

# 5 NARRATION

## WHAT IS THAT VOICE AND WHERE IS IT COMING FROM?

Narration, also known as voice-over, is a disembodied voice that informs the audience what is going on in the story and moves it forward. As a form of storytelling, narration is the quickest and most efficient way to get details to the audience. Most narration is recorded after the picture is edited and is recorded to picture and not part of production sound. For this reason, I consider narration recording as part of audio post-production.

A filmmaker that I worked with for many years once told me that if narration is needed in a film, it is a sign that there is a problem in the storytelling, and the narration is the cheapest, or laziest, way of fixing the problem. I am still not sure whether I believe this or not, but the concept has stuck with me for many years, so I think that there is something to the statement. Yet narration can be extremely effective in films, as *Goodfellas* demonstrated. In this movie, the main character, Henry Hill, is describing his life in the mafia. While there is plenty of diegetic sound in the film, the movie is driven by narration. When we get to the end of the film, he breaks frame and looks into the camera, revealing that he has been telling us this story the whole time.

Another well-known example is *A Christmas Story*, where the writer, Jean Shepherd, drives the tale of his biographical anecdotes in a believable way that no on-camera actor could replicate.

Television shows also use voice-over well, as we can see in shows such as *Arrested Development*, *Scrubs*, and *Desperate Housewives*.

## PLANNING A NARRATION RECORDING SESSION

Let us now plan our narration recording session. What type of narration is it? It could be for a documentary, a narrative film, or even just a few wild lines—dialog recorded without camera to be inserted later in post production—that help move the story along.

In many cases, temporary narration is recorded by the editorial department, usually using a microphone plugged into the editing computer, recorded in the room with the editor. This is less than ideal—usually the computer is in the room and the fan noise will be difficult to remove—but the director or producer knows that this is a temporary solution and the narration is used as a placeholder to establish timing and pacing of the picture.

Most narrations are recorded in a professional studio with the voice actor (the “talent”) working inside a vocal booth or other very quiet environment. The voice has to sound pristine, without any sense of space. For the last ten years, I have recorded narration in the same room as my mixing and composing setup. Usually the voice-over talent is just a few feet away from me, yet the recordings are successful because of where I place the microphone and how I treat the acoustics of the room. However your space sounds, there are some simple solutions that will achieve successful results.

- Place the talent and microphone stand on a rug. While minimizing any reverberation in the room, the rug will greatly reduce any foot noise created when the talent is moving or shifting their weight. That said, if your voice actor is standing on a rug on a hard floor surface such as wood or tile, you might consider placing some blankets on the floor to minimize any reverb in the room.
- The surface behind the talent should have some sound absorbing properties. Since the microphone typically used for this work has a cardioid pickup pattern, and thus picks up in the direction of the voice and not the entire room, it will also detect any sound behind the talent. In my space, I have sliding glass doors behind the talent, which is the worst possible surface for recording voice-overs, unfortunately. Knowing this, I have installed thick curtains that I pull over to cover the windows during recording. These prevent any sound from bouncing off of them and into the microphone. And since they are not a flat surface, sound is also diffused, or scattered.
- The talent will need a music stand to hold the script. Mine is a sturdy metal version, but it does vibrate, and it is possible to hear that vibration. It also becomes another surface off which sound will bounce. To solve the problem, I have cut a piece of thick carpet the size of the stand, and placed it so that the script can lie on top of it. In watching “behind the scenes” videos of professional voice-over sessions, you may notice that they use music stands that are made of vertical slats of wood—no bouncing sound, and no vibration. Some day I have to build one of those.

## **MICROPHONE CONSIDERATIONS**

Generally, narration is recorded with large diaphragm cardioid condenser microphones. Condenser microphones reproduce a relatively flat frequency response, and the large diaphragm microphones deliver a more natural, accurate bass response than a small diaphragm mic. I am generalizing here. There are some excellent dynamic microphones that do a wonderful job at recording narration. Dynamic microphone’s sensitivity is not as responsive after two or three feet away from the diaphragm, but if your space has a bit too much reverberation, this may be a better choice for you.

Today, you can find first-rate microphones at quite reasonable prices. If possible, try and borrow, or rent a variety of microphones to try out before you purchase one.

### **Placement**

Now you have your recording setup ready to go, it is once again time to listen to your room. Place your microphone where you think you want to record, and record the room tone without any voice. Then, without changing the recording levels, move the microphone to another spot and record some more

room tone. And then try other places in your space, even turning the axis of the mic 90 degrees. Listen for the quietest placement. Going through this process will teach you about your room. Our ears perceive sound differently than microphones. And most importantly, do this well in advance of the recording session. Once your talent arrives, everything should be in place and ready to go.

## CASTING

The voice over/narration recording market has changed in recent years. If voice artists intend to stay in business long-term, they usually have to have their own recording setup at home. Many casting services are online and potential clients choose from a wide selection of demo reels and then direct the session over the phone. The talent then uploads the files for online delivery.

Often I am asked to recommend someone for a narration session, usually for a long industrial training video. Time is money. And since the time that you spend recording and editing the read directly affects the cost, choosing someone with experience makes the experience good for all involved. There are usually two ways of billing for these sessions. One is by the hour, where the client pays the talent a fee for their services, and you, the studio, buy the hour for the recording and editing of the read. In this case, the more efficient your talent is, the happier your client is. The other way of billing is a flat rate, where the client pays you one price that includes the fee of the talent *and* your fee for recording and editing. If you plan well and have competent talent, everyone is happy. If you do not plan well and the talent struggles in delivering what the client is looking for, however, or makes frequent errors in reading, you have to spend more time recording. Plus, you will have to put in the hours of editing the recording to deliver an acceptable product to your client. Agreeing to a flat fee can be risky, but if you know what you are doing and you are proficient at your craft, your expectations of time will be realistic.

Here is an example of a spot (commercial) where I had to cast a voice talent. The client wanted the narrator to sound like the Ronald Reagan reelection campaign spot from 1984 called "It's morning again in America." Try a little experiment with yourself. Go to any voice-casting website and listen to the sample reels of voice over talent, and see if you can pick a talent that has the same feel as the Reagan spot.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU-IBF8nwSY>

## SCRIPTS

Most of the time, clients provide the script, and often there are last-minute changes. If they are bringing printed copies, the minimum numbers that I request is three; one for me, one for the talent, and one for the client. If possible, plan ahead and ask for an electronic version to be emailed to you in advance too. This allows you to not only print your own copies, but also to sort out any font size or spacing issues that your client may not have considered.

For longer reads, I like double spacing with a minimum 10-point font size. Make sure that page breaks happen at the end of the paragraph. Since you are going to pick up the page turn in the recording, having a page turn at the end of a paragraph will allow plenty of time for the talent to pause at the end of a thought, and then turn the page.

For shorter reads, such as a commercial, I leave plenty of space between sentences and even phrases that are fragmented sentence. Phrases in commercials are usually standalone thoughts and do not have to follow grammatical precedent. I also number the lines in the margin of the page. Even with leaving plenty of space and number margining, I am able to get the spot onto a single page.

Here is an example of a commercial script.

- 01 *Your IT is critical for your organizations to fulfill their missions.*
- 02 *You are constantly adding new functionality and leveraging new opportunities, in ever-changing worlds of day-to-day operations, applications, and innovations.*
- 03 *Your IT is on an evolving journey through an accelerating and demanding technology universe.*
- 04 *Wherever you want to go, **The Greatest Company Ever** is with you for that journey.*
- 05 *Three constellations of services provide you with the expertise to evolve, implement, and manage your **Greatest Product** environments, making your voyage to future easy.*
- 06 *Whether you need specific **Greatest Product ABC** or **XYZ** skills, or want to outsource all your IT headaches in order to concentrate on growing your business – or anything in between –*
- 07 ***The Greatest Company Ever** is with you.*
- 08 *We can help you evolve and further enhance your current applications, to capitalize on new market dynamics, and keep your **Greatest Product** environment up-to-date with the latest innovations.*
- 09 *We are from the center of the **Greatest Product** universe, we are the people who created **Greatest Product** technologies – we are **THE** experts. We are **The Greatest Company Ever**.*
- 10 *We can innovate and build the future with you, while maintaining the high availability, security, stability, and business continuity you need and expect from **The Corporation**.*
- 11 *This is your voyage to the new worlds of your digital enterprise, and wherever you want to go, **The Corporation** is with you for the journey.*
- 12 *Because, with **The Greatest Company Ever**, the sky is no longer the limit.*

## **WORKING WITH TALENT**

Whether the voice talent is a professional or someone who is recording for the first time, your role as engineer is to make them as comfortable as possible. Generally, narration is recorded standing up. However, if the read is rather long, make sure a chair is available in case they wish to sit. And always have water available.

Now you are all ready to go and all technical aspects of the recording have been solved, prepped, and prepared prior to the talent, and usually the client, arriving at your studio. Once everybody has been introduced each other or caught up on current news and jokes, it is your responsibility to move the session forward. And it is important to do this without being pushy. I find myself always holding back. I want to finish and get everyone out of my place. Most of the time I get paid a flat rate, meaning that the faster I finish, the more I am compensated. I am not selling time, after all. I cannot let everyone know this, though, so I have developed certain people skills of making sure everyone is comfortable while moving everything along at a decent pace.

The recording has started. You are as responsible as the client in ensuring that the script is recorded correctly. And, while the read is recording, errors will inevitably crop up and need to be corrected. Your first impulse will be to stop the talent and to make them aware of their mistakes, but I suggest waiting

until the end of the sentence or paragraph instead of jumping on the mistake and interrupting. Most of the time, seasoned talent know that they have made a mistake, but they want to get through the thought. (After all, it is probably the first time that they have seen the script.)

And as with actors, do not read the script to them. If your client is not present, direct the talent, if necessary, by telling them to speed up or slow down the pace, or lift it up, or bring it down in feeling. The only time I have read lines to voice talent is when they are children. They may not understand the subtleties of what is necessary, but are excellent at mimicking what they hear.

I did a small web commercial about a child's product called "Monster Spray," where the client wrote the script and a brief melody at the end that needed to be read and sung by a little girl. Naturally, I enlisted my six-year-old daughter; she was free, and had her repeat exactly what I said and how I said it.

### MARKING SCRIPTS DURING RECORDING

While the recording is happening, and you are listening to the read to make sure that every word is correctly delivered, you should be also planning on a way to edit it efficiently. The best way to do this is by leaving marks on the script to indicate issues such as:

- any errors, or where a re-read or restart takes place;
- which takes are the best ones;
- a page break where an extended pause needs to be closed.

Here is an example of a marked script and the reasons why I marked them.

Dynamic Earth Script 3

BUT WHEN TROPICAL HEAT BUILDS TO PYREXAS, IT CAN BE REE BAVED IN A JURY.

IN AUGUST 2005, WITH A HUGE LOOPING SECTION OF THE GULF STREAM, THE OCEAN UNLEASHED A MONSTER... HURRICANE KATRINA.

THIS IS A SUPERCOMPUTER MODEL OF KATRINA -- A TOOL FOR SCIENTISTS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE DYNAMICS OF THE HURRICANE SYSTEM.

TO VISUALIZE THE FLOW OF AIR INTO THE STORM, THEY RELEASE A SWARM OF VIRTUAL STREAMERS.

THOSE WITH LIGHTER COLORS ARE WARMER WINDS. AS THEY RISE, THEY COLLIDE WITH COOLER AIR ABOVE AND PRODUCE CLOUDS.

THE WINDS INCREASE THE EVAPORATION OF WARM SEA WATER... WHICH DRAWS MORE AND MORE HEAT FROM THE OCEAN AND CAUSES THE WINDS TO ACHIEVE MASSIVE MOMENTUM. AROUND THE EYE OF THE STORM, WINDS CAN REACH SPEEDS OF UP TO 200 MILES PER HOUR.

A TYPICAL HURRICANE LIKE KATRINA CAN RELEASE AS MUCH HEAT ENERGY EVERY TWENTY MINUTES AS A TEN-MEGATON NUCLEAR BOMB.

WHILE STORMS RELEASE HEAT STORED IN THE OCEAN, THE MOISTURE THEY STIR INTO THE ATMOSPHERE HELPS KEEP THE REST OF THE PLANET WARM. WATER VAPOR TRAPS SOLAR ENERGY... ALONG WITH CARBON DIOXIDE... THE SAME GREENHOUSE GAS THAT RUINED VENUS.

THE DIFFERENCE IS THAT EARTH HAS FOUND A WAY TO CHECK IN CHECK... AND LET ITS OWN UNBROKE CLIMATE CONTROL SYSTEM... CAN SORT THINGS OUT BY TRYING TO COOL DOWN TO THE OCEAN.

THE SPECIAL INGREDIENT THAT SAVED EARTH AGAIN IS CALLED... "LIFE"

THE OCEANS ARE A BOEK FULL OF IT... TOO SMALL FOR OUR EYES TO SEE... PHYTOPLANKTON MAY BE THE MOST IMPORTANT LIVING THINGS ON THE PLANET.

THEY TAKE IN CO2... DRIVEN INTO THE OCEAN BY WAVES OR DRAGGED UP FROM THE DEEP BY CURRENTS... THEY RELEASE... HELIX OXYGEN... WHILE ABSORBING CARBON.

THE CARBON THEN BEGINS A JOURNEY UP THE FOOD CHAIN... PHYTOPLANKTON GET EATEN BY ZOOPLANKTON... TO NAME A FEW... RADIOLARIANS DATE BACK TO A TIME OVER 200 MILLION YEARS AGO WHEN LIFE FIRST TOOK ACROSS EARTH'S OCEANS.

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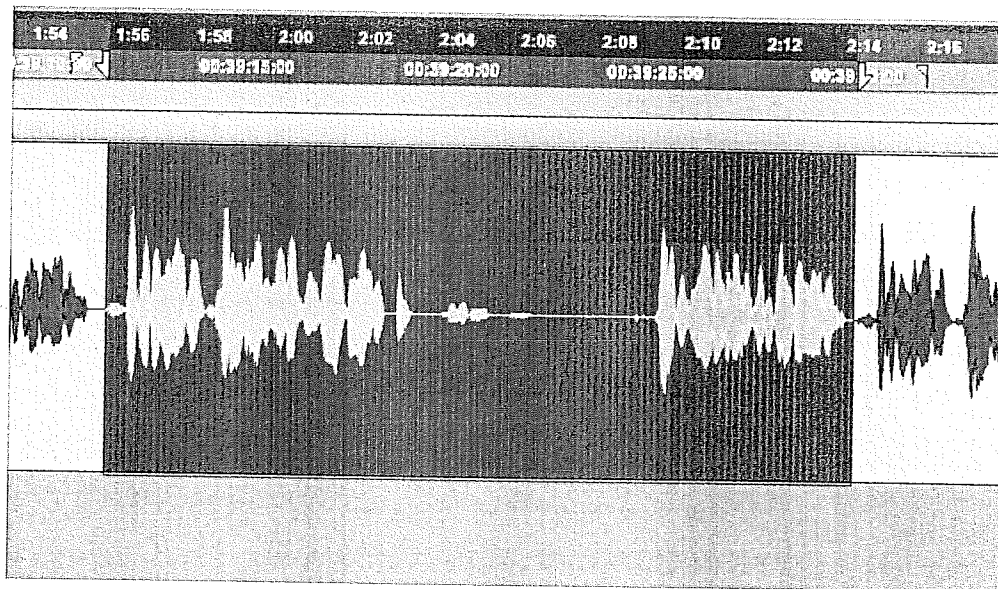
70:51

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## EDITING NARRATION

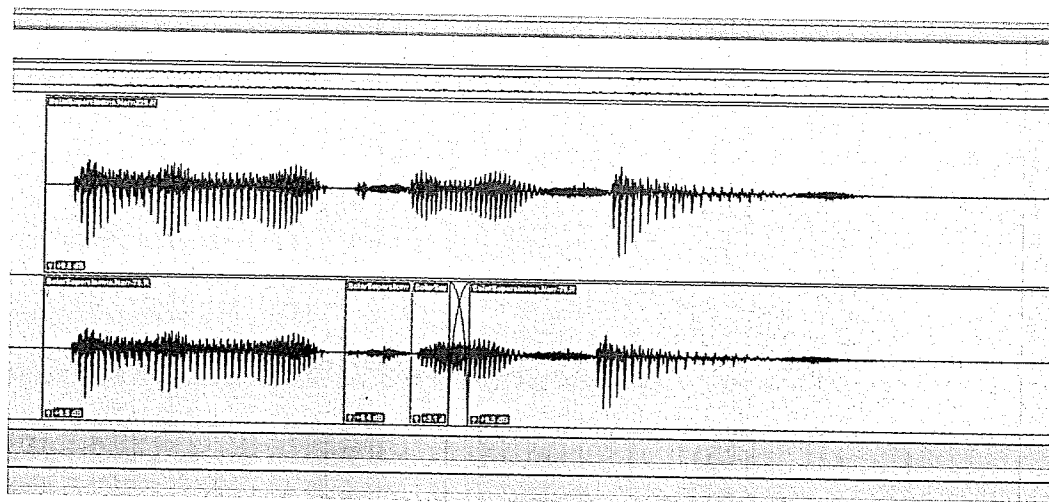
Now that the recording is finished and the clients and talent have left, it's time to edit the read. Clients rarely stay around to watch you edit, and it is usually uploaded to a website by the time they arrive at their next destination. It's a good idea to edit as soon as possible while the session is fresh in your memory.

For a narration like the above example, which was for a planetarium presentation, the running length of the read is not as important as it might be were it created for broadcast. We do not have to be concerned with the running time so we can make edits in a "natural sound" way, by leaving the spacing of phrases and breaths as they were recorded. In this edit, I am removing a bad take, yet I am keeping a little breath in front of the sentence. This will leave a natural space between the previous sentence and the connected correct sentence.



Inevitably, mistakes are made and discovered only after the talent has left. In this example the celebrity talent misread "nuclear" and read it as "nucular." And, after the George W. Bush issue (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hORaebYWDwk>), it is something that had to be corrected.

In this edit, the word "clear" was edited into the "cu" on the erroneous read.



## TIMED NARRATION

Often temporary narration is recorded during the editorial process. This is usually not recorded well—and often read too fast—but the real narration is recorded once the picture is locked. As a result, the new narration must be of a specific length and this should be stated in the script. An example of a timed script is below.

A (01:01 -)

*We are 250 miles above the Earth, about to board the International Space Station.*

B (01:09 -)

*To maintain this altitude, we must orbit around our planet at over five miles per second*

C (01:19 -)

*Life is very different aboard the station. Up here we experience a sunset every ninety minutes,*

D (01:30 -)

*followed by a setting Moon.*

This script gives me the start time of the phrase and lets me know that the read has to be finished before the next phrase starts, so that there can be a natural enough pause in between the phrases. Often using the temporary rough narration is enough information to let me know the amount of time required. If the new read is a little too long or too short, most audio software programs have a tool called TCE (time compression and expansion), which either extends or shortens the time of the read without changing the pitch. The process *will* alter the sound of the audio if it is overdone, however, but with some experience, you will learn the limits of this valuable tool.

## A CLEAN RECORDING

As the audio engineer for the narration you are recording, you are responsible for delivering a voice-over track that is free from any clicks and plosions. Plosions, or “P-pops,” are very brief low frequency bursts that hit the diaphragm of the microphone. They typically occur with consonant letters like b, t, or p. Often they cannot be removed due to the distortion that was recorded, so it is good practice to avoid them by having the talent direct their speech just to the left or right of the microphone. Veteran voice-over talent are well aware of this potential problem and move their head just a little off axis when they deliver these consonant spikes. It should go without saying that any rustling of clothes or shuffling of feet must be removed before you deliver the final version of the narration; most clients want all breaths removed too.

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## STUFF TO REMEMBER

Running a successful narration recording session requires a certain amount of multi-tasking. The engineer is responsible for the following:

- creating a quiet, comfortable microphone setup for the talent;
- providing a microphone that records well in your specific recording environment;

- having enough scripts available for all parties present, printed in a way that is easily read with as few page turns as possible;
- focusing on the read to mark any errors that may happen in a way that is efficient for the editing process;
- delivering an accurately read script that is free from any extraneous noises.

### **PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE**

- To test your narration recording setup, record yourself reading demo scripts found online.
  - Find a favorite commercial with a narrator, then try to find a similar sounding voice from an online casting service.
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# Post Sound Design

THE ART AND CRAFT OF AUDIO POST PRODUCTION FOR THE MOVING IMAGE

JOHN AVARESE

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