

Arizona Talking Book Library

# Studio Auditions

# Manual

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## **Introduction**

If a volunteer is interested in narrating, they may request an audition as part of their interview or anytime thereafter. The purpose of the audition is to assess the Volunteer's potential to be a successful Narrator. Volunteers will be asked to first spend time as a Reviewer before they can become a Narrator or Director.

## **Audition Scheduling and Preparation**

1. The audition consists of three cold readings given to the prospective volunteer just before going into the studio to record and one reading selected by the prospective volunteer.
  - a. Self-selected reading – this should be a selection that is fiction, has dialogue, and takes about 8 minutes to read out loud.
  - b. Cold readings – these should include a nonfiction piece about Arizona, a piece that contains emotional content and dialog, and a piece from a technical work that is somewhat dry to see how the prospective narrator can engage the listener in the work.
2. When scheduling the audition, the Studio Manager provides the Volunteer with reading guidelines and describes the process to the volunteer.
  - a. The volunteer is instructed to choose something that is of interest to them, to practice reading it out loud before the audition, and to bring a print copy of the selection with them.
  - b. Tell them to use a conversational style. Remind them they are telling a story not just reading words on a page. They want to draw their listener into the material with their voice. It is all their listener has.
  - c. Tell them about preparing page turns. If a sentence is interrupted with a page turn, they should either write the rest of the sentence at the bottom of the first page or the top of the next page.
3. The Studio Manager reserves a recording booth for the audition on the Studio Calendar.
4. Before the audition, the Studio Manager sets up a project in Hindenburg.

## **Recording the Audition**

1. When the volunteer arrives for the audition, the Studio Manager greets the volunteer and reviews the audition process.
2. If the volunteer is unfamiliar with the recording booth, familiarize them with the equipment, show them how to position the microphone, and review the recording process.
3. The Studio Manager will operate the recording software much as a director would. However, there is no stopping to correct or edit the recording.

4. Once the volunteer is in the recording booth, begin by doing a sound check.
5. During the audition, the Studio Manager will provide feedback to the volunteer regarding ways to improve their recording.
6. When the recording is complete, the Studio Manager exports the files for evaluation.

## **Audition Evaluations**

1. The Studio Manager typically conducts the evaluation. If there is some question about the quality of the prospective narrator, the Studio Manager may ask one or more experienced reviewers to evaluate the audition.
2. The evaluations need to provide specifics regarding the auditions. The comments should support the evaluator's recommendation to accept the volunteer as a narrator.
3. Appendix A – Audition Evaluation Guidelines includes documents that can be used by the evaluators to assist them in their evaluation.
4. When evaluating auditions, always consider which qualities could be improved with training and which qualities cannot be improved with training. Generally, qualities associated with vocal quality or language proficiency will not improve.
5. The following qualities generally CANNOT be improved, aka. "deal-breakers":
  - a. Agreeability, directability (can the volunteer accept suggestions for improving)
  - b. Reliability (will the volunteer meet the commitment to regular recording sessions, will they be on time, will they notify the Studio Manager when they can't attend a session)
  - c. Clarity, clear articulation (does the volunteer have a speech impediment that would make it difficult for patrons to understand the reading)
  - d. Resonance
  - e. Pitch
  - f. Fluency
  - g. Logic and phrasing
  - h. Accent (if it's a heavy accent that makes reading difficult to understand. A slight accent is ok.)
6. The following qualities generally CAN be improved with training:
  - a. Presentation
  - b. Interest
  - c. Liveliness
  - d. Accuracy - It's possible to improve accuracy, especially if the reader is making mistakes because they are rushing or reading too fast. If inaccuracy is not the result of speed, it will likely not improve. The reader

must come through the door with a firm command of the English language and the ability to read words verbatim on a consistent basis.

- e. Diction may also be improved if the reader is motivated to do the work (which is not guaranteed).
  - f. Breathing (unless breathing is excessive or ever-present in the recording)
  - g. Throat noises
  - h. Mouth noises
  - i. Mechanical or extraneous noises
  - j. Speed
7. Remember that the purpose of the evaluation is to determine whether the volunteer has the potential to produce a high quality recording. Evaluators should not look for imperfections that are not obvious or detracting from the recording quality.
  8. If a reader scores well in most categories, but needs work in one category that can be improved with training, consider him or her for narration, based on best judgment. If a reader scores poorly (2 or 1) in a category that cannot be improved with training, indicate whether they would make a better director, reviewer or editor.
  9. The Studio Manager compiles the evaluation results and notifies the volunteer of the results of the audition. The Volunteer Coordinator is copied on the email. All 'yes', or one 'no' and the rest 'yes', means the audition is accepted for a reader position.

**Appendix A – Audition Evaluation Guidelines**

## **Communication Art in Audio Book Production**

### Narration as Communication Art

It has often been said that narrating an audio book is an art, and to a great extent that is true. Narration is an art form related to acting and oral interpretations, but is neither. Rather, it is a niche in the performing arts that blends some elements of both. Ideally, narration is translating the written word to the spoken word in a way that is as consistent as possible with the intent of the author. At the least, it is translating the written word to the spoken word in a way that is intelligent and agreeable to the listener. The task of reading aloud for the purpose of producing an audio book original master recording is called narration, and the person who performs the task of narration is called a narrator. Narrators are also frequently called readers because, after all, their task is reading aloud.

As a narrator, the late William Arthur Deacon, Toronto literary critic, tried to make himself “into a panel of glass through which the reader could see the book as if he held it in his own hands.” Reading aloud, like singing, is something many people do, but only a few do well. Both require a good voice, a talent for using the voice, and a native ability to apply that talent effectively. The art of narration can be taught only to the extent of giving basic guidelines and techniques to one who has a talent for it. If talent is present, it can be enhanced, but if talent is not present, it cannot be taught. Good narration is a composite of four primary components and several enhancing factors.

## **Evaluation of Narration**

(Excerpt from The Art and Science of Audio Book Production – NLS)

Among many elements that must be considered when evaluating a narrator audition, the following are judged to be the most important:

The narration skillfully conveys the sense of the text to the listener at all times, including the emotional level and other elements appropriate to the needs of the text.

The narration distinguished narrative form from dialogue and characters from each other through effective use of timing, stress, emphasis, inflection, and other appropriate skills of the speech arts; and all character voices possess the same ease, flow, and vocal range as the normal narrative voice.

The narration is free of strained, unclear, inconsistent or overplayed accents, dialects or character interpretations.

The narration is accomplished in a conversational manner free of stilted, mechanical, monotonous, or repetitive patterns of delivery that are not called for in the text.



## Items for Attention when Evaluating Audition Tapes

Auditions are not easy to evaluate. The criteria are defined but there is much room for subjectivity. As you listen to a tape, ask yourself if the reader is someone you could enjoy listening to for a long period of time. Do not feel that you are being too critical. We want to select the best readers and while many people improve with practice, they must be good at the start.

For an audition, the reader chooses the first selection and should prepare it before arriving for the audition. The other three selections are standard readings that are given to the reader when she arrives. She does not have time to prepare these before reading them.

Text for the first reading selection is sent to the evaluator at the time the audition tape is sent. All evaluators should have a print copy of the standard readings.

**Listen to each evaluation tape at least twice.** The first time listen all the way through to get general, overall impressions. The second time through, follow the print text and complete the evaluation form.

Every item on the **front side** of the evaluation form, including ACCURACY, must be given a 5-1 rating. 5 is excellent. 1 is poor.

To determine ACCURACY, as you are following the print copy of the text, make slash marks next to each of the six errors listed (mistakes, additions, substitutions, stumbles, omissions, transposed words) each time that error occurs.

For the first 5 items on the **back side** of the evaluation form, check yes or no. On the next four items - mispronunciations, speed, overall evaluation, and conditions of acceptance - write any comments you have.

Make a **specific recommendation** for each evaluation by choosing YES for at least one of the four available choices. Clearly indicate whether you think the person should narrate or not. Undecided is a last resort. Mark that if you are really 'on the fence.'

## **NLS Criteria for Judging Narration**

(Adapted from N.L.S. Technical Standard #3)

The narrator's voice, when recorded, must be (a) clear, firm, and distinct; (b) flexible enough to avoid monotonous or repetitious vocal patterns; (c) free of strain or tension; (d) able to sustain energy over long periods of time; (e) free of any uncontrollable medical or physical conditions; (f) free of impure tonal characteristics (scratchiness, nasalness, raspiness, etc.)

### **SPEECH**

The narrator's speech shall be: (a) free of excessive regional coloration or accents; (b) free of patterns not associated with American English; (c) free of mannerisms that detract from the text; (d) neither too rushed nor too slow for comfortable listening over extended periods of time.

### **INTERPRETATIVE REQUIREMENTS**

The narrator must be attentive to the sense of the publication, skillful in securing proper emphasis, and must avoid a stilted, mechanical, monotonous delivery. The emotional content of the voice shall at all times be appropriate to the emotional level of the publication. The narrator, by proper use of timing and inflection, must clearly differentiate between narrative and dialogue, and between various characters depicted. If character voices are utilized, each separate vocal characterization must possess the same ease, flow, and vocal range as the normal narrative voice. Character interpretations, dialects and accents that are strained, unclear, inconsistent, or overplayed shall not be acceptable.

Attempt the creation of character voices only if you are certain that you can maintain each characterization with the same ease, flow, and vocal range as the normal narrative voice. Narration must be free of strained, unclear, inconsistent, or overplayed accents, dialects or character interpretations. It is advisable to be subtle and simple in delineating characters. Otherwise the effect can detract from the narration rather than enhance it.

### **PRONUNCIATION**

Pronunciation shall be appropriate to the style and period of the publication and to the nature of the characters.

### **NARRATING**

As a narrator, the late William Arthur Deacon, Toronto literary critic, tried to make himself "into a panel of glass through which the reader could see the book as if he held it in his own hands." Just as an interpreter translates from one language into another, the narrator interprets what the author has written into feeling, meaning, and emphasis.

You do not enjoy something dull and boring; neither do the patrons. A book is not simply read. It is presented.

You speak; you also see. These two factors allow the transformation of the printed page to the recorded page. How well you do it will determine your ability as a narrator. The narrator must express fear, desire, love, or other emotions the author wishes to convey. Do not confuse interpretation with acting. An actor wants to have you believe he is the person portrayed, while the narrator draws the outline of the character and lets the listener fill in his own colors.

Your personality is a key asset in recording a book. It represents your understanding, sensitivity, and individuality - don't hide it. We are not searching for professional voices but for professional attitudes. We seek intelligent presentations with voices that are audible, pleasant, fluent, and flexible. Narrating a book is an opportunity to use the mental talents you possess. Do not shortchange yourself or your listener. At all times, keep in mind that you are reading for intelligent people.

### **SOME COMMON READING FAULTS**

1. **Over-preciseness.** A child who hasn't learned to read fluently has a characteristically formal, precise, conscientious style of reading in which he pronounces every word, however unimportant, with painful exactness, even going to the extent of saying "ay book" and "thee ball". A remnant of this style persists in some adults. When reading aloud they become abnormally precise in the way one sometimes uses when talking to a foreigner who knows little English. Do not labor each word. Without being slovenly, read words as you would naturally speak them.
2. **The bedside manner.** There are a number of well-intentioned people whose way of reading unfortunately takes a kind of patronizing so-happy-to-be-doing-this-for-you tone. Such an attitude, which the listener easily senses, is of course entirely out of place. The narrator's manner should be that of one telling a story to his friends.
3. **Dropping the voice.** The habit of dropping one's voice at the end of a sentence or paragraph results in frequent loss of a word and the creation of a monotonous reading pattern. The voice should be dropped only slightly at such places; sometimes it should not be dropped at all, and occasionally it should even be raised.

4. **Punching.** This is the technique of the commercial announcer. Emphasis is on every other word as if it were the most important word the announcer ever uttered. It can be extremely tiring to the listener and has little place in narration. On rare occasions the author may have a character make dramatic emphasis. Here punching is effective but it should be used sparingly, only for a few words or perhaps a sentence.

### Excerpts from NLS Technical Standards for Judging Narration

This document contains NLS criteria by which narration and narration practices used to record original masters of books and magazines are judged.

#### The Narrator

With respect to narration, the profile of a narrator is a composite of characteristics in the voice, speech, language, and narration skill of the individual.

#### 1. **Voice**

The uniqueness of each voice results from many factors, which combine to produce the vocal composite that is identifiable as the voice of a specific individual. The elements that are considered to be of importance to good narration include the following:

- a. The ability to modulate the voice through the range of vocal dynamics that are essential to good narration
- b. The ability to produce fluent speech that has good clarity and is free of any characteristic, which might become a distraction during extended periods of listening
- c. The strength to generate sound levels that produce clean, clear signals of the recorded voice in the soundtrack
- d. the stamina to maintain consistency of all vocal characteristics for the duration of a recording session without audible tiring and with no audible degradation in voice quality or narration effectiveness

#### 2. **Speech**

All normal speech has some degree of coloration. This coloration results from many factors of cultural and regional influence as well as factors that are characteristic to the individual. These combine to form a composite speech blend. The elements that are considered to be of particular importance to good narration include the following:

- a. a speech blend that has good clarity, is easy to understand, and free of any characteristic that might become a distraction during extended periods of listening
- b. a speech blend that has no characteristic, which adversely affects speech intelligibility
- c. a speech blend that has no extreme speech coloration
- d. a speech blend that is easily understood by the majority of listeners
- e. a speech blend that does not diminish artistic effectiveness of the narration

### **3. Narration Skill**

Many factors of communication talent, skill and ability combine to produce the composite of that which is called 'narration skill'. The elements considered to be of particular importance to good narration include the following:

- a. a natural sensitivity to the meanings of words and phrases and the ability to recognize nuances in the written word
- b. the talent to deliver a skilled verbal performance that conveys the style, mood, energy, tempo and sense of the text to the listener
- c. the artistic sense, ear and talent to convey the essence of characters without skewing the essence of dialogue
- d. the talent to incorporate life experiences in the narration without allowing personal biases to inappropriately color the narration
- e. the talent to enhance the listener's imagination and the discipline not to replace it
- f. the ability to handle variations of pacing, timing, and rhythm in the rate of delivery that is most appropriate for effective narration of the text
- g. the ability to maintain consistency of narration style and skill appropriate to the text throughout the recording sessions

### **4. Narration of the Text**

The criteria for judging narration of the text include but are not restricted to the following:

- a. the narration shall convey the sense of the text to the listener at all times
- b. the narration shall convey the appropriate emotional levels of the text to the listener at all times.
- c. the narration shall be accomplished in a conversational manner, so far as is practical, and shall avoid at all times a delivery that is stilted, mechanical or monotonous
- d. the narration shall make effective use of timing, verbal punctuation, stress, emphasis, inflection, and other appropriate skills of speech arts to distinguish narrative form from dialogue and characters from each other

- e. the narration shall make effective use of timing, verbal punctuation, stress, emphasis, inflection and other appropriate skills of speech arts to ensure that if character voices are utilized the voice of each character shall possess the same ease; flow and vocal range at the normal narrative voice and be appropriate to the text
- f. the narration shall make effective use of the speech art skills that are most appropriate for avoiding character interpretations, dialects and accents that are strained unclear inconsistent or overlapped
- g. the narration shall make effective use of the speech art skills that are most appropriate for speaking unusual written language items to achieve an intelligent and artistic narration of the text
- h. the narration shall be accomplished at the pace, which enables the narrator to most naturally convey the style, mood, energy, tempo and sense of the text to the listener

## **5. Accuracy of Narration**

The criteria for judging accuracy of narration include the following:

- a. Narration shall conform to the print edition so far as it is linguistically practical. The exceptions to this are those instances in which established conventions for speaking written language take precedence over verbalizing the text as it is printed.
- b. Errors in the written text identified during the recording process shall be corrected as appropriate after consultation with the studio director. If there is reasonable belief that the item identified as an error is not an error, and the text is readable as printed, it shall be read as printed.

## **6. Correct Pronunciation**

The criteria for judging correct pronunciation include the following:

- a. Pronunciation shall be appropriate to the style and period of the book, the context in which the word is used and to the nature of the characters.
- b. Dictionaries, either on-line or in print and other standard reference works are acceptable authoritative sources for correct pronunciation.
- c. The narrator is responsible for all research necessary to ensure correct pronunciation.

## **7. Conventions for Speaking Written Language**

The criteria for judging appropriate use of conventions for speaking written language include the following:

- a. Written language situations occur in which speaking the written text as it is printed will make the spoken text sound awkward. In such situations the techniques of speech arts that are most appropriate shall be used for conveying the sense of the written text to the listener.
- b. Print punctuation is intended for the eye and it gives intelligence and coherence to the written text, but it is verbal punctuation intended for the ear that gives intelligence and coherence to the spoken text.
- c. There are items in print books, such as dates, caliber of firearms, types of aircraft, etc. which should be read according to spoken language convention rather than rigid adherence to a verbatim rendition of the written text.

# **The Art and Science of Audio Book Production**

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## **Introduction**

Over the years, many organizations have begun audio book production programs. Some have been successful, some have not advanced beyond the novice level, and some have failed completely. The diverse skills and technologies necessary to achieve high levels of artistic and technical quality in audio book production are called audio book art and science. Many elements, such as good staff, equipment, and facilities, are important in determining quality of the final product; but the most important is how well the principles of audio book art and science are understood and applied.

## **Communication Art in Audio Book Production**

### **Narration as Communication Art**

It has often been said that narrating an audio book is an art, and to a great extent that is true. Narration is an art form related to acting and oral interpretation, but is neither. Rather, it is a niche in the performing arts that blends some elements of both. Ideally, narration is translating the written word to the spoken word in a way that is as consistent as possible with the intent of the author. At the least, it is translating the written word to the spoken word in a way that is intelligent and agreeable to the listener. The task of reading aloud for the purpose of producing an audio book original master recording is called narration, and the person who performs the task of narration is called a narrator. Narrators are also frequently called readers because, after all, their task is reading aloud.

As a narrator, the late William Arthur Deacon, Toronto literary critic, tried to make himself "into a panel of glass through which the reader could see the book as if he held it in his own hands." Reading aloud, like singing, is something many people do, but only a few do well. Both require a good voice, a talent for using the voice, and a native ability to apply that talent effectively. The art of narration can be taught only to the extent of giving basic guidelines and techniques to one who has a talent for it. If talent is present, it can be enhanced, but if talent is not present, it cannot be taught. Good narration is a composite of four primary components and several enhancing factors.



## **Primary Components of Narration**

### **Voice**

The most important attributes of the voice, with respect to narration, are acoustical, strength, and stamina. The voice must have good clarity and be free of any acoustical characteristic that might become a distraction. It must have strength sufficient to generate sound levels necessary to achieve clean, clear recordings of the voice. Stamina must be sufficient for the duration of a recording session with no audible tiring and no audible degradation in narration effectiveness. Knowledge of how to effectively generate, modulate, and manipulate the voice and the ability to apply that knowledge are as important as any attribute of the voice itself.

### **Speech**

The most important attributes of speech, with respect to narration, are its acoustical characteristics. Speech must be clear, easily understood, and free of any elements that might become a distraction. Knowledge of how to effectively generate, modulate, and manipulate speech and the ability to apply that knowledge are as important as any attribute of speech.

All normal speech has some degree of regional and cultural coloration, as well as coloration that is characteristic to the individual. These factors usually do not cause problems in understanding between individuals who have similar speech coloration, but understanding can be affected if the colorations are sufficiently different.

The middle area among coloration extremes is a speech blend easily understood by a majority of people. This middle-area blend that encompasses the most common speech colorations is mainstream speech. It has coloration, but not to a degree that interferes with ease of understanding. Mainstream speech blends can be rich in a variety of colorations and still have the clarity and fluency that make understanding easy and effortless.

### **Language**

The most important attributes of language, with respect to narration, are in-depth knowledge of and fluency in the language in which the text is printed. Knowledge of the language and the ability to apply that knowledge are as important as any attribute of voice and speech.

### **Narration Skill**

Narration skill, as with skill in other arts, has many elements. Foremost among these elements are a natural sensitivity to the meanings of words and phrases and the ability to recognize nuances and shadings in the written word. These are the most basic elements necessary to achieve good narration, and there are no substitutes for them. Among other essential elements of good narration are a talent for using voice, speech,

and language and a native ability to blend language sensitivity with talent. These elements combine with experience, training, and education to enable what is termed narration skill to emerge.

Knowledge of speech arts and the ability to apply that knowledge form the cement that bonds voice, speech, and language together in verbal performance. Good narration requires an ability to achieve a level of verbal performance that conveys the style mood, tempo, and sense of the text to the listener. Equally important is the ability to maintain consistent narration style throughout a recording session and to maintain continuity of that style from session to session.

### **Enhancing Factors of Narration**

The categories of enhancing factors are physical, mental, and artistic. An example of a physical enhancing factor is good coordination of muscles that control eye scanning across the page. An example of a mental enhancing factor is good memory retention of the final line of text on a page. This ability helps maintain continuity of narration when turning pages. An example of an artistic enhancing factor is good verbal punctuation. It is print punctuation, intended for the eye, that gives intelligence and coherence to the printed text; but it is verbal punctuation, intended for the ear, that gives intelligence and coherence to the spoken text. Each primary component and enhancing factor has variables that combine to influence perception of narrator effectiveness.

### **Accuracy of Pronunciation and Narration**

The deficiencies most frequently cited in the review of audio book original master recordings are errors in pronunciation and narration. The spoken text must be a word-for-word rendition of the printed text, and the importance of accuracy in pronunciation and narration cannot be overstated.

Correct pronunciation in a recorded book is the equivalent of correct spelling in a print book. Pronunciation must be appropriate to the style and period of the text and to the nature of the characters. Proper names, foreign words, and phrases in a foreign language must be pronounced with accuracy and delivered with naturalness without breaking the rhythm of narration.

A wide range of authoritative reference sources should be available for use by the audio book production staff. Specialized reference works (music, law, medicine, etc.) may be used for specialized requirements. If published sources do not give the needed pronunciations, additional research must be conducted to the extent necessary to determine correct pronunciation.

The deficiencies most commonly cited with respect to narration accuracy are errors that make the spoken text fail to conform to the printed text, narration errors that change the

meaning of the printed text, and narration that imposes personal bias in presenting the printed text.

### **Evaluation of Narration**

Among many elements that must be considered when the narration of an audio book original master recording is evaluated, the following are judged to be the most important:

- The narration skillfully conveys the sense of the text to the listener at all times, including the emotional level and other elements appropriate to the needs of the text.
- The narration distinguishes narrative form from dialogue and characters from each other through effective use of timing, stress, emphasis, inflection, and other appropriate skills of the speech arts; and all character voices possess the same ease, flow, and vocal range as the normal narrative voice.
- The narration is free of strained, unclear, inconsistent or overplayed accents, dialects, or character interpretations.
- The narration is accomplished in a conversational manner free of stilted, mechanical, monotonous, or repetitive patterns of delivery that are not called for in the text.
- The narration is accomplished at a pace that is appropriate to the needs of the text.

### **Science in Audio Book Production**

Many technologies are needed for audio book production, among which are the technologies of acoustics, mastering, duplicating lighting, and ventilation. The technical quality of the final product is affected by how well these technologies are understood and applied.

### **Narration Environments**

A narration environment is the environment in which a narrator is located during recording sessions. It is a room or free-standing enclosure that meets physical, acoustical electrical, lighting, and ventilation requirements considered important for the task of narration. A manufactured prefabricated product used as a narration environment is called a sound-isolating enclosure. This term is used in lieu of booth or studio, but all three terms refer to the same generic product.

Enclosures used as narration environments must be protected from outside noise because all enclosures, manufactured or constructed, have finite sound isolation. Sound isolation is the degree of acoustical separation between two locations; the degree of isolation for a sound-isolating enclosure is the difference between sound levels outside and sound levels inside.

A typical enclosure used as a narration environment is a single-wall enclosure, and the sound isolation it provides is modest at best. The only difference between a single-wall and double-wall enclosure of the same manufacture, other than cost is the degree of sound isolation. "Soundproof" is a misnomer for such enclosures, because they cannot provide infinite sound isolation.

## **Host Environments**

A host environment is the site in which an enclosure used as a narration environment is located. Host environment size can vary from a small area that accommodates only one enclosure to a large area that accommodates several enclosures.

A quiet host environment is important because it protects enclosures used as narration environments from outside noise. It is also the work site for monitors and frequently the work site for reviewers. The task of monitoring and reviewing requires continuous, concentrated attention to acoustical details, and noise in the host environment affects how well that task can be accomplished.

The host environment should be free from airborne noise and structure-borne noise. Airborne noise is noise that travels between two locations through the atmosphere. Structure-borne noise is vibration that travels between two locations through structural components of the building, such as beams and girders, and radiates from the floor, walls, and ceiling into the atmosphere as airborne noise.

Among the most common sources of airborne noise in host environments are ballasts in fluorescent light fixtures, air diffusers, and ventilation ducts. Among the most common sources of vibration in buildings from which structure-borne noise can originate and from which the host environment should be isolated are elevators, central air handling equipment, and boiler rooms.

A host environment must have a floor that is level, firm, and well supported and must provide adequate clear space for each enclosure. Clear space is the distance between any vertical surface in the host environment and the greatest protrusion on the side of an enclosure. Examples of vertical surfaces in a host environment are walls, support pillars, or other enclosures. An example of a side protrusion is a side-mounted fan silencer. The following clear space should be available for each enclosure in a host environment:

- Clear space of not less than twenty-four inches between any vertical surface in the host environment and the enclosure
- Clear space that allows a full arc for door opening
- Clear space adjacent to the enclosure window for a monitor work area with easy entry and exit.

## **Ventilation and Lighting**

Narration and host environments should be cool, dry, and well ventilated. The air supply should be well filtered because clean air is important for the comfort and well-being of production staff, as well as for reliability of mastering and review equipment.

Most enclosures used as narration environments are not connected to the heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning system of the building but have a ventilation system mounted on the enclosure's exterior. This system uses fans to pull air from the host environment, move it through the enclosure, then exhaust it back into the host environment. Temperature and humidity inside the enclosure are maintained at the ambient temperature and humidity of the host environment, provided there is adequate air flow through the enclosure.

The quality of lighting in narration and host environments is important because the work of narrators, monitors, and reviewers is sight intensive, and many problems with print quality can be ameliorated with good lighting. Full-spectrum light is recommended when working intensively with print material for an extended period of time.

## **Original Masters**

### **Production**

NLS specifications require the original master recordings of book titles intended for cassette duplication to have sound tracks of eighty-eight minutes duration. The two exceptions to this requirement are the final sound track of a book and a book that requires a sound track of fewer than eighty-eight minutes duration for the entire recorded text. Original masters are recorded on open-reel tapes at 3.75 inches per second with a half-track format. This is a practical combination for producing high quality original masters at reasonable cost for the following reasons:

Aberrations in tape oxide coating can cause signal breakup distortion, and dropout. A minor aberration that is quite audible in a quarter-track recording may not be audible in a half-track recording made on the same tape. The sound track made by a half-track record head is ninety-one percent wider than the sound track made by a quarter-track record head. It has more oxide recorded with the same signal than a quarter-track recording, so minor aberrations are less audible.

Signal to noise ratio (S/N) is a comparison of the level of the recorded signal to the level of noise inherent in the recording process, such as noise from tape oxide and record electronics. S/N is affected by soundtrack width and tape speed. As a rule, the wider the sound track and the faster the tape speed, the greater the S/N. As sound track width and tape speed decrease, so does S/N. A full-track recording has the best S/N when compared to half-track and quarter-track recordings, and quarter-track recordings have the lowest S/N.

The typical original master has two sound tracks, and two consecutive masters are needed to produce a four-track cassette.

### **Production Time versus Listening Time**

A production team, which consists of a narrator, a monitor, and a reviewer, typically requires 5.5 staff hours to produce each hour of error-free recorded text. Each hour of finished sound track typically requires not less than 2 hours of studio time to produce; that requires 2 hours for a narrator and 2 hours for a monitor working together as a team for a total of 4 staff hours. The reviewer requires not less than 1.5 hours to review each hour of sound track because notes must be prepared to identify errors for correction by the narrator monitor team. The total time contributed by all three team members yields the 5.5 staff hours necessary to produce each hour of error-free recorded text. Thus, the typical two-track original master with just under 3 hours of listening time requires not less than 16.5 staff hours to produce.

### **Running Masters**

A running master is a composite recording made from two consecutive original masters. It has a four-track format and can be a cassette or open-reel tape. Running masters should be the signal source for general duplicating purposes, rather than original masters, so that original masters are not put at risk.

Running masters are usually made on a custom-engineered duplicating system. Two consecutive original masters are played simultaneously on twin half-track, two-channel master decks. The output from the two master decks is fed to a four-channel copy transport to produce a running master.

The three versions of this system used in the field to produce running masters are:

1. RRX open-reel masters to open-reel copy
2. RCX open-reel masters to cassette copy
3. CX cassette masters to cassette copy

### **Ensuring Quality**

The use of quality assurance and quality control methods and procedures should be standard practice in all facets of audio book production. Quality assurance is a collection of methods and procedures established to identify potential problems and prevent them from occurring. Quality control is a collection of methods and procedures established to identify finished products that do not meet requirements and prevent them from circulating to consumers. Quality assurance is problem avoidance and quality control is problem detection.

Examples of quality assurance methods and procedures are requiring all narrator candidates to pass a narration audition to qualify to be a narrator; having available appropriate reference materials for all staff involved in original master recording production; using good quality tape products for original masters, running masters, and cassette copies; and frequent, thorough cleaning of tape transports for all mastering, reviewing, and duplicating equipment.

Examples of quality control methods and procedures are completely reviewing all original master recordings for artistic and technical quality; checking all running masters for technical quality before they are used to duplicate copies; and checking all cassette copies for technical quality before they are circulated to consumers.

An example of a production practice that encompasses both quality assurance and quality control is the use of running masters for general duplicating purposes.

## **Position Descriptions for Audio Book Production Staff**

### **Narrator**

#### **Purpose**

The narrator translates the written word to the spoken word in a way that is as consistent as possible with the intent of the author.

#### **Supervision Received**

The narrator works under the supervision of the studio director who assigns tasks, sets priorities, and provides guidance on matters of studio policy.

#### **Requirements**

- Good vision and hearing.
- Ability to pass a narration audition.
- Fluency in the language in which the text is printed.
- Ability to work well with others and to accept critiques from the monitor, reviewer, and studio director.
- Discipline to achieve and maintain consistent narration performance for all recording sessions.
- Ability to use dictionaries and other reference sources.

#### **Responsibilities**

- Achieving a presentation that conveys the artistic emotional, and intellectual range of the text.
- Conveying the sense of the text by handling the narration in the manner most appropriate to the needs of the text.

- Ensuring correct pronunciation, which requires research in applicable sources as well as judging when common usage should take precedence over correct dictionary pronunciation, especially in novels.
- Handling characterization appropriately and consistently without underplaying or overplaying.
- Narrating the text without commenting on attitudes and opinions expressed by the author.
- Achieving and maintaining a presentation that is consistent throughout all recording sessions.
- Writing accurate, concise descriptions for illustrations graphs, charts, and tables when such graphic elements appear in the text.

## **Monitor**

### **Purpose**

The monitor controls all technical operations during a recording session, thus allowing the narrator to devote full attention and effort to the task of narration.

### **Supervision Received**

The monitor works under the supervision of the studio director who assigns tasks, sets priorities, and provides guidance on matters of studio policy.

### **Requirements**

- Good vision and hearing.
- Good ear eye hand coordination.
- Ability to learn to operate the recording equipment correctly and sufficient dexterity to perform those operations.
- Ability to work well with others and to accept critiques from the narrator, reviewer, and studio director.
- An artistic sense for spoken language and the ability to work with problems related to translating printed text to spoken communication.
- Fluency in the language in which the text is printed.
- Ability to use dictionaries and other reference sources.

### **Responsibilities**

- Working with the narrator to achieve a recording of high artistic and technical quality.
- Ensuring that the sound track is free from audible noise.
- Ensuring that the text is accurately narrated and all edits are clean and undetectable.



- Ensuring that the segments of sound track with corrections to the recorded text are acoustically identical to the rest of the recording.

## **Reviewer**

### **Purpose**

The reviewer ensures the artistic and technical quality of recordings by reviewing them for adherence to established procedures. The reviewer is the third member of the production team and cannot have been involved with the narration or monitoring of the master recording being reviewed. This requirement assures a different ear for the review process. The reviewer is a full participant in quality assurance procedures of master recording production.

### **Supervision Received**

The reviewer works under the supervision of the studio director who assigns tasks, sets priorities, and provides guidance on matters of studio policy.

### **Requirements**

- Good vision and hearing.
- Ability to listen effectively.
- Ability to communicate effectively in writing and orally.
- Ability to work well with others and to accept critiques from the narrator, monitor, and studio director.
- Sensitivity to the difficulties involved in translating a printed text to spoken communication, and an artistic appreciation of the written and spoken word.
- Fluency in the language in which the text is printed.
- Ability to use dictionaries and other reference sources.

### **Responsibilities**

- Reviewing recordings in their entirety for artistic and technical quality.
- Verifying that side announcements, duration of sound tracks, and record level comply with established procedures.
- Verifying that sound tracks are free from any audible disturbance.
- Noting mispronunciations, omissions, substitutions, and transpositions.
- Verifying consistency of characterization, pronunciation and narration style; and noting changes in energy level pacing, recording level, background ambience, and any other audible characteristic.
- Making observations on artistic and technical qualities of the recording that could be improved, but do not require correction.

Billy R. West

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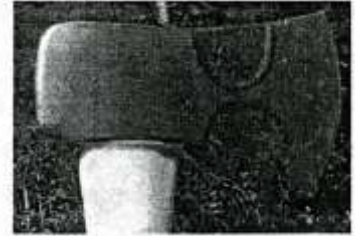
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Posted on 2010-11-12

## #35 - HOW TO GIVE AND RECEIVE CRITICISM

By Scott Berkun, September 2004

Good feedback is rare. It can take a long time to find people who know how to provide useful criticism, instead of simply telling you all the things they think are "wrong" with you or whatever you've made. A good critic spends as much energy describing what something is, as well as what it isn't. Good criticism serves one purpose: to give the creator of the work more perspective and help them make their next set of choices.



Bad criticism uses the opportunity provided by someone else's work to make the critic feel smart, superior or better about themselves: things that have nothing to do with helping the recipient of the critique (Or in the case of movie reviews, the reader of the critique). Given the difficulty of creative work, it would seem that giving and receiving useful feedback should be an important part of what designers, writers, programmers and others are taught to do. This essay attempts to serve that purpose.

### **ASSUMPTIONS BAD CRITICS MAKE**

There are four fundamental assumptions bad critics make:

1. There is one universal and objective measure of how good and bad anything is.
2. That the critic is in sole possession of the skill for making these measurements.
3. Anyone that doesn't possess this skill (including the creator of the work) is an idiot and should be ridiculed.
4. That valid criticisms can and should always be resolved.

Let's work with these one at a time. First, the idea of objective measures runs against everything we know about the history of man made things. To objectively measure how good and bad anything is would require not only that the universe is objective, but that the people in it are objective. There is no film, book, software, website, or album that is universally liked by everyone (including those who have the word critic in their job title). Some people may be more informed or knowledgeable than others, but this doesn't make their opinions objective.

More important perhaps is the idea of measurement. To measure how good or bad something is requires knowledge about the intent of what the thing is trying to do. If you show me a frying pan that you've made, and I criticize it for not playing MP3 files, there's a mismatch of intention in what we're trying to measure and evaluate. Unless the intention of the work is clear to everyone, "I want to make omelets", good criticism is impossible. There are an infinite number of intentions and goals in the universe, and if two people can't agree

on what the creators intentions are, real communication is impossible. It might be fair to say that the intentions of a work should be transparent in the work itself: A toaster oven should look vaguely like something that can receive slices of bread. But in the case where the intentions aren't clear, critics have a choice: they can trust the creator and invest more energy trying to sort out what the intentions are, or they can assume the worst about those intentions and begin criticizing what they don't understand.

Second, believing that one person has sole possession of good perspective is a contradiction in terms. Good perspective by definition means the recognition of how many alternatively valuable perspectives there are on any matter. Two smart knowledgeable people might both love the new super-thin I-mac design or the recently U.S. released film Hero, but for entirely different and non-overlapping reasons. Good criticism generally comes with some degree of humility and respect for the possibility of other equally valid points of view. The better the critic, the more holistic their sense of how their own perspectives and tastes fit into the diverse pool of informed opinion of others.

Third, respect and ridicule don't mix well. To offer good criticism must be an act of respect: an act of communication with the intention of helping the other person do better work, or understand their work better. If you are shaping sentences and remarks to be snide, snarky, or sarcastic, the intention of being helpful is unlikely to be served (Unless you know the recipient of the criticisms well enough to be comfortable razzing or joking with them about their work). It's entirely possible to offer criticism, commentary and advice without any negative energy attached: it's just so rare that we see it done properly that most of us don't realize it's possible, much less more effective.

Lastly, finding a valid criticism doesn't mean that it can be fixed or is worth fixing. In many situations responding to one kind of criticism will just make the design or the work vulnerable to another kind of criticism. A film or essay that is dark and brooding could be made lighter and funnier, but then another critic could say "it wasn't dark and brooding enough". And in some cases, fixing a particular problem will cause other problems that are worse. Until the creator explores the alternatives presented by feedback, it's impossible to know whether responding to a piece of criticism is possible, much less desirable.

Collectively, this means that criticizing and giving feedback should be a thoughtful activity. If you're flippant, arrogant, dismissive, curt or annoyed while giving feedback, you're probably making one of the four assumptions above and not giving very good criticism.

## HOW TO GIVE CRITICAL FEEDBACK

The verb criticize, once a neutral word somewhere between praise and censure, is now mainly used in a negative sense. To say "He criticized me for being so friendly" generally means something different and less positive than "He made me think about the possible effects of being so friendly".

critical (adj.)

1. Inclined to judge severely and find fault.
2. Characterized by careful, exact evaluation and judgment: a critical reading.

Now I'm not saying that finding fault isn't useful. On the contrary, it's very important. It's just that of equal importance in understanding the value of a design, algorithm, script, or film is to know what isn't broken, or god forbid, what's actually done brilliantly. What you want to do when you are offering criticism is to live up to the second definition listed above: Careful evaluation and judgment. To do this you need to do the following:

**Before you speak, know the goals:** What problem is the work trying to solve? What are the goals? If you don't know the intention of the work it's very difficult to offer careful evaluation and judgment. Remember the frying pan? If I don't know what the creator is trying to achieve, how can I possibly offer any commentary that's of value? Now it should be the creators job to inform me of what they're trying to do, or tell me that they think it should be self-evident in the work, but if they don't there's not much harm in me asking "What are you trying to accomplish here?", and it will save everyone much time and grief. If the problem is at the level of intention, discussion will ensue at that level instead of trying (and failing) to sort out intentions at the level of specific design choices.

**Good and bad, is not the same as what you like or don't like.** You must shatter the idea that anything you like is good, and anything you don't is bad. If you can't separate your personal preferences from more abstract analysis of a kind of work, then you will rarely provide much useful feedback: criticism is not about you. It's about the work you're viewing and person that made it. Your personal preferences only get in the way of providing the work (and its maker or possible consumers) with useful information. Learn to see the good and



	Good	Bad
Dislike		
Like		

respectable attributes in work you do not like: they are there if you let yourself see them. For example: a good film review should evaluate the film's merits somewhat independently from the reviewer's personal tastes. It should be possible to read a review about a film the reviewer didn't like, but be inclined to see it anyway based on the observations he made about its content, style, and form.

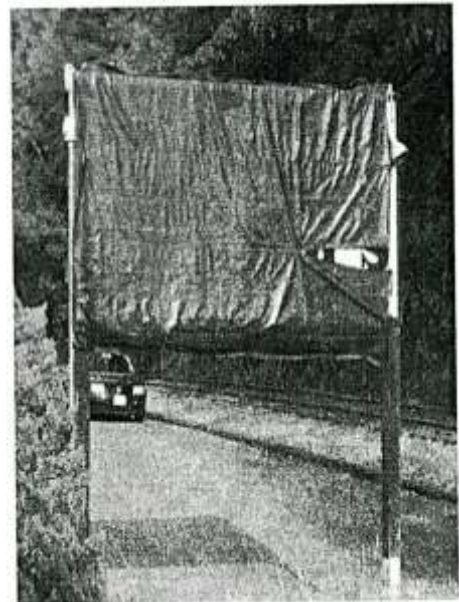
**Talk as much about what it is, as what it isn't** While it can be more efficient to focus on problems and what's broken, rather than what's good and working, if the creator can't see both, there's not much hope of their next choices being good ones. Make sure you spend as much energy helping them to see and keep the strong parts of what they've done as you help them see the weaker and more questionable parts.

**Try the PNP sandwich (positive negative positive):** I don't like this idea much, but I think it can be a good one (see what I did there?) for dealing with people sensitive or new to receiving criticism. The idea is simple: find a way to alternate, your feedback. Find something positive, then find something negative, then find another positive thing. It's an easy way to develop trust and help people become comfortable with hearing other people's opinion. I don't like it because it has a touchy-feely vibe and it can lead to pretension and insincerity. However I have seen it work as a way to get strangers to warm up to each other, and eventually grow out of this little pattern of behavior.

## RECEIVING CRITICAL FEEDBACK

It's much harder to receive criticism than to give it. By the time most people make it through college there have been so many bad experiences with receiving feedback, especially on creative work, that they tend to avoid it or ignore it. Nothing can be worse: feedback is essential to developing ideas, and if the project involves a team in any way, the dialog and communication that falls out of feedback is essential. Anyone that makes anything must find ways to not only obtain feedback, - but to master the skills of milking it for all its worth.

**Shut up. Just shut up and listen.** Creators often fall into the trap of speaking for their work, trying to use words to defend things that should be in the design. This is a form of denial: The work has to speak for itself. Even if only for a few minutes, let the prototype or draft be its own thing, and stand on its own. If you respond right away to (or perhaps interrupt) every point made in a critique, you can't possibly be thinking about what's being said to you. Thinking takes time. Try to talk as little as possible, and let the time be used for critique, not for defense. If you don't trust the people critiquing you to be fair, that's a problem best



solved by defining sound ground rules (See below), or by investing more in finding better critique partners.

Ask clarifying questions. Again, avoid filling the conversation with defensive chatter. Instead respond to questions by trying to sort out any ambiguities or points you don't agree with by getting whoever is critiquing to restate their point. "When you say the style in my design is sloppy, do you mean that the lines aren't sharp, or that the composition isn't balanced quite right? Can you show me exactly what you mean?" By asking clarifying questions you allow yourself time to decide if you agree with the criticism or not by working with the other person to understand their point/question better. It makes the critique into a dialog, which is what it should be, and not a courtroom trial.

**Refer back to the goals.** If you're not getting what you want from the critique, provide some goals for the work that you're trying to achieve. If you're working on a project this should be easy: the goals for a given design should derive from the project goals. Ask whoever is giving you feedback to do so in terms of those goals or your derivations of them. Then whenever the conversation goes astray, you can refer back to the goals and set things in a useful direction again.

**Ask for what changes you can make that will satisfy the criticism.** The goal of criticism is not to learn every nuance about a design's weaknesses: its to know enough about a design so that the designer can make it better. If you agree with a criticism, but don't see a path to improvement, ask for one. Turn the question back around on the person who made the comment. "Good point. So do you see anything I can do to improve on that?" Often they won't have anything to say: critiquing is not the same as creating. But by asking the question you do move the conversation forward into thinking about future action, instead of staying stuck in criticism mode.

## GROUND RULES

**Take control of your feedback process.** Feedback is not something that happens to you: it should be something you make happen. If you wait for feedback to come to you, it tends to be less positive and supportive than if you seek it out. If you walk into someone's office and say "hey, can I have 5 minutes of your time to look at something?" you are taking control. You put yourself in the driver's seat of the process, and can frame and shape the criticism you get however you want. But if you wait and wait and wait until deadlines approach, you have less and less control over how feedback will be given to you. It will have more edge to it and will tend to serve others more than serve you.

**Pick your partners.** Who do you get the best feedback from? It's probably not the person who loves everything you do. If you don't think you get good feedback from anyone, part of the problem might be you haven't taken control of the process. Be more specific about what kinds of criticism you need, and go to people and ask for it. If you find a good source, cherish it, and reward them for it. Much of what a good mentor does is provide good, consistent, honest feedback. If you can get this from a peer or a manager find ways to

cultivate and reward it. Look for people outside of your company or organization that might be willing to form a peer review group: meet once a week/month over coffee and show each other your work.

**Strive to hear it all, informally and early.** The sooner you hear a question or criticism of something you've created, the greater your ability to do something about it before it's finished. If there is any kind of formal review or feedback process (e.g. a spec review or group critique) make it your job to find out what opinions there are of what you're doing well before it happens. This can be as simple as going to door to door and showing sketches, and asking for a few quick comments. Give yourself the opportunity to benefit early from other perspectives and think things through. But do know how much feedback you can handle: you don't want your work driven by other people's opinions, but you do want to give yourself the opportunity to benefit from them.