



Voice-over Fundamentals

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According to Merriam-Webster OnLine, the term voice-over dates back to the late 1940s, and refers to a production technique where the voice of an unseen speaker is broadcast live or pre-recorded in a variety of media. The voice-over may be spoken by someone who also appears on the screen, or it may be performed by a specialist voice actor. Voice-over is also commonly called “off camera” commentary. Voice-over can also refer to the actual voice actor who performs the recording. The terms voice actor, narrator, voice artist, and announcer are all similarly used. Regardless of the specific terminology used to describe this technique, voice-over is another form of language transfer.

Viewers of news programs are familiar with the voice-over of statements or responses made by interviewees who do not speak in the language of the viewing audience. Typically, this technique allows the first few words in the original language to be heard, and then fades them down for re-voicing of a full interpretation by the voice talent.

The voice talent is a professional who, through skill and education, has achieved breathing control, proper enunciation and tone, and the ability to convey the right feeling in the context of a recording session. All types

of voices will do for this type of work. Basses and altos seem to be preferred for training materials, news, and documentaries. Tenors and sopranos are usually chosen to voice ads and instructional materials.

Considering the partial application overlap, it is important to make a distinction between dubbing and voice-over work. The difference is lip-synchronization. Dubbing is a technique that makes the translated dialogue match the lip movements of the actors on the screen. Both voice-over and dubbing present identical extra-linguistic requirements, expecting close equivalence of several markers, including gender, age, and ethnicity. Voice-over works show greater variance from these ideal equivalences, and parity is not always maintained.

Applications

The range of applications for voice-over work is quite broad. It encompasses film, radio and television productions, multimedia presentations, interactive voice response systems (telephone prompts), video games, educational materials, and audible messages in public places (e.g., airports, train stations, and terminals).

Film: Many films and documentaries have no acting. Instead, there is an unseen narrator (e.g., the BBC's *Planet Earth* series, narrated by Sigourney Weaver). Voice-over can also be used as a character device to present the audible thoughts of a visible character in a film. (For example, the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, where the voice of Morgan Freeman's character narrates over several scenes.)

Radio: Voice-over is applied to promotional spots or promos (a spot or a promo is an advertising industry term

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used to designate 30- or 60-second promotional segments between scheduled programs on radio and television).

Television: Voice-over is used in every newscast, in just about every commercial, in sitcoms, and in educational programming. In short, almost every television show has a narration component done by a voice talent. In many cases, when the person on screen speaks a different language, and the broadcast is live, a voice talent (frequently a simultaneous interpreter) speaks over the foreign voice.

Multimedia: When you visit a museum, chances are you will come across an exhibit with a voice component. The visitor usually presses a button and a voice plays in the background. Corporate training videos normally have a voice component to enable learning across sensory preferences. Multimedia educational materials always include a voice component.

Interactive voice response systems (IVRs): The very nature of IVRs depends on good, clear voices. In this type of system, a caller responds to a set of prompts (spoken by a voice talent) to access a system or a person. Recent developments in the field of natural language processing have turned IVRs into very effective systems for automating services where a large exchange of information and data capturing are required. These systems

are used by utility companies, large corporations, and in clinical trials.

Video games: Even if a character in a video game just grunts, a voice talent is required to bring it to "virtual life." Not all games have voice components, but those with educational purposes always do. There is no doubt that doing the voice-over for a video game requires voice characterization (i.e., acting).

Educational materials: Many learners are auditory, that is, they favor acquiring information through their sense of hearing. If a voice component is not incorporated into educational materials, those learners are at a disadvantage. Adding voice and sound to interactive materials enriches the user experience and ensures that learning occurs at every sensory level. It also renders versatility to the materials, sometimes making it possible simply to listen to them.

Audible messages: These messages are usually playing in a loop at airports, terminals, and other public places, often in several languages. In most cases, they are recorded by professional voice talent. Visitors at many museums can also get a guided tour using an interactive device that plays a narration (through headphones). Audible messages are also used for the visually impaired at ATMs and elevators, for individuals entering a secured facility as confirmation of their ➡

credentials, and for many “talking” machines. The latter, however, are instances of screen readers, not voice-overs done by humans.

A Skill Primer

Asking the basic questions listed below will help those interested in voice-over work define the areas where more practice might be needed to improve their overall performance.

Is every voiced syllable perfectly audible? Enunciation is key for a successful message, so audibility is crucial.

Is every word pronounced with the right stress? Some words have very similar sounds. If these words are not pronounced correctly, they may sound like something else entirely. Proper pronunciation is critical.

Is every sentence pronounced with the right tone for the context? If you are reading a warning, a soft, relaxed tone will not engage the target audience. Every context has a particular tone associated with it.

Are the sibilants particularly loud in the target language, sometimes sounding like static on a telephone line? Muting these “S” sounds is one of the most difficult skills to acquire, and it takes lots of practice to master the art of pronouncing sibilants without residual noise. The other extreme should be avoided as well, that is, eschewing and sounding like you have a speech impediment. Balance is key.

Can you hear your tongue clicking loudly, like when you take a sip of a really cold liquid? This is a common occurrence. Your goal is not to eliminate clicking, as that is impossible, but to minimize it. Current audio recording technology helps eliminate clicking to a

large degree, but a well-hydrated throat is the key to minimize clicking when recording.

Can you hear yourself inhaling or exhaling? Breathing control is not about holding your breath or inhaling deeply so that you can speak for a long time without inhaling again. It is about taking in the right amount of air for every segment that you and the client or producer have agreed will be

Learn to breathe like a singer: The techniques used by singers are sure to be beneficial for voice talents. Currently, many self-study materials on singing technique include breathing techniques.

Observe news anchors from a different perspective: Study their intonation and the way they pronounce and enunciate.

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recorded. This is not just the air that you hold in your lungs, but the kind of air that lyric singers, for example, pull from their entire abdomen so that their voice can carry through a space and hold a particular note in tune.

Do you hear noises such as jewelry jingling, hair rustling, or hands rubbing? Studio microphones are extremely sensitive and, although most have noise cancellation features, they pick up noises such as those listed above from the person speaking directly into them. To reduce background noise, wear “quiet” clothes, do not wear any jewelry, and avoid fidgeting (including touching your hair or tapping your fingers).

Skill Development Tips

Understand phonology and phonetics: For example, knowing how your voice apparatus works and the difference between the voiced and unvoiced phonemes will help you enunciate correctly.

Pay attention to the “feel” of the voice-overs for television commercials: Notice how different the voice choices and the intonation are for the various products.

Take an acting class: If you are serious about becoming a professional voice talent, this will help you stand out in a sea of voices.

Listen to others in the field: You can always learn delivery techniques by listening to professional voice talent.

The Market

The U.S. voice-over market can be organized in the segments listed below.

News organizations: Most are in New York, Atlanta, and Washington, DC. Some local cable stations might have a need for voice-over work. Please keep in mind that this work is often pro bono, but the experience these types of assignments provide is invaluable.

Ad work: Inquiries for this type of work should be directed to ad agencies, talent agencies, and recording studios.

Documentaries: Public television stations, colleges, and private television and radio stations are the most likely sources of work.

Instructional materials: Translation agencies are often in charge of localizing these materials, and will be the source of related voice-over work. They will often need voice talents in their own geographical area.

The full range of options for voice-over work often applies only to work in English. In reality, language services companies often manage foreign-language voice-overs, seeking and booking the various talent. Agencies may contact local linguists for the job first (and be willing to train those without voice-over work experience). Jobs are also advertised in the usual online boards for linguists (e.g., www.proz.com).

There are other instances in which the companies who manufacture the materials in need of foreign language voice-over hire the voice talent directly. These companies usually advertise the projects on Internet boards dealing specifically with voice-over or acting work, and invite candidates to audition for the project. To develop a sense of what these sites offer, you could start, for example, with <http://voice123.com>, <http://searchvoices.com>, or <http://voicerecruiters.com>.

A Starting Kit

The following is a simple list of what you will need to get started in this business.

Sources for Work

ATA Job Bank
www.atanet.org/jobbank

ProZ
www.proz.com

Search Voices
www.searchvoices.com

Voice123: The Voice Marketplace
www.voice123.com

Voices
www.voices.com

Voice Recruiters
www.voicerecruiters.com

Voice-over Directory
www.voiceoverdirectory.com

Voice-over LA
www.volatalent.com

Voice-over Miami
www.voiceovermiami.com

Voice-over Resource Guide
www.voiceoverresourceguide.com

Voice samples: It is a good idea to have quality voice samples of your work in MP3, CD-ROM, or .wav format. Avoid cassette tapes and videotapes, as well as cell and digital videos. Cell videos offer low bandwidth/quality, and digital recordings are distracting and too costly to produce professionally. Read only public domain texts or text you can use with the author's permission. If you choose a newsprint article, quote the paper and the journalist. Make sure you conform to international copyright laws.

Job leads: Visit the public library, consult the U.S. Yellow Pages, and search the Internet for recording studios, public television stations, (voice) talent agencies, and translation companies in your geographical area. You should cover as much ground as possible in your search for job leads (e.g., East and West Coasts). Your motto should be "have voice, will travel."

CV: Write a résumé highlighting voice-over and dubbing as objectives/goals, listing singing and acting courses or classes/experience, mother tongue (if working into foreign languages), etc.

Mailing campaign: Send your résumé and voice samples by regular mail or e-mail to the leads. Do not be discouraged: five answers in 100 is a very good score, and one solid contact out of 20 responses is a phenomenal result. (You are still unemployed, but in business!)

A Voice-over Session: Methodology

Voice-over is done in a variety of ways and settings, at times using specialized equipment with peculiar quirks. Nevertheless, the methodology, basic equipment, and pitfalls seem to be a constant. First, the methodology: ➡

Record in a controlled environment: Whether recording at a studio or recording your first voice-over sample on a home computer, a recording session must occur in a controlled environment. The first rule is: NO NOISE. We have already mentioned the example of background noise caused by rustling clothes or fidgeting, which should be avoided when recording. Recording from home will obviously not be possible if your dog is barking at a passerby. Electronic feedback can also be a problem while recording if the equipment is not handled correctly.

Have a properly prepared script: Improvisation may be adequate in certain settings, for instance, when it occurs in a recording session, because a director is present and has authorized it. In most instances, however, a script is necessary and must be followed. When scripts are long, they must be divided into workable segments, and a time cue should precede each segment. When there are multiple voice talents in the same recording session, all participants must be clearly marked on the script so that each person knows with certainty when it is his or her time to speak.

Logistics: A voice talent must be punctual. Studio time is booked for a specific schedule and the norm is to hold back-to-back sessions. It is also a costly service. Every minute lost from the original schedule of a session because a voice talent is late costs money, and may mean that a makeup session will need to be scheduled. Clients will not appreciate this.

Practice: The script must be fully read and practiced ahead of time. Preparation time is not part of a scheduled session. At the studio, once the voice talents and all other participants are properly situ-

ated, a sound test is conducted and the session begins immediately afterward.

Standard Equipment and Tips for Use
Recording booth: Make sure you can see/hear your recording technician/

should be done. Textual checking is a much more vague domain. It could be done by the producer, the project manager, or, in a multilingual event, a fellow talent waiting for his or her turn. Professional productions have

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coach. Find a good position for the reading stand, stool, and yourself. The recording sessions can last a few hours, so you might as well be comfortable.

Microphone: During the voice level test, make sure you are not adapting to the microphone. Save your neck and put the microphone in a position that is completely comfortable. Ergonomics first!

Earphones: You are supposed to hear voices! Make sure they do not bleed into the microphone. Normally, the original voice is piped through one channel/ear, and your own through the other. Be careful when putting on your earphones and be ready to remove them fast in case of deafening feedback.

Video monitors (optional): Video monitors can be useful in providing visual clues (e.g., a timer at the bottom of the screen) that allow you to fine-tune your starting points. Conversely, not everyone can integrate two sound tracks and two visual inputs (text and monitor) on different visual planes.

Booth supervision: The recording technician is in charge of timing, and if she or he asks for a retake, a retake

real booth support. They require another talent with a similar language specialty, background, etc., who can check diction and enunciation.

A fat glass of cold water: Be prepared. Voice-over is thirsty work.

Pitfalls

Whatever can go wrong will go wrong, especially in three areas: communication, timing, and recording.

Communication: The text presents its own obstacles, mainly:

- Pronunciation (e.g., Is it pronounced *Apalæcian* or *Apalâcian*?).
- Alliteration (e.g., “I bought a box of biscuits, a box of mixed biscuits, and a biscuit mixer.”).
- Translation errors from mild to catastrophically offensive.
- Run-on passages, which are difficult to read in any language because they cause the speaker to pause in inappropriate places.

Timing: Normally, if it is not timed properly, the translation is too long when speaking into a foreign language, or too short when speaking into English. In these cases, only two options are avail-

able, and sometimes both are insufficient. In fact, it is possible to speed up/slow down your speech, or trim/expand the text. The choice depends on the assertiveness of the talent/producer and the seriousness of the timing gap. In the best-case scenario, the voice talent is also the translator, which means that the timing has already been taken into account. This also means that the talent has greater control over the final script when it comes time to do the voice-over. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there will be situations where a talking head (the person speaking to the camera) strings together a long sentence on the screen while the voice-over offers a simple “Yes.”

Recording: The problems encountered during recording include but are not limited to:

- Poor breathing.
- Slurred enunciation, especially at the end of long sentences.
- Uneven tempo. If the talking head is vivacious and bubbly, the voice-over talent should not sound like he or she is reading an accountant’s obituary.
- Missed passages. To skip a line is not acceptable, no matter where and in which language.
- Volume levels. Especially during retakes and in between scenes, it is important to maintain an even volume level. Discrepancies can be digitally corrected up to a point, but it is a matter of professional pride (and cost control) to keep the takes to a minimum.

A Few Reminders

Control your breathing! If you do not fill your lungs with air before you start, you will produce the Brenda Vaccaro effect. (Some 20 years ago, in a nationally televised ad, Brenda started with a deep aspirating groan,

Want to Learn More? Links to the Voice-over Experience

“Interview with Freelance Audiovisual Translator Anna Matamala.”
Journal of Specialised Translation (September 25, 2004),
www.jostrans.org/issue04/art_matamala.php.

Kenyon, Heather. “Getting that First Voice-over Role.”
Animation World Magazine (September 1999),
www.awn.com/mag/issue4.06/4.06pages/kenyon/voicesurvey.php3.

saying “AAAAAH Tampax.” It sounded as though she was dying of anaphylactic shock. Sales suffered and so did Brenda’s advertising career.) Count to five, take a full breath, and start on cue.

Do not get flustered. If you hit a rough spot, call for a break, have a brief normal conversation, drink a glass of water, and try again. What you cannot afford to do is act like a prima donna with a short fuse. Retake whatever needs to be re-recorded, and when mistakes are made or one of the participants is not satisfied with the quality of a sound byte, remember that communication must be clear. The point in the script where a repeat is needed must be well indicated. Many studios have the capability to replay a segment immediately after it is recorded. You should check with the studio production team to see if there is time to replay segments, since this is a very useful way to spot problems.

Do not overact. Unless you are dubbing or doing voice characterization, all you need to do is to convey the feeling of the message by reading the script as if it meant something to you.

Aim for clarity and proper tempo. Even when others check what you do, check your own work and be brutally critical. It is better if it comes from you than the final audience.

A Final Warning

To hear your own recording is a paramount component of voice-over quality control. You know best your own phrasing, pacing, parsing, and projecting. If you sound hollow, tentative, or out of breath to your own ears, consider whether that passage conforms with minimum standards and ask the opinion of others. Do not leave a job feeling like you should have done better. The end client might think the same.

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