

How to Narrate Audiobooks

From Novice to Professional



Steve Carlson

The book is divided into two parts; From having no idea how to narrate, record, edit or even audition for audiobooks, to figuring it out and becoming successful in the field. Navigating ACX, the largest audiobook maker in the industry.

HOW TO NARRATE AUDIOBOOKS: From Novice to Professional

By Steve Carlson

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Print ISBN: 979-8-88531-191-5

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-192-2

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Published by Abuzz Press, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

Abuzz Press, Inc.

2022

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Carlson, Steve

HOW TO NARRATE AUDIOBOOKS: From Novice to Professional
by Steve Carlson

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022937390

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PART 1	7
CHAPTER 1	7
<i>HOW IT ALL STARTED</i>	7
<i>AUDIO GURU</i>	14
CHAPTER 2	17
<i>THE EQUIPMENT</i>	17
<i>TABLET</i>	23
CHAPTER 3	31
<i>THE RECORDING STUDIO</i>	31
CHAPTER 4	43
<i>PERFORMANCE</i>	43
<i>VOICES</i>	45
<i>EDITING</i>	55
CHAPTER 5	65
<i>BUSINESS OF THE BUSINESS</i>	65
PART 2	71
CHAPTER 6	71
<i>ACX</i>	71
<i>PAY FOR PRODUCTION ROYALTY SHARE</i>	73
CHAPTER 7	79
<i>STEP 1, ETC.</i>	79
<i>PROFESSIONAL SUMMARY</i>	80
<i>GENRES</i>	81
<i>ABOUT</i>	82
<i>CREDITS</i>	82
<i>AWARDS AND RECOGNITION</i>	83
<i>WEBSITE</i>	84
<i>HOW ABOUT A 'CAREER'?</i>	88
CHAPTER 8	95
<i>AUDITIONING</i>	95

From Novice to Professional

CHAPTER 9	107
<i>YOU GOT ONE!</i>	107
<i>RETAIL AUDIO SAMPLE</i>	114
CHAPTER 10	119
<i>IT'S A WRAP!</i>	119
<i>FIRST STEP OF THE DANCE</i>	120
<i>NEXT STEP</i>	121
DENOUEMENT	125

INTRODUCTION

There is a lot of information available for those wanting to create an audiobook, especially technical info. But what about the basics, the simple info that they (the makers of audiobooks) assume you already know?

I was a film actor in Los Angeles for most of my life. I was fortunate to be able to run the gamete; movies, TV, soaps and commercials. It was a mix of the above, sometimes starring, sometimes not, that provided a good life for my family and me for many years. Much of this I base on the "kindness of strangers". These were the strangers that helped a young actor when many times I didn't even know I needed help. Coming from Cheyenne, Wyoming, as I did, I had damn few "street smarts" and knew nothing about show business in general and making movies or television in particular. Many people

along the line showed this young actor the ropes and slowly but surely, over the years and a lot of mistakes later, I actually learned what I was doing.

Many years into that game I realized how much there was that an actor was expected to know before he/she set foot in front of a camera. *But nobody taught it.*

Acting was taught on a stage so we learned nothing about cameras, sound, shadows, film etiquette, sightlines and a few hundred other things. Film is an art form unto itself.

As are audiobooks.

I've been doing audiobooks for a number of years now and at this printing have done 127 books. I have come to realize that audiobooks may suffer the same fate as film acting. It's compiled by a number of parts and nobody teaches you how to put them all together.

Acting - As mentioned, most learn to act on a stage. Some adapt to film and learn what's necessary there, usually by trial and error. Nobody teaches acting for

audiobooks, but that's exactly what you're doing, especially in fiction.

Preparation - Well, few teach anyone how to prepare for most anything, acting (stage or film), music, dance, etc. You can learn the skill but how to turn that skill professional enough to make a living, is often left to luck.

Narration - This would include most non-fiction books as well as large sections of fiction books. The narration and the dialogue have to blend seamlessly. You must be a good storyteller. The story itself, of course, will come from the manuscript, but your job is to bring it to life.

Technical - As an actor (and VO talent) I spent years behind a microphone - which was also behind glass in my own little booth. I had no idea what the guys in the other room were doing, the ones with the dials and gages and zig-zaggy audio things moving across monitors. Narrating audiobooks also means 'producing' them,

which also means recording and editing. New skills for most of us.

There are a lot of venues for learning about recording; You Tube, Ted talks, ACX and practically every company dealing with Voice Over (VO) work have tutorials.

Auditioning - People audition all the time. Every time you apply for a job, every time you discuss with a person about taking them on as a client-that's auditioning. It's especially important, and a little bit cruel and scary in the arts (and audiobooks is an art) because it's totally subjective. Someone may say that that is a great picture but if you don't like it, you're not going to buy it. How many movies or audiobooks have you been told were wonderful that you hated? Probably many.

There's no right or wrong. The timber of your voice, your cadence, inflection, accent and on and on... whether the buyer, listener, author likes it or not is totally up to them.

These and many other things unique to audiobooks are what we'll be dealing with. Sure, you'd pick up most things on your own after a few years of recording but why wait that long? Think of all the jobs and opportunities lost while fumbling around, learning the hard way, what could have been learned much easier and much more productively at the beginning.

Of course, some of you will already know some of this. You are all in different stages of knowledge and experience. If we are dealing with something you are familiar with, think of it as a review. Double check your view of the situation, then move on to the next subject.

This little book can help. You will learn the most by doing but there's nothing noble about starting out blind, with your hands tied. The more you know up front the better work you will do from the beginning....and the more sense everything will make as you learn more.

There's a much over-used term in show business and that is "have fun with it". Over-used or not, there's truth in it. The more you enjoy what you're doing, the more

your listener will as well. So, loosen up, lighten up, prepare for a new journey and let's get on with it.

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

HOW IT ALL STARTED

After a life of film acting, I retired at age 58 and my wife and I moved to 2 ½ wooded acres outside a charming historic town in Southern Oregon. I soon learned that successful people from all walks of life were also retiring to this area making it a very eclectic, interesting place. Not to mention the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (the largest in the country) is in our area as well as are about 40 excellent vineyards (making us Napa-North). Also, there is a large amphitheater called the Britt music festival which book well-known acts all summer (I rather enjoyed having Crosby, Stills

and Nash singing under the stars for us two minutes from our house.) as well as a month of classical. I became part of a wonderful golf foursome, remodeled the house and life was good... until it wasn't.

Actually, life was still pretty darn good, it's just that I discovered that man can only play so much golf, at least this man. I was ready to leave Hollywood and to step out of that game I had played for so long, but I wasn't ready to do nothing.

I was bored. So, what does a 60-year-old ex-actor find to do in a little historic town in Southern Oregon? Perhaps you see my problem.

The answer began with an interesting offer from the actor/author Bruce Campbell (*Evil Dead*, *Burn Notice*, etc.). He and his wife Ida had moved to this area years before as a needed respite from the madhouse Hollywood can be sometimes. Both being show-biz types, it didn't take long for us all to meet and fortunately, got along famously.

Bruce had written a book called 'Make Love the Bruce Campbell Way' (which is quite a clever book, BTW) and decided to make a rather interesting

audiobook out of it so he hired some actors from the Shakespeare Company, me, and brought a few friends up from LA. There were about 12 of us who all got together in a large recording studio and proceeded to do his book in the style of an old radio drama with everyone playing 2 or 3 parts.

It was great fun and gave me an idea... audiobooks. Hmm. I wondered if I could do that. Not like Bruce, of course, but just like me, like most audiobooks you hear. Part of being an actor in Los Angeles is being able to do many different things; movies, TV, sitcoms, soaps, commercials and announcing, narrating, all sorts of voice work (VO). As such, I felt I could tell the stories just fine but the technical part of it was worrisome.

VO work in LA is extremely professional. The voice person is usually in a soundproof glass booth with Mic, earphones and the copy. Outside the glass walls is the director and all the technicians and equipment. Dials, buttons, gages, and switches that I didn't know anything about. That wasn't my job. Now, thinking about doing audiobooks myself, I would have to learn about all that; recording, editing and probably a few hundred other

things that I had no idea about. It was scary.... but also exciting. Mentally and physically, I wasn't ready to be put out to pasture but whether I could actually do this or not, I had no idea. I did, however, decide to look into it.

(Remember the 127 audiobooks? I'm kinda glad I did.)

So that was how it began for me. It'll be different for you. We all come from our own places, bringing our own talents, personalities, and fears to the game. As it should be. That's what makes us unique. Wouldn't it be boring if we all sounded the same?

What we'll be dealing with in this book is what I've learned along this journey and, hopefully, I'll be able to share some helpful suggestions on how one can get started and succeed at this business of audiobooks. Remember please, this is A way, not THE way. Like in life, everyone is going to have their own experience but, also like in life, the more you know the better off you'll be. Knowledge is power.

Though everyone's experience is going to be unique to them, there are still basics, certain things every audiobook narrator has to deal with and master. We have to read well, tell a story well and have a comfortable, soundproof area to record in. We also have to learn the technical side of it all. Of course, *how* we do it is up to us.

A word about this book....

I am an actor and narrator. I learned the technical aspect of this because I had to. I am not a technical expert. I learned it late and have only had a little over 8 years of experience with it. I know just enough to be dangerous... actually, I know enough to get the job done and since my authors keep coming back to me, I guess I'm doing all right.

That's what I want to pass on. I had to build it up from nothing, not knowing much about it at all. You might be in the same situation. If so, come on along. It should be fun. We'll see what I did, what worked and

what didn't and it just may give you a good blueprint for how you can get rolling in the audiobook world as well.

The only thing I would be considered an expert in is the acting/narrating part. However, by now I am fairly efficient with the process of recording and editing but for technical questions, problems and advice, I still rely on the professionals. It is interesting though, as the years go by, I'm asking fewer and fewer questions. Years go by when I don't need to send out an SOS. I was trained well.

I had a lot of questions. Although I felt confident in the performing/narrating part of this, I had no idea how to begin to actually do an audiobook. Fortunately, because of the business I was in, I knew a lot of people who did voice work. I did a lot myself but always viewed it as a bit of a sideline to on-screen acting. Some pursued it more seriously than I did and, as a result, knew much more about it than I did. They are who I went to first with my questions.

The first thing I learned was that there were many places where one could audition for jobs on-line. Great,

but I still had to learn about the recording part. How do I get the audio to get to them?

As film actors, we shoot on locations a lot which means we are traveling a good portion of the time. As mentioned, some of my cohorts took VO more seriously than I did and even made sure they could audition for things on location. As I learned, all it took was a lap top computer, a set of earphones and a ‘snowball mic.

The Snowball mic is aptly named. It’s a pure white ball about 6” in diameter and is not entirely a bad mic for the around \$35 to \$45 price tag and it doesn’t even need an interface. (You can find it in practically any music store in the country.) For traveling, this fits nicely into a suitcase. (If the person auditioning got the job, a VO session would be scheduled at a later time at a professional studio with a few hundred thousand dollars’ worth of state-of-the-art equipment and technicians but for auditioning, this set-up is just fine.)

If you are fortunate enough to have a Mac computer or laptop (I’ve been a Mac guy from the beginning) you will find a free app called Garage Band. I know it sounds like it’s made to record music. Well, it is. They *all* are.

They also happen to be how one records audio as well. We use less than a tenth of their capacity for audio.

Don't let the 'free' part of Garage Band throw you. Even though it will be one of the easiest recording software systems to use it is also quite good.

That pairing of the Snowball mic and Garage Band represent one of the easiest and cheapest ways to get started not only in audiobooks, but VO work in general as well. (Actually, I recorded my first 4 professional audiobooks with a snowball mic and Garage Band and got no complaints.)

There are still a number of non-Mac options for recordings as well. We'll get into them a bit later.

AUDIO GURU

This might be a good time to mention the importance of talking with someone who's been there. You need a recording guru of some sort. How do you know which is the right mic for you? The right interface? The right recording software? How do you learn how to physically

record, edit, troubleshoot...all the things that you have to learn to record well?

If you haven't done it before, you need some help. If you happen to know someone who knows what you need to know, great. That's your new best friend. If you don't, you probably need to hire someone. Many folks who work at the music or computer store that sells this equipment would love to pick up a few extra bucks by helping you install them and show you how to use them. You would then also have a connection with someone to call when you get in a jam, and believe me, at the beginning, you're going to get in a few. An expert can guide you smoothly through a lot of things that would seem hopeless otherwise. (Everything's easy when you know how.)

It's extremely helpful to have a friend/helper who is familiar with the software you're using.

"It does what?" he asks.

I explain and explain about the noises, the strange pages I've ended up on, the lights...

“Oh, yeah.” He says. “No problem. What you need to do is... “etc. etc. And there you are, happy that you have a knowledgeable friend on your side.

When I mentioned earlier about being trained well, I was, and I have my personal audio guru to thank for it. I met him through my work. When I retired from acting and moved to Oregon, I still continued to do voice work. My guru owns a successful, recording studio where I was recording a lot of commercials at the time. When I decided I wanted to try this and needed some advice (and, later, instruction) he was the one I went to.

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