

Voicing Your Script Tips and Techniques

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Voicing a script is radio and television-speak for reading a written script in a conversational style. The voicing is generally recorded and used as narration for a produced radio or television piece. Voice tracks are referred to in radio as **voice tracks** (TX). In radio, sound bites are called **actualities** (AX), while **natural or ambient sound** is called either AMBI or SFX (sound effects).

This cheat sheet will outline the basics you need to remember whenever you're voicing.

WARM UP

- ~ **Never read a script cold.** Always warm up your voice and your body with a little humming or singing, a little vocal play such as tongue-twisters to loosen your facial muscles, and some deep breathing from your belly. Loosen up your body with some stretching and arm shaking.
- ~ **Read through your script aloud several times.** All the way through. Practice names – especially foreign or unfamiliar names – by reading them aloud many times. If there's a place where you stumble, practice it. If you still stumble, rewrite that phrase so you can read it cleanly.
- ~ **If you feel stiff, your voice will sound stiff.** Try laughing through your script for a few graphs just to loosen up, then try again. It sounds ridiculous, but it works.
- ~ Try to warm up in the position in which you'll be voicing. Hopefully, you'll be standing. If sitting, place your script slightly above eye level. Envision the person you're talking to.
- ~ **If you're generally too quiet, try reading your script loudly.** Pretend you're trying to talk over a crowd. Project your voice. It's okay if it sounds funny, this is just the warm-up.
- ~ Don't drink coffee or milk products or soda before reading a script. These can all affect the sound of your voice. Drink water to keep your mouth from drying.

MARKING YOUR SCRIPT

- ~ Until you're a veteran, **don't try to read a script without giving yourself some visual cues.** It only takes a few minutes to mark a script for voicing.
- ~ **Underline the operative words.** Generally, these are the words that are essential to telling the story in each sentence. These are the classic who-what-when-why-how words – nouns, adjectives, adverbs, titles and names. These are the words that you'll emphasize in your read.
- ~ **Underline a proper name the first time it appears.** They don't need to be emphasized after that, but they do still need to be clear.
- ~ **Mark your copy with “/” or even “//” where you'll need to take a breath – or pause for emphasis.** This won't always be at the end of a sentence and it won't slavishly follow punctuation. Commas are a good place for a breath and sometimes so are operative words.
- ~ Once you've read your script through, you may want to go back and add or remove pauses or breaths – so **use a pencil, not a pen.**

- ~ Writing for the ear usually involves different punctuation – hyphens to set off clauses, instead of commas, to make it easier to read.
- ~ If there are numbers in your script, write them as numbers you can easily read. For example 14 is easy to read. 14,000 is not. Write the latter as 14-thousand.
- ~ If there words or names in your script you may stumble over, write them out phonetically in brackets after the word. Example: mahjong [mah-ZHONG] Use caps to indicate stress.

DELIVERING YOUR SCRIPT

- ~ **Mic placement** is key to a good delivery. Using headphones, play around with different mic positions, while saying explosive sounds like “p” and “k” to check for pops. You want to be close enough to be intimate. Best placement is usually the distance between your side-turned fist and your mouth. Turn the mic slightly off-center to avoid pops. Use a mic screen, if available.
- ~ **Always use headphones as you record your script.** This will help you hear tiny mouth noises and help you avoid making them. If your mouth is dry, take a drink of water.
- ~ **As you start your read, take a deep breath, then let out part of it.** This keeps you from taking a breath right before you speak, which can be hard to cut. Do this especially every time you start a new graph.
- ~ **Don't close your mouth between phrases or sentences.** When you open it again, you'll make a small popping noise.
- ~ **Keep your chin parallel to the floor** to keep your vocal cords as relaxed as possible. Breathe from your belly, not your chest. Stand with your knees slightly flexed. Open your mouth wide.
- ~ Hold your script in one hand and keep the other free to gesture as you speak. Gestures help improve the energy of your read.
- ~ Never staple your script. Drop a finished page on the floor, well below the mic, so it doesn't pick up sounds. **Always print your script so that you don't break paragraphs across two pages.**
- ~ **Good radio delivery is conversational**, like you're talking to a friend. You're not reading a script, you're telling a story. Tell the script, don't read it.
- ~ It helps to start reading by starting as though you were speaking to someone in particular. “Well, Mary...”
- ~ **Use emphasis in speaking to deliver the meaning of what you're saying.** Remember in radio, you only get one shot at keeping the listener with you. A listener can't go back and re-read something that was confusing.
- ~ Your emphasis will follow operative words, the words you've underlined that deliver the basic sense of the sentence. There are **four ways to create emphasis – volume, pitch, rhythm, and tempo.**
- ~ **Volume** is simply increasing or decreasing the volume of your voice. Emphasizing an operative word with increased volume is called “punching.” Be careful not to overdue this. Too much punching can sound artificial.

- ~ **Pitch** is the scale of your voice, higher or lower, from baritone to falsetto. Changing the pitch of your voice is an excellent way to create emphasis, especially when you add a bit of volume change as well.
- ~ **Rhythm** is the space between your words. Change the rhythm of your voice by adding pauses for emphasis. Try adding a pause before or after an operative word – or even both. Pauses are effective before saying a scientific or foreign word. They also work well before you introduce a new idea.
- ~ **Tempo** is changing the speed of your delivery to emphasize an operative word. Try picking up the tempo where the copy is less important and slowing down where you hit a section with operative words, to emphasize them. You can also stretch out the sound of a vowel for emphasis.
- ~ When **reading a list** of things, vary the pitch and the rhythm of each element of the list to add emphasis and make the list interesting.
- ~ **Be animated while you're speaking.** Use your eyebrows, widen your eyes, make all the facial gestures you would if you were talking to a friend directly. Don't forget to use a little arm or hand movement. This helps with emphasis, energy and that conversational style.
- ~ If you need to sound serious, try frowning as you read. If you want to sound warm and friendly, try smiling. Don't be afraid to throw in a tiny laugh into a word, if it's appropriate.
- ~ Stay in the story. **Think about what you're reading.** Tell that story to your friend.
- ~ **Don't throw away the last line** just because you've reached the end. Sometimes the last line is the best, the closing argument in your story.

MAKING MISTAKES

- ~ This is inevitable. Don't let stumbles rattle you. You don't necessarily need to re-read an entire graph. Just stop, breathe, partially release that breath, and go back to the last whole sentence and start again. There should be a pause with no breathe at the fresh start. This will make editing your voice tracks easier.
- ~ If you're stumbling a lot, maybe you're trying to read too fast. Try slowing way down. Then read it again a little faster.
- ~ Sometimes you don't hear a dropped “t” or a slurred vowel. **Always give yourself two recorded reads of a graph to simplify editing.** Most radio veterans read the same graph twice before moving on. This is easier to edit, but some will read the entire script twice, especially if it's long. It's up to you.

EDITING

- ~ People breathe. If you've ever listened to someone talking on the radio where you can't hear their breaths, you know how stilted it sounds. **Remember to keep the breaths you took.** Don't edit them out.
- ~ **Never cut your voice tracks and leave blank spaces between paragraphs.** Create those blank spaces in your read. Even in a quiet, soundproofed studio, there is a tiny ambient background sound. If you cut your tracks the loss of that ambient sound will be noticeable.

- ~ When you've edited your tracks, **listen all the way through, first with headphones, then with speakers.** If there's something you're still not happy with, go back and re-record that section. But be sure that your mic placement is the same you used in your original recording or the sounds won't match.
- ~ **Try sharing your recording with a friend.** Ask that person to listen for meaning, for emphasis, for energy.
- ~ **There's no such thing as the perfect radio voice.** Young voices often don't have the timbre or resonance of older voices. Don't sweat it. Sound like yourself – but a better self who articulates well and reads for meaning and emphasis.