



SO, YOU WANNA BE A VO? GREAT! HERE'S MY ADVICE TO GET STARTED

FIRST OFF - FIND A FRIEND!

Being a VO is a fun and rewarding job, but unless you have access to the equipment already, either through yourself or someone else, the initial set-up costs can be expensive. If you are lucky enough to know someone with the right gear, that's a huge plus, and if so, you might want to skip ahead to the Recording Tips section below.

If not, read on!

WHERE TO RECORD

These days, through content like podcasts and vlogging, we're very used to hearing audio that doesn't always have that studio polish to it – there might be an echo or other distortion, mouth sounds and plosives (more on these later!), a background hum, etc. For a medium such as a podcast, this is usually fine, as sound quality is generally accepted as being less important than the actual content. For a VO however, while having a clear and engaging voice remains the most important thing, good quality sound is of far higher importance than on a podcast. So, first off, you'll need access to somewhere quiet to record that is as free from external noise as possible, and that is not too echoey. Echo on a recording not only sounds unprofessional, but it's very hard to edit out later, although AI audio processing has made huge advances recently in dealing with sound issues such as echo.

To begin with, find yourself a space with a lot of soft material around you, like thick curtains and carpets, which will help to deaden the sound around you. Smooth, flat surfaces like painted walls or floors without carpet reflect more sound and create an echo. It's a good idea to surround yourself with thick materials by hanging up blankets, duvets and the like, and you can find plenty of videos on making yourself a DIY sound booth on YouTube. You might feel a little silly recording while sitting in a cupboard under a duvet, but many VOs start this way!

EQUIPMENT

You'll need a computer, a microphone, and a pop shield. Desktop computers are better than laptops as laptop fans make more noise, plus laptops usually have quite basic sound cards (the part of the computer that processes audio), but they are fine to get started. A desktop computer with an upgraded sound card is ideal, but I would recommend seeing how you go with whatever you have got first.

There are two types of microphones, USB and condenser mics. USB mics just plug into a USB slot on your computer and take their power from there. Condenser mics need their own power supply and are the professional's choice, with much better sound quality, but they are more expensive and more complicated to set up. USB mics are absolutely fine to get started – a Samson Meteor or a Blue Yeti are very popular, low-cost mics with decent sound quality, so are a great place to start. As with most things in life, the more you can afford, the better!

Next, you'll need a pop shield, also known as a pop filter. A pop shield is a metal or nylon device that you put in between your mouth and the mic to prevent plosives. Plosives are puffs of air that your mouth makes naturally when you say a P or a B sound - If you put your hand in front of your face and say a P sound, you'll feel the air hit your hand. If this air hits the mic it causes distortion that is unpleasant to listen to, and a pop shield breaks this air up and helps stop it affecting your recording. While there are advanced techniques that you can use while narrating which mean you don't have to use a pop shield, for the beginner I would say that it's essential to have one. The good news is that you can pick up a perfectly acceptable pop shield for about £10.

SOFTWARE

Next up, you will need an audio editing program for your PC to record and edit your work. A large number of people start with Audacity, because it's decent and – bonus – it's free. There are loads of tutorials on YouTube on how to use it and you'll need to familiarise yourself with the basics, as almost all audio jobs these days require you to record and edit your own work – it's only the Stephen Frys of the world that gets to sit in a professional studio, with a sound engineer to do all the boring stuff! Alternatively, you can always look at hiring someone to edit your work for you.

I provide a low-cost editing service to beginners, so drop me a line if that's something you'd like to do.

RECORDING TIPS

Firstly, it's vital that you are hydrated, as poor hydration will not only affect the quality of your voice and increase mouth sounds, it will also mean you won't be able to record for as long. Water takes on average about twenty minutes to fully enter your system, but it's best to make sure that you are steadily hydrated throughout the day, rather than just chugging a pint of water twenty minutes before you start. Warm water is best. Lemon and ginger tea can be helpful, but I also find that it dries my mouth out. There's just no substitute for good old H₂O.

Before I begin, I will usually do a five-minute meditation to help me focus and bring myself into VO mode. Next, you'll need to warm up your voice, which is essential for many reasons – breath control, diction, pronunciation, and for doing your best work. Don't be fooled into thinking that just because you've been using your voice to talk that day, that's a warm-up – it's not, and in fact that makes it even more important to warm up, otherwise your voice will get tired quickly. There's lots of good guided vocal warm-ups on YouTube, with a range of times and different exercises. Try to get in at least one of the following – some gentle stretching, a breathing exercise, scales (it's best to hum these to start with as it puts less strain on your voice), a facial massage (particularly around your jaw), and some tongue-twisters to make sure your diction is on point.

Last tip - before you begin recording, make sure all of your devices are set to silent – there's nothing more frustrating than being in a flow state and doing great work, only for it to be interrupted by getting a text!

GETTING WORK

Once you have got all this set up then you'll need to record yourself a voice reel. This is a sound file that has short clips of you narrating different things, and it's absolutely vital as this is what you send to people to show what you can do. I think it's best to start with a very general one with a few different styles – say a clip of you reading a fiction book, a children's story, a non-fiction book or something else factual (think documentary), maybe a bit of mediation if that's something you might like to apply for – anything that you think you'd like to read and you think would be good at. It should be about 2-3 minutes long max, and no section should be longer than 30 seconds max. Later on, you can start to develop specialised ones, for instance, one that just shows off your audiobook skills, one that just has commercials, etc.

When you are recording, you want to aim strike a balance between being aware of what you are doing, and also forgetting that the microphone is there, as if you were just talking to someone else. Some folks are naturally gifted at doing this, while others find it trickier, and the only way it gets better is with practice. Some VOs (me included) wear headphones so I can listen to myself as I record, as it's much easier to spot mistakes that way or re-record a section that you think you can do better, but not all VOs work like this, and again, this can take a little getting used to – try to forget that it's you, if you can, and just be analytical about it. If I am recording dialogue where it's important that I sound as natural as possible, I will usually take the headphones off, as this helps the tone be more conversational.

Once you've done all that then you'll be ready to start applying for jobs!

Check out freelancer websites like Upwork, Freelancer and Fiverr, which are great places to start. You make a profile, put your files on it so people can hear you, and then start applying. Sometimes people come to you, too, and regardless of who made the approach, the website takes a cut of how much money you make.

If you would like to try out for audiobooks, acx.com is the portal to Audible, where you set up a profile and use the search functionality to find titles that are looking for a narrator that suit your voice, gender and accent. Once you've found a suitable title that you would like to apply for, you will normally be expected to record a demo section of the book as an audition. Titles on Audible have stringent audio quality standards, so until you are familiar with these and are comfortable editing your own work, you might need to take a financial hit to hire someone else to edit it for you.

Once you've established yourself and got some good credits and experience, then you can start to look for a VO agent, and this is practically the only way to get access to high-profile jobs for well-known brands. If you get that far, the sky is the limit!

BEST OF LUCK!

BRAD X

