

Voice overs

*Many videos are spoilt by poor quality or amateurish voice-overs.
It's easy to optimise quality with a few simple steps.*

Write your script and familiarise yourself with it, so you won't hesitate over it.
Write it large and legible, make page turns come between sections.
Write it to be spoken – would you say it like this to your friend.
Check its timing - Will it fit under the scenes to which it refers ?
Check its content – does it add to the information seen on screen ?

You are not going to appear on camera, so location can be chosen to give a suitable acoustic.
Best is a well-furnished domestic room. If acoustic is too reverberant, you will have to work closer to mic.
If using a table, think about reducing reflected sound by using a blanket or thick cloth on the table.
Don't get the script between your mouth and the microphone.
Position the microphone to avoid breath noises and plosives (popping on p's and b's). If you have to work close to the microphone for acoustic reasons, you may need a breath shield ('windshield'). Be aware also of bass-tip up effect. With directional mics, the closer you get, the more the bass is accentuated. Many vocal mics have a bass roll off (sometimes switchable) to minimise this.
Since you are only recording sound, you can use a sound recorder. Even cheap digital ones can give broadcast quality if used with the right microphone in the right place. You can record directly onto a sound program on your computer, provided the computer's sound card is good enough and the computer is quiet enough. Don't use the computer's microphone input though, it is only good enough for stuff like Skype. Use a mixer feeding into the computer's line input

Choice of microphone.

Doesn't appear in shot, so no need to worry about its appearance. In many cases it may be what you possess, although cheap (Chinese made) microphones suitable for voice work, (best sourced from well known companies though) can be had for under £30.
Note that some capacitor microphones need a 48V 'phantom' power supply ('phantom' because it 'sneaks' up the signal cable rather than needing a separate power cable). Most recorders and most of the better camcorders provide this, but computer sound cards do not.

Cardioid (directional) most rejection of reverberation, but liable to bass tip up (exaggerated bass if mic is used close). Some 'vocal' mics have a midrange peak to aid voice clarity.

Omnidirectional. More smooth, natural sound, less prone to sibilance, but increased pick up of reverberation.

Clip-on Is usually an omnidirectional mic, has a frequency response adapted to suit its position below the mouth. Working distance is fixed so level is uniform, but tonal quality can be less good.

Pressure zone mic - again usually an omnidirectional type, sits on a flat surface so delayed reflections are minimised, can be useful in difficult acoustics.

Piece to camera

If working in a static position where cable is not an encumbrance, a clip-on microphone is acceptable in shot and gives uniform level.

Cardioid or hypercardioid can be used just out of shot, makes shot look more natural. Gun mic in same position gives better rejection of unwanted sound.

If handheld is acceptable in shot, convention is to use an omnidirectional one, less critical which way it is pointed, gives more natural sound, but must be close enough to mouth to get good rejection of unwanted sound.

Gun mic or cardioid on camera *may* be acceptable if working alone, but is rarely the best option. Ask yourself "If I was *only* recording sound, would I choose to put the microphone there?" The answer is usually no.

Some general points

Beware of jewellery which clatters or clothing which rustles (especially with clip-ons).

Always monitor the sound to check for distortion, pops, sibilance and handling noise. (If you are appearing in a PTC shot, you will have to get someone else to do this.)

Distortion happens when either the microphone or the circuits of the recorder are overloaded because the sound is too loud. Working the correct distance from the microphone, or changing to a type designed for close work, will avoid the former. Careful attention to record levels will deal with the latter.

Pops happen when the air from the mouth actually hits the microphone. We want the vibrations of the air to move the microphone's diaphragm, but we don't want a blast of air to hit it. So-called 'plosive' sounds 'B' and 'P' cause a sudden rush of air when spoken. Speak slightly off-mic to minimise.

Sibilance is excessive emphasis on 'S' sounds. It happens with some microphones and some voices more than others. Can be minimised by choice of mic, working position, (sometimes off-axis is best), and by judicious treble roll-off.

Handling noise is what you might expect, the noise you make when holding a microphone. For voice-overs, you can eliminate this completely by using a stand. Beware though of transmitted noises from the table or floor.

Listen for unwanted background sounds. Fridges, heating systems, washing machines, road drills and excavators can all distract from the story and reduce intelligibility.

Record each sequence of voice-over on a separate file or track.

This way there is less pressure on you because you are doing fewer things at once. You can concentrate on getting the level right, the delivery fluent and the recording quality good, then when you come to insert it, you can slide each sequence along the timeline till it is in the right place.

What next?

Post-production is a generic term for processes you use after the recording is finished. Ideally the recorded material should require minimal or no attention, it is always better to make a good recording initially, than to try and fix it afterwards.

However you may need to use:

Normalisation, which adjusts the volume level of the entire piece to a chosen standard.

Compression, which reduces the difference between the loudest and softest sections.

Equalisation, which adjusts the different frequencies in the recording, for example reducing excessive bass caused by working too close to the microphone.

You may also need to cut out any unwanted noises, and reduce the volume of breath noises. (don't remove them, it upsets the timing and sounds odd. Attenuate them by 6-10 dB)

These utilities, and many others, are available in a sound editor such as Adobe Audition. Audition is by far the most comprehensive and easy to use, but there are others, such as Audacity, which do many of the same functions.

Audition 3 is available free from www.techspot.com (later versions are available if you pay for them, but I have found version 3 entirely adequate.)

Microphone suppliers.

Studiospares stock a huge range. Their own-brand range of microphones is made in China, but to Studiospares own design and quality control, and can be excellent value.

Consider Studiospares S945 (£20) S940 (£27) S1005 (£50) or if you want the best, Neumann M150 (£4190)

Thomann (Germany) have very keen prices on both their own-brand and other manufacturers' products.

Consider Thomann's 'T bone' brand MB85 (£35) MB95 (£25) SC300 (£32) SC400 (£54)

Sontronics is a British company which makes and sells an excellent range of professional quality microphones at reasonable prices. The capsules are made in China, but the owners, Trevor and Lisa Coley, have very high assembly and quality control standards.

Sontronics STC1 (about £90) and STC10 (£70) are excellent – I use them.

Firms like Amazon and CPC often have the keenest prices, but they do not necessarily guarantee the performance of the products they sell. If you have tried a particular model of microphone, and consider it suitable, you can often get it at a good price from these sellers.

