

Giving Voice To Your eLearning



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Our Session Topics

- Why use voiceovers in eLearning?
- When to use voiceovers—and when *not* to
- Golden rules for successful voiceovers
- Tips and tricks for working with in-house amateur talent
- Tip and tricks for working with voiceover professionals
- Tips and tricks for better recording and playback

A Bit of Background

- My observations and recommendations are based on my own hands-on experience on both sides of the fence:
 - Over 12 years in corporate learning
 - Performing needs analysis, instructional design, content authoring/editing, course/simulation development, and overseeing integration/launch
 - Selecting/hiring professionals to create voiceovers
 - Coaching in-house amateur talent
 - Creating voiceovers myself
 - Over 30 years as a professional actor



What About You?

- Have you included voiceovers in at least one eLearning project?
- Have you worked with a professional voiceover artist?
- Are you a professional voiceover artist?
- Have you worked with in-house amateur voiceover talent?
- Do you need to create the voiceovers yourself?
- How many of you have at least one voiceover horror story (as listener or on a project team)?



Section One



VOICEOVER BASICS

Why Use Voiceovers?

- Done *well*, voiceovers add a human element to self-paced study that:
 - Enlists another of the five senses
 - Gives the course more of a personality
 - Engages the learner's interest
 - Guides, reassures, and encourages the learner
 - Highlights your key points
 - Promotes retention
 - Can you think of other benefits?



When *Not* to Use Voiceovers

- Here are some examples of when voiceovers would not be appropriate:
 - When the target audience doesn't have sound capability on their pcs (it can still happen) or is hearing impaired
 - When the target audience is in a shared space without personal headphones (ex: call center)
 - When your target audience has bandwidth issues (nothing worse than waiting for audio)
 - When you don't have the appropriate resource(s) or time to create quality voiceovers
 - Can you think of other circumstances?



What About the Cost?

- We've mentioned time and resources, but what about the added expense?
 - If you're recording in-house, you can be up and running for under \$200. Really.
 - If you're hiring one or more professionals, the cost will depend on their level of experience. In today's market, artists are now available at *all* prices. The artist may charge by:
 - Project
 - Hour/Portion
 - Need for Pro Studio vs. Home Studio



Section Two



THE GOLDEN RULES OF VOICEOVERS

Voiceover Golden Rule #1

- **Prepare your project plan and your budget!**
 - Make sure your client understands the time needed for including voiceovers.
 - Allow the developer time to input the script as closed-captioning text whenever possible. Important points should never be audio-only.
 - Make sure to allot task time for client review (and legal review, if needed) and artist retakes.
 - Make sure the client and the artist(s) book the specified time on their calendars.
 - Set a clear date as to when the client must sign off on the script as “**final**”—client rewrites is the #1 cause of rerecording!
 - Who has a horror story about insufficient planning for voiceovers?



Voiceover Golden Rule #2

- **Prepare your content: the abc's**
 - Keep it *Active*: In general, use the active voice, and first person; address the learner as “you.”
 - Keep it *Brief*: Stick to *essential* text. If you can't trim long-winded copy, breaking it up more helps the file load faster and also helps hold the learner's interest.
 - Keep it *Clear*: avoid excess tech talk, big words or acronyms.
 - Know your audience and write for *them*.
 - Use a template (PPT, Word, etc.) with space to display the voiceover “copy” (script) that will accompany each screen.
 - Have at least two people proofread!
 - Obtain any signoff (including legal) *before* recording.
 - Make the word choice sound like someone *talking*, not reading.
 - Who has a horror story about non-final copy?



Talking vs. Reading

- Consider the sentence below:
 - *It is imperative that all associates adhere to the new, more stringent guidelines immediately to prevent the incursion of additional regulatory repercussions.*
- Now, try saying it aloud.
 - It's understandable on the page, but it's a mouthful, and hard for the ear to absorb.
 - If the client is open to rewriting, do it! Try putting that sentence in your own words now.
 - When in doubt, try speaking the lines yourself.

The \$64K Question

- Q: *Should my voiceover copy be an exact match for what's shown on the screen?*
- A: It depends. In some cases with legal or compliance content, the exact wording may have been dictated by a judge or your law department and the voiceover *must* match (in which case you don't need closed captioning). And if the language of your course is a *second* language for your learners, matching exactly will work better for their comprehension.
- Otherwise, if you *have* a choice, and time, when given a script that is too long and/or will speak poorly, explain to the client how simplifying will help increase retention, and help them rewrite it. Obtain legal signoff again as needed.



Voiceover Golden Rule #3

- **Prepare your talent**
 - Provide them with the final script well in advance of the project's specified recording date.
 - Provide them with a pronunciation "dictionary" list for any unusual terms.
 - Follow up to answer any questions.
 - If they point out something they still find difficult to say, *listen to them* and adjust the wording with the client.
 - Who has a horror story about breaking the talent preparation rule?



Section Three



WORKING WITH AMATEUR TALENT

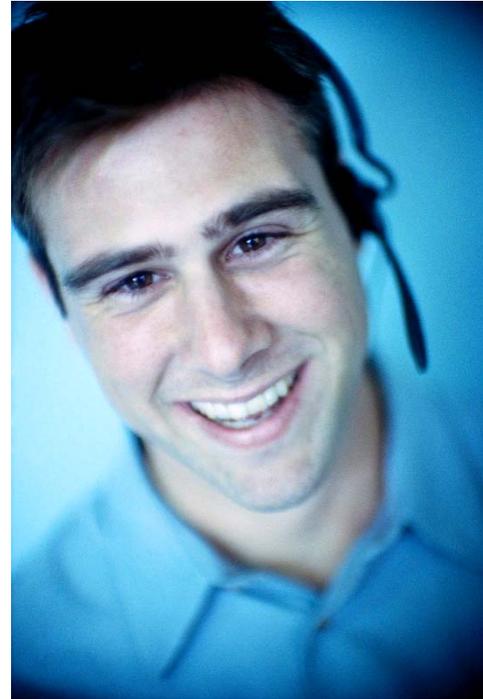
Working with Amateur Talent

- If creating amateur voiceovers internally (you or a subject matter expert (SME)):
 - Follow the “Prepare your talent” guidelines.
 - Obtain and test a good microphone.
 - Download “Audacity” software (free) or use another recording software of your choice.
 - Assuming you have no sound studio, identify a quiet, private room for recording.
 - Ideal: Solid door & walls, carpet, minimal outside noise (no windows is perfect!)
 - Prevent as many interruptions as possible.
 - Silence your phone, cell phone, e-mail alerts, fans, heat/air, etc.
 - Put a “Do Not Disturb: Recording” sound on the door
 - *Practice* the script aloud before recording.
 - Follow these tips...



Tips From the Pros

- Relax. Just *talk* to the learner.
 - Speak in a normal tone of voice; don't whisper, don't preach, and don't "talk down."
 - Don't try to "act" to emphasize meaning—just believe the words.
 - Don't slur, but don't over enunciate, either.
- *The Secret: As you speak, imagine that you're sharing good advice with a friend one-on-one, and that the information you're giving them will really help them succeed.*



Tips From the Pros

- ***Amateur giveaway #1:***
The words all have the same “weight” or odd ones pop out.
 - When we talk, we don’t give all words equal importance. Some naturally receive emphasis, others are almost “thrown away”.
 - Verbs are gold, because they are active.
 - Conjunctions (“And,” “If,” etc.) should only be emphasized to make a specific point: *The company will succeed if, and only if, we all succeed.*



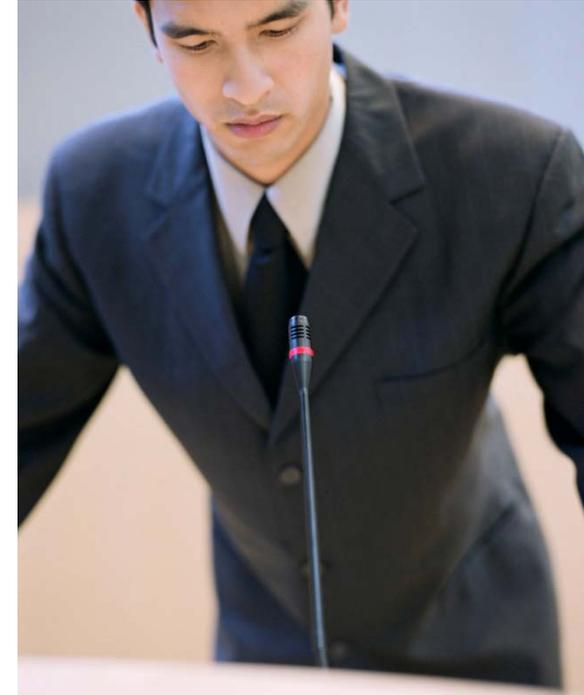
Tips From the Pros

- ***Amateur giveaway #2:***
The sound level varies within a clip or between clips.
 - Identify a good distance from the mike, note that position, and use it for all clips in a course.
 - Keep your speaking level steady from clip to clip.
 - If you're unsure, or you are interrupted and go back to recording later, listen to what you've already created to gauge the level before recording more of your clips.



Tips From the Pros

- **Amateur giveaway #3: “a”.**
Say aloud:
 - A man and a dream is our theme.
 - She obtained a warrant and a summons.
 - *In typical speech, “a” is a short vowel sound, not a long one.*
 - Many amateur voice artists make this simple mistake, and it’s a dead giveaway to the ear that the speaker is just reading.



Tips From the Pros

- **Amateur giveaway #4: “the”.**
Say aloud:
 - The answer is simple to the informed.
 - The boat left the dock.
 - *“The” has a long “e” sound before another vowel, and a short one before a consonant. Anything else rings false.*
 - After the initial welcome, the voice shouldn’t call attention to itself.
 - *The goal: capture their interest with the voice, then keep it with the message.*



Section Four



WORKING WITH A PROFESSIONAL

Working With a Professional

- When hiring a professional voiceover artist, you will probably go about it in one of two ways:
 - Through a previously-approved master vendor that your company already uses
 - From one of the many online “voice banks”
- Either way, the golden rules still apply.
- Here are some other things to bear in mind, as well...



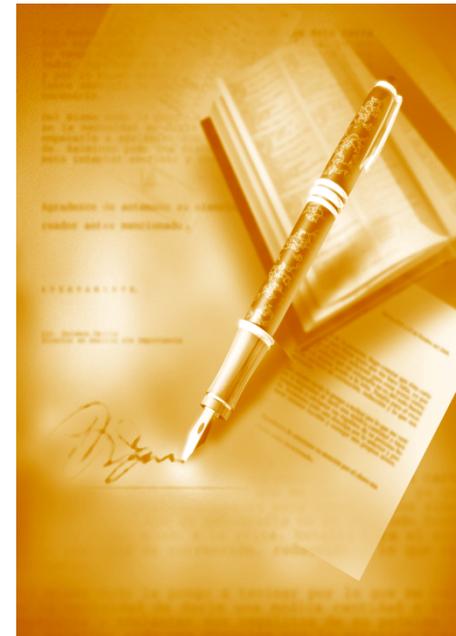
Tips for Working With a Pro

- Confirm with your clients whether they need to “listen in” on the recording session and communicate that to the potential artists; not all artists are set up to do that without renting time in a recording studio.
- Make it clear you expect finished audio.
- If the artist will be recording from a home studio, specify in your contract that after the artist is chosen, they will provide one or two clips as examples of final quality.
- Have the client approve the samples before the artist records the rest. *It will save everyone time and money.*



Tips for Working With a Pro

- Always spell out *in writing* your company's expectations around retakes.
- Typically, an artist will only do a retake for free if:
 - Retakes were included in the package
 - They mispronounced something for which you had already provided correct pronunciation, or
 - The audio file quality itself is unacceptable (poor levels, background noise, etc.).
- If one or more clips needs to be rerecorded because the script is changed post-approval, expect to pay the agreed-upon rate. It's only fair.



Tips for Working With a Pro

- If using a master vendor:
 - Make it part of your contract that they must provide demo clips of at least three artists for each role.
- If auditioning artists directly:
 - Provide your client with at least three samples for each role. You can download or play demos from the voice bank web sites, or submit a snippet of script and request demos.
 - Talk to prior clients, if at all possible, to ensure that the artist can deliver what you want when you want it.
 - *Thank* every artist who submits a quality custom demo; it takes them time and effort. *Courtesy is good business.*



Choosing the Voice

- When listening to demo clips, keep in mind what we've discussed:
 - Do they pass the simple word tests?
 - Are they talking to you?
 - Is the diction clear without sounding overdone or phony?
 - Do they sound positive and committed?
 - *Are you interested in what they're saying?*
 - ***If you find yourself thinking "what a beautiful voice" then the artist's focus may have been on sound when it should have been on sense!***



Choosing the Voice

- The courseware stakeholder should give written approval of the artist(s) to be used, based on hearing demos. Period.
- Don't assume the vendor knows the best voice, or even that you do.
- Consider the picture here:
 - The woman is a high-powered manager advising her employee about a regulatory infringement.
 - How should she sound to be persuasive?
 - What if she sounds like a teenager?
 - *Re-recording is costly.*
- Who has a mismatched voiceover horror story to share?



Section Five



RECORDING AND PLAYBACK

Recording Software

- Many tools (Captive, etc.) offer ability to record from within that software, but consider recording your clips independently and adding them to the screens. They're easier to update and repurpose.
- On a budget? Audacity is a free download, and so is the mp3 encoder file. It's easy to use, and gets the job done. It's in wide use across the industry.
- There are many other software titles out there at varying prices. Just keep in mind: the more fully-featured, the longer the learning curve. Check out free trials when possible, and find one that works for you.



Microphones

- You can keep it simple for around \$100, or you can spend thousands.
- If you're on a tight budget, a USB mike is a good way to go. You don't need analog hookups or a pre-amp/mixer to get good sound, but of course you lose options, too.
 - Pro: Plug and play to your laptop
 - Con: You can't listen on headphones while recording due to a slight delay
- Examples: Alesis podcasting kit, Blue Microphones' "Snowball" mike
- If possible, *try* before you buy, or buy where you can return.



Recording Tips

- Follow the guidelines already discussed for identifying a place to record.
- Minimize the sounds we all make:
 - Use lip balm, and have a sport bottle of water handy to keep your throat and lips hydrated
 - Keep still while recording; avoid rustling paper, moving your chair, fiddling with a cord, clicking buttons, etc.
 - Don't wear "noisy" fabrics (nylon, corduroy, etc.).
 - Remove any loud/jangly jewelry.
- **Invest in (or make) a "pop" filter**
 - This filter goes between you and the mike, and takes the edge off any exaggerated plosives ("b," "p," "t," etc.) you speak. It costs as little as \$13 and it's a *must*.
 - ***Record each page/screen in its own clip!***



Recording Booth

- If you can record in a pro studio, do it!
- If you are recording in-house, consider building yourself (or investing in) a portable mini sound booth.
- You can put together a portable one yourself with a 14" Whitmor collapsible cube and some acoustic foam for under @\$50 (or buy the same thing ready-made for @\$150).



Playback Tips

- Your courseware tool and your network's bandwidth will help determine the file format you need for *playback*: mp3? Wav? Or?
- The better the audio quality, the bigger the file, and the slower it is to load in a course.
- Test sample clip playback on the same type of system your learners will use!
- Often mp3s work well; the files can be compressed to a size that will sound good and load quickly—and mp3s are easily repurposed.
- Experiment with compression levels when saving to hear what amount of is acceptable. Too much compression causes audio to become “tinny” and to lose the human warmth you want.



Summary

- Decide whether voiceovers are appropriate on a project by project basis.
- Follow the Golden Rules and remember the tips when recording in-house.
- Follow the Golden Rules and remember the tips for working with the pros.
- If working in-house, create the best tech setup you can afford. It's a good investment.



Questions/Thoughts?

- Thanks for joining me today!
- Come visit me at the Speaker Clinic, Table 12, 4-5pm on Thursday, March 25th.



Section 6

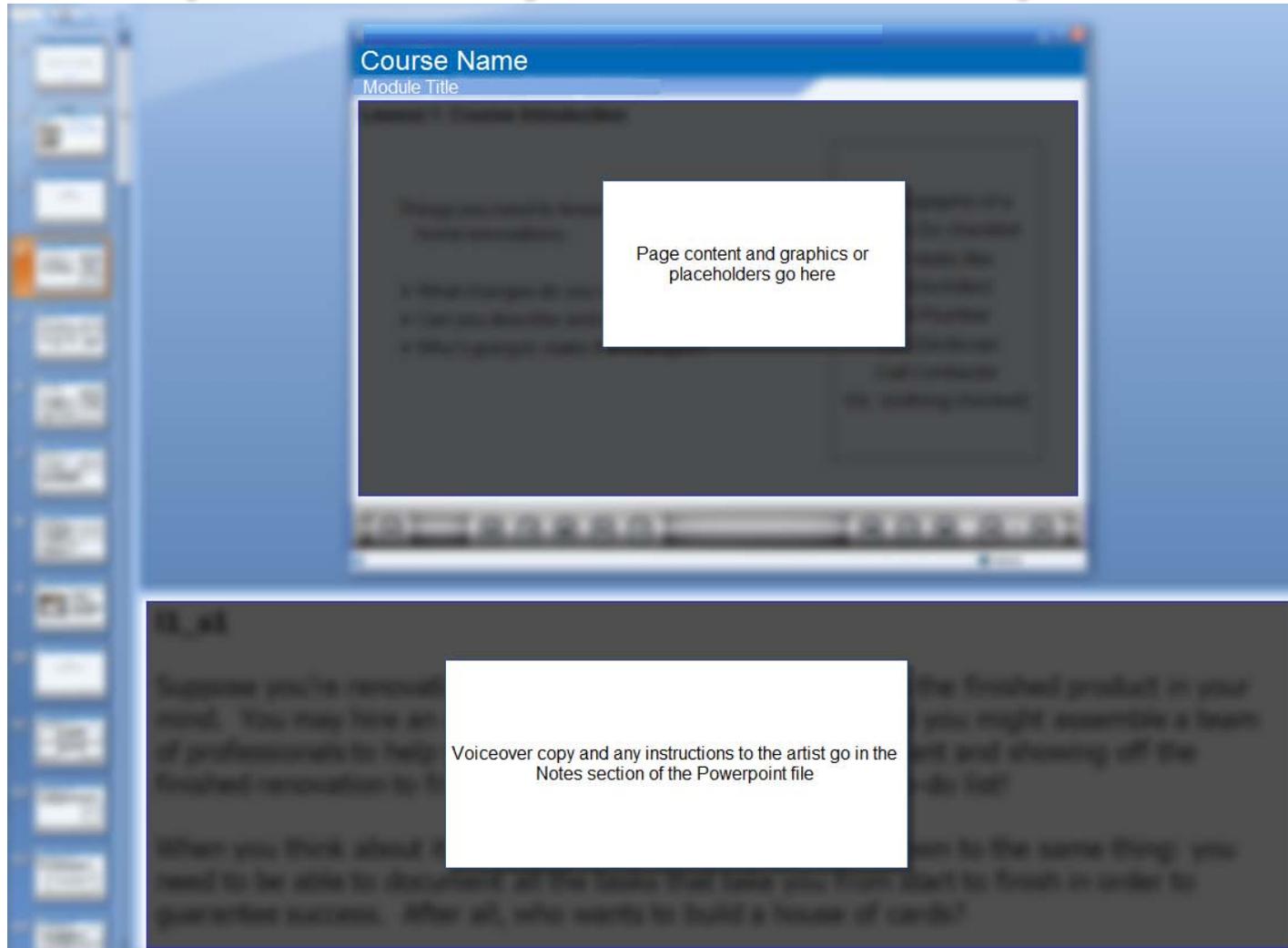


APPENDIX

Links & Resources

- [Audacity Web Site](#)
- [Lame MP3 Encoder File \(dll\)](#)
- [Google: search for “good voice over microphone”](#)
- [YouTube: HowAudioTV mike shootout](#)
- [Harlan Hogan: Building a PortaBooth](#)
- [Whitmor Cubes](#)
- [Acoustic Foam](#)
- [Pop Filter](#)
- **Some LinkedIn Groups:**
 - Instructional Design & eLearning Professionals Group
(*Discussion: What microphones should we use?*)
 - Working Voice Actor Group
 - Voice Over Professionals

Sample Storyboard Template



Sample Simulation Template

Project Title:
Simulation Title:
Instructional Designer:
Client SME/Reviewer:
Voiceover artist:
DRAFT DATE:

Screen #	Action(s)	Voiceover	Comments
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">[Simulation starts at company home page in browser]Click <u>ePay</u> logo	It's easy to access your <u>ePay</u> statements from your <u>WonderBar</u> home page. To begin, click the " <u>ePay</u> " logo in the upper right-hand corner of your screen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Don't take the <u>screencaps</u> until the new green logo is in place.Remember that it's <u>WONDERbar</u>, not <u>wonderBAR</u>.
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">[Login screen appears]Enter ID & passwordClick OK	Your login screen will appear. Enter your employee ID and your password, then click OK.	
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Etc.	Etc.	
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Etc.	Etc.	
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Etc.	Etc.	

Dictionary Template

Term	Definition	Pronunciation	Comments
Wonderbar	Company name	WONDERbar	Don't overdo 😊
SME	Subject matter expert	SMEE	Long "e"
Smusch	Exotic drink	SMOOSH	Long "oo"
Kloptiki	Exotic ingredient	klopTEEKEE	
Etc.	Etc.	Etc.	Etc.

Recording Day Checklist

Status	Item
	Room/studio reserved & confirmed
	Final, approved version of voiceover script
	All pronunciations confirmed with client
	Water in bottle w/sport top to prevent spills
	Lip balm, lozenges
	Audio software tested & ready on laptop
	Mike tested & ready
	Any additional soundproofing in place
	All noisy jewelry removed
	“Do Not Disturb” sign posted on door
	Silence all phones, e-mail alerts, etc.



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