

Introduction

Those who attempt voice-over for the first time are often left feeling that it is an impossible thing to do. Those who do voice-over regularly will sympathise with this feeling because we, too, found it difficult at first. If we were fortunate, as I was, to be introduced to a local sound-recording “guru”, then we were quickly steered away from the bad practices and steered towards the good practices.

It is my intention, through this guide, to try and steer you, the novice, towards the good practices that I have learned during my journey along the AV maker’s highway. My advice will, largely, be free of any references to particular hardware or software. Good techniques will produce passable voice-over on poor equipment, good voice-over on good equipment and excellent voice-over on excellent equipment. Bad techniques will produce poor voice-over no matter how good the equipment is.

So, why are voice-overs so difficult to do well?

There can be many reasons:

- They are open microphone recordings, and the microphone picks up all sounds – not just the spoken words that we want it pick up
- The acoustics of the room used as the recording studio may be less than ideal – with excessive echoes or resonant frequencies
- Your voice has probably never been trained for this job
- You’re too self-conscious about speaking out loud into a microphone
- Your script is poorly prepared causing you to stumble over some words and phrases

In the rest of this guide we will explore each of these in turn.

But let’s get one thing clear: I’m not saying this is the only way to make voice-overs. If you are doing things differently but getting results that satisfy you and your audiences, that’s fine. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!”

But if you have tried to do voice-over and are not happy with what you have achieved, read on. You might pick up some pointers that you can apply within your own ways of working that will raise the quality of your voice-overs.

All I can say is that these techniques work for me.

Microphones

Microphone types

There are two basic kinds of microphone: omni-directional and directional:

- Omni-directional picks up the sounds roughly equally from all directions: in front of, to the side of, above, below and behind the microphone
- Directional microphones pick up sound mostly from a “cone of acceptance” in front of the microphone with very little pick up from outside this cone.

For voice-over work you are best using a directional microphone. The size of the cone varies. Some pick up from almost the entire front hemisphere, others have very narrow cones. I

have found that a cone of 60° gives a good workable set up. Any narrower and I find it difficult to keep my head in the “sweet spot” of the microphone, any wider and the microphone starts to pick up more of the unwanted sounds.

Microphone placement

Now let's consider where we should place the microphone relative to our mouth. Obviously it needs to be pointed towards our mouth. Ideally, our mouth should be on the central axis of the “cone of acceptance”. But we all have a tendency to pronounce some of the consonants in an explosive manner, especially “p”, “b”, “t” and “k”. These “explosives” cause the level of the input signal to rise suddenly, resulting in “over recording” and distortion. If we place the microphone directly in front of the mouth and pointing straight back into the mouth, we will almost certainly have a problem in controlling these “explosives”.

So we need to position the microphone off the main axis of the mouth. I find that positioning it 6 inches (15cm) above the axis, 6 inches (15cm) left or right of the axis and six inches (15cm) forwards from my face is what works well for me with my recording equipment. Although the microphone itself is now positioned away from the axis of the mouth, its own axis is still pointing directly towards my mouth.

This arrangement also helps to reduce the pick up of stray noises from my lips, teeth and tongue and also my breathing.

Room acoustics

The ideal room to use as a recording studio is one with thick carpet on the floor, long drapes at the windows and plenty of soft furnishings scattered around: i.e. one that reflects very little sound off its surfaces. Ideally it needs to be away from the road so that you minimize pick up of stray traffic noise. A bedroom at the rear of your house might be suitable.

I don't have any rooms that are really ideal so I've had to work out a solution that gives me acceptable results. I do my recording in the room that I use as my office and studio. It has all my computer equipment in it, the storage units that contain all my 35mm slides and all the folders that contain my family history and local history research material. It is carpeted but there are no soft furnishings. The door to it leads out to the first-floor landing and from there other doors lead into my bedroom, the junk-room and the bathroom.

I set the microphone up near the window but facing away from it into the room and at an angle of approximately 45° to that wall. The window has vertical, slatted blinds and I angle these to be at 45° to the window. I stand in front of the microphone and I leave all the doors on the landing open at various angles. It's the most complex set of angles of reflection that I can devise. And most of the time it works fine.

You will also need to think about the time of day and day of the week when you do your voice-over recordings. I have found that the best time for me is between 10am and midday, weekdays. The local kids are at school and their parents are at work or out shopping. I live in a quiet cul-de-sac so traffic noise is minimal. The only things I have to be aware of are my two striking clocks. I need to be alert as we approach the half hour (one bong each), take a comfort break at eleven o'clock (twenty two bongs!) and keep an ear open for the next half hour strike. If I fail to stop recording for either of the half-hour strikes I just do a re-take of that piece of voice-over.

Voice training

Unless you're a broadcaster or into amateur dramatics, your voice will never have been trained for clear delivery. The following advice was given to me by my first "guru" and it has stood the test of time and of many different audiences.

Speak slowly – When we speak in our daily lives we are usually engaged in a conversation. In those circumstances our brains are racing with thoughts that we want to introduce into the conversation and so we speak quickly. When doing a voice-over, we want the audience to hear every word – so slow down your delivery.

Speak clearly – We, all of us, in our normal daily lives, speak in our local colloquial style. For voice-over, although the regional accent will add local colour to the voice-over, we must avoid the idiomatic forms of speech.

Animate your voice – The single most valuable piece of advice I've ever had was: Vary the intonation of your voice up and down, in an appropriate manner, but to an extent that, to you, sounds way over the top. To your listener it will then sound full of feeling and emotion.

Self-consciousness

I've been doing voice-overs for more than twenty years and I still get self-conscious when I stand in front of the microphone. I think it's something to do with "talking to yourself". My technique at the start of a recording session is to get the levels set by reciting a nursery rhyme or two; usually "Mary had a little lamb..." and "Peter Piper picked a peck...". I then read the first two or three paragraphs of voice over with the recorder not actually recording before I switch it on and begin recording. Even then, I always record the first two or three paragraphs twice before moving on. I can sense within me that at each "take" I am relaxing a little bit more.

As I've already indicated, I do the recording near a window. From this window I can see horses from the nearby riding school in their paddock. I try and think of them as my audience, and deliver the voice-over to them, as I would do to my audiences. It all helps to take my mind off being self-conscious.

Script preparation

Preparing the voice-over script is a crucial step in the chain. Obviously it has to be factually accurate but what else does it need to be and do?

For a start it has to complement the images. So, don't use the voice-over to describe what the audience can see for themselves in the image. Use it add information that they cannot see in the image. For example, you've got an image of a statue (a man on a horse, wearing armour and carrying a battleaxe, let's say). Don't describe this in the voice-over. Who is he? What did he do? When did he live? Why is he commemorated? Why here? These are the things that your voice-over can convey. Another example: you have some beautiful landscape images. What made you take the photos? What emotions did the views stir within you? These are the sort of things that your voice-over could convey.

Having drafted your voice-over script you must then read it out aloud – and several times. This allows you to practice varying your intonation but, more importantly, it gives you a

chance to find the “tongue-twisters” – those word sequences and phrases that you struggle to say clearly and cleanly. Re-phrase them to get rid of them.

Once you are happy with the script, lay it to one side for two or three weeks. Then come back to it and read it out aloud again. Your previous readings were teaching your mouth to get itself around some of the awkward words and phrases. Coming back to it after a couple of weeks, you might spot some latent tongue-twisters that need attention before you begin recording.

Conclusion

I hope you’ve found these thoughts of some value. Voice-over is not an aspect of audio-visual work where you should expect any “quick wins”. It takes time and practice to master it. As I’ve already said, I’ve been doing voice-overs for more than twenty years – and I’m still learning!