

Narrator's Guide:

I Want to Become an Audiobook Narrator

Have you been told that you have a nice voice? Do you love reading aloud to your kids? Do you make a living as a commercial voiceover or as a narrator of medical or corporate scripts? Then recording audiobooks will be a natural fit for you, right? No! Not necessarily! We encourage you to think twice before you embark on this career path.

The audiobook industry is growing rapidly, but it remains very competitive, with specific artistic, technical, technological, and business requirements. It's also by far the most time-intensive genre of voice acting work for the least amount of money. There is no shortage of narrators, and while projects may at times be plentiful, the life of a freelance narrator is like any other freelancer, with ebbs and flows in the amount of work.

For the vast majority of narrators, even those at the highest levels of the business, an agent will not help build an audiobook career. Narrators are responsible for maintaining relationships with casting directors, producers, and publishers and for booking their own projects. Independent audiobook narrators run their own small businesses, so it's necessary to balance not only the creative demands, but also the financial management, record-keeping, tax preparing, billing, marketing, professional networking, self- and project-promotion, scheduling, and other essentials of any small business. It is possible to become a successful, full-time audiobook narrator, but it demands focus, determination, skill, stamina, professionalism, reliability, talent, flexibility, financial investment, and time.

CHHH-CHHH-CHHH-CHANGES

The audiobook industry has changed a lot over the at least 20 years, but this has not: The best narrators are also thoughtful readers, so bringing a love and understanding of the detail of language and books is a key part of excellence in the craft.

In years past, the most successful actors recorded books working only in professional recording studios, guided and supported in their performances by audiobook directors and professional sound engineers. Many books today are recorded by narrators working alone in home studios, self-directing, and self-engineering their work before sending their digital recordings to publishers for editing and proofing.

Just breaking into audiobook narration, you will need some degree of sound recording and engineering ability, have reasonably sound-proof space, a computer, a microphone, a preamp, and the appropriate software. While one can get started in audiobook narration with a fairly small investment (using a low-end microphone, inexpensively setting aside/stealing a closet to serve as a recording booth, using free recording software, etc.), over time, a successful narrator might invest thousands of dollars in training, space, and equipment.

Most audiobook publishers and producers now work under a union contract with the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA). If you're not now a member of SAG-AFTRA or its sister union, Actor's Equity, contact SAG-AFTRA for further information on membership and benefits.

The More You Know

Narrators usually have little say in what books they record, or in what they are cast. You might hope to narrate classics, sci-fi, or fantasy, but most often be asked to narrate history and business books. While every narrator has the right to kindly say "no thank you" to any audiobook project, it would be unwise for anyone to enter the field without the will to narrate most anything and everything, including books they would never themselves read.

Narrators are paid by the finished hour, and most do not go beyond a 2 to 1 ratio, meaning that for every finished hour the listener hears, it took the actor two hours to record, and it takes time to work up to this level. Also, narrators are usually not paid for their time to do any retakes, nor are they paid for any of the prep time needed, including reading the script and researching the proper pronunciation of unfamiliar vocabulary or proper names. As there are very few opportunities for royalties in the audiobook world, voice actors work paycheck to paycheck. Narrators can make a good living, but they're not likely to become rich from this work alone.

Breaking into the Industry

Invest in specific audiobook acting training. Even if you're a trained actor with credits on stage, on screen, or in voiceover, you still need to learn technical skills specific to audiobook narration. Search for classes from audiobook coaches and directors, but do your homework. As in any industry, not every person who claims to be, is, in fact, an expert. For referrals to respectable, experienced audiobook teachers and coaches, contact the APA staff.

If you're not a trained actor, begin with some basic acting courses at your local college, or join your local community theatre. Read out loud, record your voice, and listen to the playback. Listen to professionally-produced audiobooks and take notes on how narrators create excellently-done performances with emotional depth and truth as they bring work off the page.

Attend the Audiobook Publishers Association Conference (APAC), annually held by the Audio Publishers Association (APA). Attendees include publishers, casting directors, and studio directors; voice actors with a range of experience; and members of the media who cover the industry. The conference includes performances from the most seasoned narrators, offering a great opportunity to experience live the excellence of the craft of audiobook voice acting.

Record and submit professional demo tracks. Demos are the audiobook narrator's resume, and showcase one's ability to do male and female voices, different emotions and settings, a variety of dialects or languages, and more. The key is to set yourself apart from the thousands of others eager to break in. It's not enough just to have a "great voice." Email your demos to companies you would like to work for, once you've researched who within the company casts narrators. Using each publisher's website for guidance, direct your message to the appropriate casting person, and be prepared to follow up.

Read [AudioFile Magazine](#), the leading publication for the audiobook industry, which is full of news, reviews, profiles, and information about the world of audiobooks.

Have additional questions? Contact the [APA office](#) and they'll put you in touch with someone who can help.