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## **Audio reading skills**

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**Guidance from UKAAF**

## Why format quality matters

"When organisations send me information in formats that I can read myself it allows me to be independent, feel informed and appreciated - just like every other customer."

End-user

"Producing consistently high quality accessible formats helps us to maintain our reputation, to gain new customers and to retain existing ones."

Transcription agency

"We are committed to ensuring that our customers with print disabilities receive the same information, of the same quality, as everyone else."

Service provider

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## Who is this guidance for?

This guidance from the UK Association for Accessible Formats (UKAAF) is primarily aimed at producers of audio formats. It will be particularly useful for people who are new to the area of producing audio materials for print-disabled people.

## The guidance includes information on:

- Marking up the text to be recorded
- Sight reading without marking up
- Breathing during recording
- Improving the sound of your voice
- Articulation, pitch and pace

## Disclaimer

This guidance may include references to external websites, services or products for which UKAAF accepts no responsibility. This information is given without any representation or endorsement of those websites, services or products.

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## 1 Introduction

By obtaining these guidelines you are demonstrating your commitment to helping people with a print disability to read your materials if they find reading standard print materials difficult or impossible.

This guidance concentrates specifically on materials suitable for blind and partially sighted people - such as large print, audio, braille and electronic file formats. However, others with a print disability, for example with dyslexia or motor-difficulties, may also find such materials necessary.

The provision of accessible information is a key requirement of the Equality Act which service providers must follow, but good customer service and business practice includes communicating with your customers and staff in ways which meet their reading needs. By providing accessible format materials, you not only demonstrate your commitment to equality and inclusion, but also increase your reach and customer base. It therefore makes good business sense.

This guidance will help you and your organisation to incorporate good practice into your business and provide good quality accessible format materials in a timely and appropriate way.

## 2 About UKAAF

The UK Association for Accessible Formats (UKAAF) is the industry association whose mission is to set standards for accessible formats that meet end-user needs through:

- development, delivery and promotion of codes, standards, and best practice for the production and provision of accessible formats

- consultation and collaboration with transcribers, service providers and users of accessible formats.

Members of UKAAF include organisations and individuals with an interest in the provision of quality accessible formats, such as service providers, transcribers, educators, researchers, print services, publishers, and end-users.

Through its leadership and representation, standards-setting, and by fostering a spirit of cooperation between members, UKAAF ensures that the needs and requirements of end-users are understood by service providers and transcribers to help improve the quality of accessible formats.

Please see the section on "Where to get further help" towards the end of this document for more information about the benefits of being a member of UKAAF.

### **3 Definition of print disability**

A print-disabled person is anyone for whom a visual, cognitive, or physical disability hinders the ability to read print. This includes all visual impairments, dyslexia, and any physical disabilities that prevent the handling of a physical copy of a print publication.

Source: Copyright Licensing Agency Print Disability Licensing Scheme, Guidelines for Licensees 2010.

### **4 Audio reading skills**

This guidance looks specifically at the way you, the reader, uses your voice to convey the printed text to your listener. The aim is "shared reading" where you enable the author to communicate with the listener without distracting them yourself. The necessary speech style has clarity, and is natural and alive and as with all

seemingly "natural" performances, it requires practice and preparation to achieve this before the microphone.

## 5 Marking up the text to be recorded

If possible, practice reading aloud first; silent reading may help you spot impossibly long words but won't help place emphasis. Mark up by underlining words to be stressed. Think of the meaning; don't fall into the pattern of stressing every verb, noun or 4th word. Another common pattern is to drop the voice at the end of sentence or to pounce on the first word of each sentence, or, especially common, the first word of a new paragraph. Instead of looking at words as individual movable objects within full stops, look at the sentence as a string of words between paragraph markers, considering always the meaning of the words. This will ensure that instead of falling into a standard rhythmic pattern, your reading stresses will naturally have variety.

Look for the keyword in each sentence and highlight it in your reading:

- By emphasis
- By inflection
- By pausing slightly either before or after it. If it is a particularly vital word, pause before and after it.

Names, places and dates should often be highlighted like this in some way; be particularly careful to say these clearly. There is no need to repeat information; the listener can if necessary replay the recording. However, spelling of important names and terms is usually appreciated, if appropriate in your setting.

If time is short, look at the beginning and the end of the passage, leaving common sense to take care of the middle. This will ensure

that you have some idea of the line of the argument, and the tone of the article. You may, for instance, find that an item on undertaking has a humorous approach not evident from the title and first sentence. This may require a different approach from the more sombre or matter of fact tone you might have adopted otherwise.

### **Tips to assist your mark up**

- Listen to one of your recordings, noting points which could be improved
- Mark up the text in a way which will help you overcome the problems (e.g. underlining or highlighting those words you want to stress, putting slash marks where you should pause or breathe or marking problem words or phrases whose pronunciation may trip you up).
- Re-record the passage, reacting to your marking and making the necessary vocal corrections
- Listen back to the second recording to see if the desired improvements were made. Practise until you have perfected a system of marking up which helps you and to which you can respond whilst reading

## **6 Sight reading without marking up**

If your reaction to the previous section has been words to the effect of "chance would be a fine thing" - please go back and re-read it. Much of it is still applicable, even if your "preparation" is apparently limited to a quick glance at the first sentence.

Even if your organisation's demands are such that you feel you have to start reading almost as soon as you sit down: we advise don't.



Take time to settle yourself, relax and then spend a few minutes skimming the material. Check the basics such as title, author or journalist, read any summaries, find the heading of your particular chapter/section/article, and skim through not just to your starting point but to the next main heading.

Then, before starting to read, if appropriate, listen to the last few sentences of the previous reader so that you can follow on without jarring the listener too much. Don't try to copy their pace and delivery as this will make your reading sound false, but it is possible to smooth the join by matching your style to theirs for a few words, before moving on to your own natural style.

If you are starting a new item or article, add a few words to ease the transition to a new voice and give the listener time to start concentrating again on what you are saying before anything of importance is read.

For example: "That is the end of Chapter 6. Chapter 7 begins on page 124 and is entitled ..." or "The next item is the Letters Column and this week starts with a short note from ...".

**Tip:** For sight-readers: an exercise to train your eye to read ahead of your voice is to open a book at random, look at a sentence, shut the book and repeat the sentence plus as many as you can remember of the following words. Practice will enable you to increase from a few words to several lines.

**Tip:** It is obviously essential that to use this skill, you must be able to see the text ahead of you. If you have been in the habit of keeping your place with a ruler or a piece of paper, try using a pencil or finger at the end of the line instead.

## 7 Breathing during recording

It is important to breathe **inaudibly**, not in great gasps.

Remember to breathe before you start, so that the intake of breath is not audible on the recording. Each time you pause, take in a little more breath quietly, as "top-up breaths".

**Tip:** Before you start, stretch and relax to make sure that from above the waist you are relaxed, especially shoulders and neck.

If you find at the end of a reading session that you are running out of breath then practice by sitting up straight, breathe out, breathe in, count aloud 1, 2, 3, take a little top-up breath. Repeat the counting and top-ups several times. In other words "tank up" inaudibly through the mouth between deeper full breaths.

You could also practice at home while doing concurrent activity e.g. walking, cooking, etc.

### Breathing tips

Quick intake, slow output is what you need. Start by counting 1-3, then increase up to 1-6. See how long you can go before you need to take a real deep breath.

Don't hold the breath in the mouth, but let it pass down, so it can come back up past the vocal cords, and through the mouth, nose and sinuses, the resonators. If you leave the breath in the mouth it will take away half of your voice the lower and nasal resonance is lost. A good voice has a balanced resonance of mouth, nose and lower resonance.

## 8 Improving the sound of your voice

Most people's reaction to hearing their recorded voice for the first time is a startled "Do I really sound like that?" Few would admit to

liking what they hear: the important thing is to listen critically and to work on points which can be improved.

### **Dullness, lack of warmth**

One of the most common effects of a microphone is that it imposes a restraint on you the reader, making your naturally alert and friendly voices sound formal and dull. We can all tell in a moment if someone speaking on the telephone is talking to a "real person" or to an answering machine. We seem to forget that a "real person" will eventually listen back to our recorded message, and so we give our message to the "machine". How many of us put down the phone and say "I do hate talking to those machines"?

**Tip:** As a reader, try to look through the microphone and recorder to the listener; pretend they are sitting in the room with you and that you are reading directly to a person, not a microphone. This will probably make your tone sound more lively and alert.

**Tip:** If nerves still make you sound dull and depressed, try smiling while you read: it may sound silly, but it works! You will begin to sound as if you are enjoying what you are doing.

### **Excessive nasality**

If you tend to sound as if you have got a cold even when you have not, the problem may be caused by too much sound coming through the nose and not enough coming out through the mouth. This is often caused by improper control in the throat, closing off air to the mouth and forcing it out through the nose. When too much sound exits through the nose, the nasal "twang" results and you'll have to practise to recognise it and overcome it. Teach yourself how to change from a very nasal sound to a very "open" sound, switching back and forth gradually and at will as you speak.

Thus, through learning exactly what it feels like to sound extremely nasal, you can develop the ability to avoid it.

In addition, a tight or tense throat can cause a "twang". Open the mouth and throat as much as possible in a relaxed speaking style and this may help you overcome the nasal problem sounds.

**Tip:** Try some muscle-relaxing isometric exercises with the head and neck before you start reading. When the jaw is loose, the throat will open, so practice letting the jaw hang loose and make it relax. Or, yawn several times to relax and open up the vocal system to prepare yourself.

### Articulation

The aim is clarity without artificial over-emphasis. Don't "put on the posh" or be tempted to be formal just because it's on the page. Everyday speech is much easier and generally preferable to listen to.

**Tip:** Consonants make the word, so make sure they can be clearly heard but don't "dress up" your voice or speech for the microphone or over-articulate.

Voiceless consonants: p, t, etc.

- P - if sounded too hard will "pop" on the mike.
- T - should sound like a fingernail tapping on a window, very small and very dry. The sound should be made with the tip of the tongue on the ridge behind the teeth. Special care is needed when sounding a 't' with an 's' e.g. stair, hats.

**Tip:** If the microphone is too close, these will sound splashy or too long. Try angling the microphone slightly upwards to lighten the tone - never angle it downwards.

Don't linger on the 's' sound too long - speech can become hissy. Voice 'z's when they are there, as they give weight, and are not as hissy as 's'. Sometimes an 's' should be pronounced as a 'z' as in "legislation". When an 's' comes with a voiced consonant at the end of a word it nearly always becomes a 'z', e.g. "feels", thus giving more weight than a hissing 's'.

### Pitch

Don't use too many notes, i.e. levels of tone. Don't try to "make it interesting", it will be interesting to your listener. You don't need as much variation as in normal conversation because you are reading one-to-one.

Don't pitch too high. Remember that in a straightforward statement, the first stressed syllable in a phrase is the highest in pitch.

**Tip:** You can take a short mouth breath after "phrase".

### Pace

There is no "right" pace: there is a pace which is comfortable for you the reader and one that is comfortable for the listener. The former is more important and will probably be dictated by the text - its content, style and complexity. As a general rule, we recommend you read a little slower than you naturally would. Avoid falling over words, or losing the sense of the passage. Too fast and you may sound to the listener as if you are gabbling and racing against time.

Pauses will be relative to your pace and their position in the text, e.g. a pause between phrases will be short, that at a full stop slightly larger; and longer still at the end of a paragraph, section, chapter or article.

## 9 Miscellaneous points

If you are recording a narrative text with direct speech in it, possibly from a novel or short story, you must separate the narrative from the speech. If you don't, you get funny intonations e.g. "How are you? Better" - he enquired kindly, - with "he enquired kindly" continuing the question. If you are reading a piece of dialogue, try to read ahead to see how it should be delivered, hints on which are usually given in the text just before or just after a passage of direct speech.

We have neutral, strong and weak forms of a large number of words, conjunctions, prepositions, and the articles.

The definite article 'the' - when it comes before a word beginning with a consonant we use the neutral form "thuh" e.g. "the book", "what's the matter", "the hat". If the word starts with a vowel, the orange, the apple we tend to use the weak form "thee". The strong form of 'the' 'the', where 'thuh' is emphasized, is rarely used.

"That" can be used as a demonstrative pronoun. Strong form - "that book". Weak form - "the editor said he hadn't edited it, but that 'that' edition had been edited by another editor". The first "that" is weak, the second strong.

"But" or "even if" are important to emphasise in a sentence in a higher pitch, to set up a proposition, argument etc. These words can help you in a difficult long passage.

If there is a rhetorical question, do not give it the answer "yes" or "no" with your voice, go down at the end or keep it even.

For inverted commas - lift the voice slightly.

For parentheses (brackets), drop the voice slightly. Sometimes the text will not actually show these, but the eyes and brain say they should be there.

### 10 Reading the text

So now you are sitting comfortably, relaxed yet alert before the correctly positioned microphone. You have prepared the text as well as your circumstances permit, and you are ready to go: a few further hints before you actually record:

- The first few words you utter are likely to be either croaky or over-loud, so to "warm up" your voice, try reading the last sentence aloud before beginning your recording. This should also make the stress fall more naturally in the correct place.
- Concentrate on what the author is saying, try to visualise what the words mean. This will help give variety and interest to your voice and increase the likelihood that you are creating word pictures in the mind's eye of your listener(s).
- Don't let your own feelings on the subject colour the way you read. If you feel so strongly that it is impossible for you to stand back and let the author have their say, ask to be assigned to another job.
- Have the page lifted and almost turned before you reach the bottom: if you wait until you are reading the bottom line before you start turning over, you will be too hurried to do it silently.
- Don't read for too long: your lack of concentration will be apparent to your listener before your voice sounds obviously tired.
- Drink plenty of water (not tea or coffee which tends to dry the throat) - this will extend the time you can read and avoid the clicks and smacks associated with sticky spittle.

- **Good luck and do enjoy your reading!**

## 11 Where to get further help

UKAAF assists businesses and organisations by advising how to meet the needs of customers and clients with print disabilities; providing guidance on how to source and provide quality accessible formats like large print, audio, braille, electronic file formats and Easy Read; and helping you to understand your responsibilities as a service provider.

Through our website and magazine, members will also gain access to:

- findings from public consultations and end-user research
- research and innovation in accessible formats
- information on suppliers of transcription services
- guidance and advice on standards for accessible formats
- opportunities to review and help to develop standards and guidance.

In addition to supporting service providers and transcribers, UKAAF also represents people with print disabilities. We believe that because format quality matters, end-users should have genuine input into the development of standards for accessible information. By collecting and sharing users' views with service providers and transcribers we can help them to deliver a quality service which meets users' needs.

UKAAF has a User Advisory Group (UAG) so we can include blind and partially sighted people and others with print disabilities in ongoing research and consultation on key accessible format issues.



There are many benefits of being a member of UKAAF, not least to demonstrate your commitment to quality accessible formats. For more information visit us at [www.ukaaf.org](http://www.ukaaf.org).

## **12 Your feedback is welcome**

We would welcome your views on this guidance, any suggestions for additions, or case studies of how this guidance has helped you. You might like to share your experience in an article in our magazine 'Format Matters'.

You can phone, email or write to us - our details are at the back, or use the feedback form on our website [www.ukaaf.org](http://www.ukaaf.org).

If you find UKAAF's guidance valuable, please encourage others to join by visiting our website.

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