# Developing a Personal Voice in Audio

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*You can deliver video tutorials with a friendly, personable voice by implementing several audio techniques common to professional voice talents and sound engineers.*

*The following are 10 techniques you can use to improve the sound and delivery of your voice. Each of these techniques has more detail, including audio examples, on my blog at idratherbewriting.com.*

## 1. FIND AN ACOUSTIC ENVIRONMENT

The first step to recording audio is to find a quiet room. To understand the need for a quiet room, stop and listen to the sounds around you: the fan, a ticking clock, a rumbling from a dishwasher or dryer, the hum of the lights, the sound of non-descript white noise, voices from a neighboring office, and cars passing by outside. The sounds are subtle, but when you start recording, these noises amplify onto your audio track.

Not many of us have private recording studios or soundproof offices. You have to make do with the space you have at your work. When you're looking for an acoustic environment, look for a room that has these qualities:

**Cloth paneling on walls.** If the walls don't have any kind of cloth or soft surface, the sounds will bounce and create echoes and boxy effects. As a test, clap your hands once and listen to the sound. Does it immediately die, or does the clap echo around in the room? You can bring in blankets and drape them around the walls to dampen the echo, but usually you can't do this in a company conference room.

**Fan-free.** Conference rooms often have fans (as part of a ventilation system), but the smaller rooms sometimes don't, or the fans are less noisy. If you can actually turn the fan off, even better. Although you can apply post-processing to edit out fan noise (using software like SoundSoap), and you can use a microphone that won't capture many of the sounds from a fan (i.e., a dynamic cardioid microphone), the hum of a fan will generally add a static background noise to your recording, which becomes problematic later on when you try to silence the gaps (to remove breathing noises, for example). At the very least, if all the rooms have fans, pick the room with the least noisy fan.

**Isolation from other people.** Conference rooms and offices in workplaces are usually located next to other rooms and offices because proximity to your colleagues enables collaboration and exchange. But if the walls are thin, those voices carry over to your room at the worst times (right in the middle of a perfect recording). You need to find a room that is isolated from other rooms as much as possible.

One of the key advantages in finding (or creating) a good acoustic environment is being able to reproduce the exact same sound when you're editing your recordings. If you have to constantly change rooms to different acoustic environments, you can't easily splice in patches or fixes to your recordings.

By maintaining the same environment and setup, you can increase the likelihood of seamless edits to your audio when you add new clips or tracks.

## 2. SOUND NATURAL

Not long ago, I decided to ramp up on PowerPoint through the video tutorials on Lynda.com. As I listened to the tutorials, the narrator's voice exemplified the natural, personable voice I'd been trying to develop. He didn't seem to be acting, nor was he a seasoned voiceover pro performing a pre-written script. He didn't seem to have a script at all. He was just explaining, like a mentor, how various parts of the application worked. But it was perfect, and I quickly learned the more advanced parts of the application.

I was curious whether he had a script he recorded first and then followed up with the recording, so I contacted him to find out. No, he said, he doesn't record a pre-written narration script first. And neither do any of the Lynda.com trainers, he explained. He records the screen *at the same time as he narrates*. He did rehearse what he was going to do beforehand, though.

I still write out a general script beforehand, but I don't read all of the words or always follow it. I use my script more like an outline, glancing at it every so often to remember where I'm going and what to include.

At times when I need to explain a concept, I read a few sentences word for word, because articulating complicated concepts in real-time can be tough to pull off with exactness. But because the sentences that I read are mixed in with the unscripted narration, they blend so well that it's difficult to tell what is scripted and what isn't.

Recording and narrating at the same time has helped me achieve more of a natural voice—something I could never quite do reading scripts verbatim. It can be difficult to sound natural when you read an entire script from start to end. But by mixing it up, by not being afraid to narrate unscripted in places, you can greatly improve your sense of a natural voice.

The downside with unscripted narration, unsurprisingly, is that you make more mistakes. In tip #7, I explain how to fix fumbled sentences.

## 3. AVOID A SENSE OF RAMBLING

A while ago, I was gathering feedback on different technical communication deliverables. I asked a user if she preferred videos or written material when learning software. I thought she would immediately say "videos," but it was a toss-up for her. In her mind, videos involved long stretches of narration in which she had to sit passively at her computer, waiting for the narrator to get to her question but never really getting there.

A lot of people feel the same way about videos. Videos can often take too long and are difficult to follow along with in a step-by-step way.

When you write a script for a video (or when you create a general outline), you can avoid the problem of the *eternal* video—which gives a sense of rambling to the user—by simply keeping the video short. Don't try to cover too much ground. You can generally speak about 100 words a minute, so keep that in mind with your script. 200-300 words is a good length.

If you don't believe me, the next time you watch an instructional video, look at the video's time counter and note when you start losing your attention. My patience times out at about three minutes. So I always try to keep my videos at three minutes or less.

Exact guidelines for video length are somewhat controversial. Part of the problem is that video content varies dramatically. If you're watching an episode on Hulu.com, that's different from a clip on YouTube, which is also different from an instructional video about a software application. But in general, shorter is better when it comes to technical instructions.

Brooks Andrus, one of the developers at TechSmith, says we should consider Twitter as a model for brevity when creating videos. He explains:

> … Most [users] don't have the tools or narrative capabilities to hold the attention of an audience for any real span of time. This is especially true in the screencasting realm which is why I'd like to propose the notion of TweetCasts–120 seconds or less of webcam or screen video. That's all the time you get to make your point. If you need more time, break your content into chunks, give viewers a rest between segments and try engaging them through a different medium. ("The Power of Constraints – Why User Generated Web Video Needs to be Twitterfied")

As informal video producers, we don't have the time to implement mesmerizing Hollywood techniques to keep our audience's attention. It's better to break long segments up into little chunks. The audience will remain engaged in part through their ability to frequently choose the videos they want to consume.

Aside from maintaining the user's attention, keeping your videos short has several other advantages:

- You make fewer mistakes creating it.
- Post-production is easier.
- Load time isn't an issue.
- You don't need a table of contents pane.
- The user's degree of active learning increases.

It can be hard to keep the video short, because sometimes we feel we have to tackle an entire component in one go. But it's not hard to break a video up into multiple subvideos about the same topic. And what viewer wouldn't rather click on several two-minute videos than sit through a ten-minute video with an eternally rambling narrator?

## 4. AVOID PLOSIVES AND BREATHING NOISES

Getting close to your microphone usually results in something called "the proximity effect." As you get

close, most microphones amplify your voice in a rich, deep way. The proximity effect can make you sound like a late-night DJ. Some microphones give you the best proximity effect when you're practically kissing the microphone.

Unfortunately, as you get closer to a microphone, the microphone also starts to pick up more sounds from your mouth. Say the word "pick" or "pull" and you unleash a gust of wind toward the microphone. Really, hold your hand up two inches from your mouth and say a few P or B words. Can you feel the gust? To your microphone, the puff is like a tsunami sound wave. This burst of air is known as a plosive.

When you get close, in addition to plosives, microphones also pick up a variety of breathing noises. When you exhale through your nose, the sound can be a low rumble in the microphone. As you finish one sentence and take a breath to start another, that sudden inhalation gets picked up by the microphone in an amplified way. When you open and close your mouth, the sound of your lips smacking finds its way into the microphone.

The easiest way to minimize these plosives and breathing noises is through a pop filter. The pop filter is essentially pantyhose stretched across a ring and held several inches in front of your microphone. For some reason, the fabric of pantyhose stops plosives. Pantyhose also helps reduce the various breathing noises I mentioned. In part this is because the pop filter ensures you don't get too close to the microphone.

One downside to the pop filter is that it gets in your way visually. Some people find them so distracting that, instead of using a pop filter, they speak to the right of the microphone a bit, so they aren't coming at it directly.

## 5. SMILE WHILE YOU NARRATE

Voiceover professionals often recommend that you smile while you narrate. Smiling injects a touch of warmth and charisma in your voice. Just a few touches here and there can make the entire tone of your voice noticeably warmer.

It may be hard to do at first, but smiling is at the heart of a voiceover actor's art and is a technique recommended over and over by professionals. Voiceover actor Catherine Marshall says,

> Maintaining a smile while doing a voice-over changes the whole energy of your voice, and therefore the voiceover. It's one of the fundamental voice-over techniques to producing a believable voiceover that's enjoyable to listen to.

It's true that smiling does imbue your entire voice with a special tone. You can hear the smile—it sounds warm and inviting. In contrast, if you record the same script with your eyebrows scrunched down in anger, your voice sounds colder and harsher.

Although almost every professional recommends smiling while you narrate, not many address exactly *how* you do it. Dan Levine, a professional voiceover coach, adds another dimension to the smiling technique. He says:

> In almost every voiceover you'll ever do, whether it be a commercial or a narration, you need to smile. That doesn't necessarily mean you need to be laughing. There are all kinds of smiles. There are smiles that represent happiness. There are smiles that represent reflection, and kindness, and thoughtful things. But you need to smile. …. The only way to make what you read sound as if you're smiling, or to make it sound friendly, is for you to actually put a smile on your face.

In other words, you don't need a giant laughing grin. You can have a thoughtful or reflective smile. You can even slightly turn up one of the corners of your mouth and still achieve some of the same effects of a fuller smile.

If you're narrating somewhat freely as you record, your mind is more occupied. The advice to smile sometimes falls by the wayside as you focus on the application and the words you're forming in your mind.

However, like almost anything in life, the more you do it, the easier and more natural it gets. At some point, you'll be able to unconsciously smile while your mind is completely focused on the screencast you're recording. (For now, I have to remind myself at almost each pause and resume.)

## 6. AVOID PHLEGM IN YOUR THROAT

When you're recording screencasts, a lot of people think about microphones, and they focus on the technical setup behind your sound. But really, your audio starts with the vocal cords in your larynx, the upper part of your throat. Your voice is your main instrument, not the microphone.

One of my biggest problems when narrating a screencast is that my throat gets clogged up. I have to hit the pause and resume key every minute or so to clear my throat. Voiceover actors have learned to deal with this problem, since they often don't have the benefits of a pause and resume key.

You can reduce the amount of phlegm that accumulates in your throat by chiefly doing these two things:

**Hydrate**. Drink lots of water, one or two hours before you start recording. Your vocal cords are wet and slimy by nature. If they're properly hydrated, they'll function better. Experts recommend that you drink *warm* water because it will loosen up your vocal cords. They also discourage caffeinated drinks.

**Avoid dairy**. Don't consume any milk, cheese, yogurt, or other dairy products. Dairy contributes to the phlegm that collects in the back of your throat.

Voiceover actors give a smattering of other advice for reducing phlegm. In *The Art of Voice Acting*, James Alburger says to eat a green apple (not red). Apparently green apples cut down on the phlegm. He also says some voice actors eat greasy potato chips to reduce phlegm. Others squeeze lemons into the water they drink.

One thing you want to avoid, strangely, is clearing your throat. It turns out clearing your throat is also bad. Voiceover professional Peter Drew says,

> If you feel mucous building up on your vocal cords, do not clear your throat. Throat clearing grates the edges of the folds of your larynx against each other causing irritation and it just moves the mucous to the side, ready to slide right back over your vocal cords. Drink some water, gently cough, or do the "panting puppy." Simply stick out your tongue, pointing it downwards, and gently breathe in and out through your mouth, panting like a puppy. Be careful not to hyperventilate! The panting will dry out the mucous.

As Drew says, clearing your throat doesn't get rid of the phlegm/mucous; it just moves it to the side. Drew's "panting puppy" technique will help you dry out or move the phlegm. (By the way, if you use the panting puppy technique, you might want to make sure your colleagues aren't looking your way.)

# 7. FIX FUMBLED SENTENCES

Whether your method for recording involves unscripted or scripted narration, you're bound to fumble some of your sentences. Even if you're 100 percent comfortable with the application, even if you have rehearsed exactly what you'll say, even if you're fresh and alert and full of energy, if you're *human*, you'll make mistakes—especially when you read a script or outline and narrate and record at the same time.

Making numerous mistakes can be frustrating. And the more frustrated and tense you are, the more mistakes you'll make. But before you smash your microphone on the floor or burst a blood vessel in your forehead, consider this comparison: when you write a help topic or article, do you write it perfect the first time? From the first word to the last, do you type out the entire concept and task details flawlessly? Of course not.

So why should we expect to do the same in speech? Speech is perhaps a trickier, more nuanced medium, since changing the tone of one word can bend the meaning in multiple ways. In addition to unintended inflections, when you string together words in real time, you're bound to have poor constructions, fumbled words, and other errors.

You can re-record the sentences that you fumble. And as you re-record the sentences, you can splice them into your original recording, similar to the way you delete some sentences and add other words in written text. The danger here is ending up with a hodgepodge of different sounds, with different tones and volumes and background noises. To avoid the hodgepodge effect, consider the following tips for fixing fumbled sentences.

**Repeat entire sentences rather than fragments.** If you make a mistake while recording, restart the entire sentence from the beginning rather than just the word or phrase you made an error with. If you re-record mid-sentence, you'll find that some words are blended together in inseparable ways. For example, if you fumbled the sentence "I want more ice cream," saying instead "I want more axe cream," don't just stop yourself and re-say "ice cream." Do you see how the word "more" blends right into the word "ice"? You can't delete a word from your recording easily when the words aren't separate entities. But sentences usually have clear breaks between them, so they're much more editable. Also, shifts in tone within the same sentences are more noticeable than shifts in tone between entire sentences.

**Fix errors immediately after the recording.** As soon as you finish recording, listen to it. Where you make

mistakes, re-record those sentences right then, while your tone and mood and environment are still the same. If you wait until another day, chances are it will be harder to reproduce the exact sound. Your voice's sound is a combination of a lot of variables—how you feel, what time of day it is, what you ate, what room you're in, how tired you are, and so on. By fixing the fumbled sentences immediately, you increase the likelihood of a seamless patch.

**Match the tone of the fumbled sentence by repeating the previous sentences.** Before you re-record the fumbled sentence, listen to the previous few sentences. Repeat them several times to get in key with the tone and rhythm of your voice. When you re-record the fumbled sentence, chances are your recording will fit seamlessly in to the original audio.

## 8. ADD INFLECTION

If you don't want to sound as if you're reading copy (if you want to instead sound as if you're speaking conversationally to the user), consider using more inflection. Inflection is a change in the pitch in your voice, moving up or down the scale as you talk.

Lack of inflection pretty much defines the reading voice. If you read a paragraph of text in a normal reading voice, you won't hear much inflection. But if you listen to a real conversation, or especially if you listen to actors on TV, their voices move up and down the scale with a lot more inflection. It seems the more emotion you add to what you're saying, the more inflection you end up including.

One reason inflection keeps the audience's attention is because inflection communicates emotional investment in what you're saying. When you believe in the content and it matters to you, your words become emotionally invested and inflection naturally follows.

When I listen to Robert Segul on NPR, I can hear the inflection in his voice. Part of the problem with inflection, though, is that you can't just start inflecting and assume it will make your voice more believable. If you inflect in an unnatural way, the result is corniness. It's easy to fall into an annoying emphatic rhythm, or to overdo inflection to the point that it draws attention to itself.

An *unnatural* inflection is almost worse than *lack of* inflection. You've seen the equivalent in text when someone *can't stop* writing with ALL KINDS of emphasis that, well, **you** just find …. S-U-P-E-R anNOYing. You have to inflect in a believable way.

Exactly how you inflect in a believable way is an art. When you're closing a thought, your inflection goes down. When you're raising a question, your inflection goes up.

You can twist a word here and there to break out of a reading rhythm. You'd be amazed at how you can pick—almost at random—any word in a sentence and twist it to *free* yourself from a monotone reading rhythm.

As you focus on inflection, listen as you talk. Make note of how you change your voice, how you pause and move up and down the scale. Listen to the inflection in other people's voices as they talk. As you start to focus on inflection, you'll begin to hear what is believable.

If you find that your normal inflection is flat and monotone, consider opening your mouth more and, as Alistair Christie says, "ham it up, just a little."

## 9. RECORD WITH THE RIGHT MICROPHONE

Choosing microphones can be a bit overwhelming, as there are hundreds of different microphones suited for all kinds of situations, from vocal music to kick drums to broadcasting and more. Here are a few things to keep in mind when choosing microphones:

**Condenser versus Dynamic.** You can choose between two main categories of microphones: condenser and dynamic. Condenser microphones are more sensitive and are more typically used in studios. For most voiceover recordings in non-studio environments, you don't want a condenser microphone. Condenser microphones pick up every little breathing noise and mouth movement on a microscopic scale that will drive you crazy. Also, if you're recording in conference rooms at your work, you want to drown out the noise around you, not pick it up.

Dynamic microphones aren't as sensitive. They're also a lot more durable. You can probably drop them on the floor a few dozen times and they'll still function well.

**Cardioid or Omnidirectional.** You can also choose another characteristic in a microphone: cardioid or omnidirectional. Cardioid microphones capture the sound immediately around the microphone in a heart shape pattern. Omnidirectional microphones capture sound in all directions.

Unless you want to record all the ambient noises in your room, choose a cardioid microphone to focus on your immediate voice. (There are other patterns, such as

unidirectional and figure eight, but they're less common.)

**USB or XLR.** You also can choose between a USB or XLR microphone. A USB microphone plugs directly into your computer. In contrast, an XLR microphone has a fatter, traditional three-pin connector that you can't plug into your computer. Instead, you have to plug the XLR microphone into a mixer or an audio interface. If you plug it into a mixer, you then need to convert the analog signal from the mixer to a digital signal through an audio interface. (The audio interface will have a USB cable that you plug into your computer.)

As you can guess, the XLR route is more expensive. But in my opinion, the sound is much richer and deeper. You can buy an inexpensive mixer for $60, such as the Behringer UB802 Eurorack. But unless you convert the sound from analog to digital, you'll hear a static background noise. An audio interface (such as one from M-Audio) costs around $150. Some mixers, such as those from Alesis, have a built-in audio interface so you can output directly to USB. You can buy an Alesis mixer and audio interface for as little as $135 or so.

Wireless microphones are yet another option, but in my experience, you have to spend a lot of money on wireless to get decent sound.

**Handheld, headphone, or lapel.** You can also choose between a handheld, headphone set, and lapel microphone. The handheld is the most traditional, but it gets in your way visually when you're recording a software screencast, especially if you have a pop filter attached. The headset provides a constant distance between your microphone and the mouth, but if you want to step away from the microphone to swallow, or record without the headphones, you're out of luck. The lapel microphones may look convenient, but they often don't sound as good as the handheld or headset microphones, because your mouth is farther from the microphone.

**Specific microphone brands.** As far as specific microphone brands, one site that provides a lot of comparisons and analyses of microphones is newmediagear.com. See the 2008 best podcasting microphones post, the posts on "broadcasting microphones," and more. Shure, Electro-Voice, Sennheiser, Heil, Neumann, and Rode are all good brands.

**Microphone stands.** As if there weren't enough choices already, you also have to figure out what kind of microphone stand to use. You can go to a local electronics store and buy a cheap six-inch stand that attaches onto a base plate for about $30. If you have a heavy microphone, though, it might not stable enough.

Also, as you record screencast demos, you will realize that any time you type on your keyboard or click your mouse, that sound transmits from the table through your microphone and records as well. When you type, it can sound like a drum roll.

The solution is twofold. First, instead of a traditional clip mount, put your microphone in a shock/suspension mount. This spider-like contraption suspends the microphone in a much more isolated way. But to add to the shock mount's benefit, also consider a scissor stand. The scissor stand is a giant arm that attaches to your table (kind of like an arm-swing desk lamp) and swings out toward you.

As far as cost, you can spend as little as $30 on a microphone to as much as $10,000 or more. Whatever you do, if you're looking for a good voiceover microphone, look for a dynamic cardioid microphone. If you're prepared to get an audio interface, then go for an XLR type of microphone. If you're looking for something less expensive, there are plenty of decent USB microphones, such as those from Samson or Yeti or Blue's Snowball microphone.

Some good online audio stores to find microphones include soundprofessionals.com and performanceaudio.com. I also recommend that you visit your local music store and ask to try out a few different microphones. Your voice may sound good in one microphone and not so good in another. But you can't hear the difference by looking online only.

## 10. BREATHE CORRECTLY

The final tip in my list of techniques for developing a personal voice in audio is to breathe correctly. In normal conversation, most of us don't have any trouble breathing. But when we start recording voiceovers, we start talking a little faster, with more energy and fewer pauses.

James Alburger says that taking a few slow, deep, cleansing breaths can help relax you. You should also follow a similar breathing pattern as when you're conversing with someone. Alburger writes,

> No one takes a deep breath before they speak. You'll also notice that no one waits until someone else finishes talking before they take a breath. In conversation, we breathe in a natural and comfortable manner. When we speak, we

> only take in enough air for the words we say, and we breathe at natural breaks in our delivery without thinking about what we are doing. When you understand how to properly use your diaphragm to provide breath support you will eliminate the need for frequent deep breaths and rapid catch breaths. (p.35)

Janet Wilcox also gives some tips on breathing. She recommends yoga as a relaxation technique and Pilates as a way to strengthen your breathing control. She also says to breathe from the diaphragm:

> Instead of hiking the shoulders or breathing from your chest, you let the lower abdomen rise to take in the air and let the diaphragm drop to help fully fill the lungs.
>
> You also want air to fill the ribcage area of the back too. It all starts low in the pelvic area as you release the lower abdomen. Think of starting the breath almost at the tip of the tailbone to help get the breath in the lower back, too. (p.23)

Beyond merely breathing from the diaphragm, Janet notes, as does Alburger, how voice-over acting is more of a mental game too. It's your state of mind that influences your delivery and helps you relax. Wilcox says to imagine one of five friends that you're talking to. You have to recreate the *who, when*, and *where* in your mind as you're delivering your voiceover (p.27).

By creating a comfortable scene talking to a friend, you'll be more relaxed and less likely to breathe in short, rapid bursts filled with tension.

One advantage you may have to voice-over actors when it comes to breathing is the ability to hit pause and resume at will. After every few sentences, you can take a break to breathe deeply and refocus, if you need to. Voice-over actors performing in studios don't often have this luxury.

## CONCLUSION

When I first starting studying voiceover techniques, I thought it would be something I could learn in a month or two. In reality, learning voiceover is as difficult as learning to play the piano, or learning a sport. It can require years of practice to move beyond the ordinary. Regardless of your starting point, following the ten tips outlined in this article will give you a good foundation and direction to improve your voice.

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