



Sarah Barron

Scottish Female Voice Over Artist



Coaching Handbook

STARTING OUT IN AUDIOBOOK NARRATION

A step-by-step guide to getting started and progressing in the world of audiobooks, and having fun in the process.



www.sarahbarron.co.uk

INTRODUCTION

Getting started in audiobook narration can feel daunting and hard to navigate. This Handbook aims to give you a clear path to entering the world of audiobooks, whether you are an actor, voiceover or writer looking to record your own work.

I have taken the questions I am frequently asked, and combined them with the things I wanted to know when I first got started, and created this practical guide to audiobook narration.

It can be used on its own or in conjunction with coaching sessions from me, details of which are at the end of the Handbook.

I hope you find it helpful and I wish you all the very best for your journey.

Sarah Barron

CONTENTS

PART A - Getting Started	3
PART B - Preparation	7
PART C - Recording a Book	10
PART D - Post Recording	13
PART E - Payment	16
PART F - Other FAQs	18



PART A

GETTING STARTED

GETTING STARTED

1. How do I get work?

There are three main ways to get work:

A. Studios/Publishers with Studios

Most audiobook recording is done by independent studios who are commissioned by publishers to record. They are the ones who cast the audiobooks. There is no obvious way to find them as they are not listed on Audible titles: a Google search of 'audiobook studios' is probably the best way! They have to record a lot of books so they are looking for easy ways to cast. Call them (so they hear your voice) and ask if they are looking for new narrators to add to their list, then follow it up with an email with your demo reel. (Yes, you need a demo reel! See question 3 below).

b. Self-publishing Platforms

The most well-known of these is ACX, Audible's self-publishing arm. You can set yourself up as a narrator on there and then go searching for titles to record. I am not an expert on this route to getting work but ACX has really good resources on how to get started and how to make money from it. **www.help.acx.com**.

I will say one thing about this route however. ACX is very useful as a way of getting started as a narrator as there are lots of books which you can record for a 'rights share' i.e. you do not get paid a fee, only royalties. This is a brilliant way to practise but a less good way of actually making money unless you're very skilled at picking books. Therefore, my advice would be to do 2 or 3 max on a rights share and after that, only pick books that pay a 'per finished hour' fee (see Part C section 9 for more details).

C. Through an agent – see question 2

2. Do I need an agent?

No, is the short answer. It is possible to make a career in audiobooks without having an agent. A lot of UK studios have very limited budgets and therefore, an agent is unlikely to be able to negotiate a higher fee than is offered. However, that is not true of all studios/publishers and it is certainly not true of US audiobooks. There may also be high profile audiobooks that only get offered through agents. Therefore, it is of course beneficial to have an agent but has to be set off against the % commission you will pay them, even when they cannot get you a higher fee.

Top Tip

To get some recommendations about demo reels visit websites like:
www.voiceoverkickstart.com
or www.gravyforthebrain.com

3. Do I need a demo reel?

Yes, you need a few samples of 1-3 mins, showing a combination of narration and dialogue and any key accents you specialise in. I would suggest no more than six samples in total. Have them as a link on your website and available in mp3. Unless you are very competent at editing, I would advise getting a professional company to record them for you and they can advise on good samples if you do not yet have your own body of work.

4. Do I need my own sound booth?

There are three key ways of recording audiobook narration:

1. Record in the studio which has been commissioned by the publisher (sometimes publishers have their own studio, such as Penguin Random House Audio)

- Advantage: you have a producer with you to pick up all your mistakes and direct your performance
- Disadvantage: less flexibility about when you record (usually full-time over 2-3 days) and you have to travel

2. Record in your home

- Pretty much the opposite of the above!
- Another advantage, you usually get paid slightly more per finished hour

- Another disadvantage: You need a high quality set up and somewhere you can sit for several hours without expiring through heat exhaustion or stopping every 5 minutes when your neighbour turns on their lawnmower...

3. There is a third option: which is hiring a local studio whenever you need it. However, studios tend to hire out by the hour/half day so unless you are very fast, this could get expensive quickly.



I have a home studio but I also jump at the chance to go into a studio whenever that is offered, as it improves my skills to record with a good producer.



5. What other equipment do I need?

A. Microphone (mic)

You can get a pretty good mic for under £200, so it's worth buying a decent one, it really does make a difference. However, mics are a matter of taste and you might find that you need to try out different ones, or upgrade, along your audiobook journey. There are essentially two types of mic:

- **Dynamic:** this picks up less outside noise and is better if you do not have good soundproofing. Having said that, I use a dynamic in my soundproof booth as I prefer the sound, and it doesn't pick up as much mouth noise as a condenser microphone. I use a Rode NTG4, if it helps. www.rodete.com/en/microphones/shotgun/ntg4
- **Condenser:** these are the voiceover 'go-to' mics and are much more sensitive which can be a good and a bad thing. I have an sE X1S, but I use the dynamic more frequently. www.seelectronics.com/products/x1-s/

B. Interface

Unless you are using a USB mic (and I would not recommend that) then you need an interface between the recording device (i.e. your computer) and the mic. I use an audient iD4 which is mid-price and seems to do the job. That is the extent of my expertise! www.audient.com/products/audio-interfaces/id4/overview/

C. Something to record with i.e. your computer

You will need a computer which doesn't have a noisy fan. Alternatively, leave your computer outside and attach it to a monitor which then sits within your studio.

D. DAW – Digital Audio Workstation i.e. software to record on

There are free software options such as Ocenaudio or Audacity, so you don't have to spend money until you're ready. However, I find they are less intuitive than the one I use which is Twisted Wave. This is specially designed for recording on a Mac and so easy to use. You can't mix with music or do anything fancy but it is brilliant for simply recording the spoken word.

www.twistedwave.com/mac

www.ocenaudio.com/en/startpage

www.audacityteam.org

PART B

PREPARATION

PREPARATION

6. How do I prepare a book?

- A.** When you first start, you might want to read the book through as a normal reader would, to get a sense of the story – then go back through the second time and do thorough preparation.
- B.** I now find that I want to make notes on the first read, so I tend to read it through once thoroughly and then go back to the beginning and work on all the tricky accents and voices.
- C.** This is not an acting handbook and I am presuming you already know how to act if you want to get into audiobooks. However, I think it's worth saying that you should think of it as a script rather than a book. You must prepare well enough to create rich characters for your listeners. Make a decision about how each character sounds and if possible, see and hear them in your head.
- D.** There are some 'policy' decisions that you need to make when prepping. For example, if there are lyrics to a song in the text, do you sing them (by the way, if it's a song in copyright, the answer is always no!). Make these decisions during your preparation, not as you narrate, and if in any doubt, go back to the studio/publisher and get advice on what the author wants. This would also apply to the names of lead characters if the pronunciation is not obvious – it's really important to check.
- E.** I make notes in the margins on the following:
 - When a new character appears, so it's clear who they are and how they speak
 - When the description of how the person speaks follows the dialogue e.g. 'I love you' she whispered
 - When there is dialogue between characters and it isn't clear who is speaking.
- F.** I always note down any unknown pronunciations and queries as I'm going along and mark them in the margin, but I also make a list of them separately. I can then go through all the queries with the publisher/author, and look up all pronunciations in one go.



- G.** You are expected to look up all the pronunciations, although the producer will help if you can't find one e.g. a street name in an obscure village.
- H.** Remember - particularly if you have a specific regional accent or you are a bilingual/fluent second-language speaker, you have been hired as the expert in that accent/language. Therefore, do the research and come prepared with pronunciations.
- I.** If the producer suggests a different pronunciation:
 - If it is a general word, I will normally go with their pronunciation unless I am crystal clear that in my accent, it would be pronounced differently
 - If it is a pronunciation in my specific dialect, I will always push back if they try to get me to pronounce it differently – I have been hired as the expert in my dialect!

7. How do I distinguish Male and Female characters?

Do not do what I did when I first started narrating which was to drop the male characters into my chest voice and speak gruffly, which meant I lost my voice by the end of the book! Picture that character and have their voice in your head, that is the best way to recreate their voice when recording. For a few quick tips: men speak in a slightly more staccato, clipped way. Women are more breathy and more fluid in their speech pattern.

8. Do I need to do Accents?

It is always helpful to be good at accents as an audiobook narrator but you are not required to be Meryl Streep. It is difficult to jump from narration to dialogue and retain fluidity, and the accent you require is an approximation. Sometimes seeking to perfect the accent can get in the way of the character - storytelling is the priority. However, here are two methods I have used of getting into an accent:

- For minor characters: IDEA – helpful database of accents in English
- For a major character: I find the most useful book is 'How To Do Accents' by Haydn-Sharpe and Rowles. They have downloadable accents on their app 'Accent Kit'.

PART C

RECORDING

A BOOK

RECORDING A BOOK

It takes stamina to record an audiobook, make no mistake! But it isn't as daunting as it sounds when you break it down into the component parts:

9. How long will it take

- Audiobooks are based on 'finished hours'. This is the duration of the final product. Most full-length novels are between 9-12 hours long. It doesn't matter how long you take to record it, you will always be paid based on finished hours. Therefore, the quicker you record, the more you get paid per hour!
- It takes me approx. 1.5 times the finished hours to record. In other words, if the final audiobook is 12 hours long, I would plan about 18 hours of recording time.
- Including prep time, it takes about twice the final number of finished hours ie final audiobook 12 hours, prep and recording time 24 hours.

10. Should I record in short or long sessions?

It is unusual to get short deadlines on audiobooks. Therefore, if you are recording from home, you can do so in short daily sessions over a couple of weeks, but I will often record a book in 2 or 3 days so I get a good run at it. I would not recommend going beyond 2 weeks or you will lose the flow and forget your characters' voices.

11. Should I sit or stand when recording?

For other voiceover work, standing sometimes provides that necessary energy. I wouldn't recommend this for audiobooks! Get yourself a comfortable office chair that is adjustable, so you are able to sit for hours on end without moving (i.e. so you don't make rustling noises)

Ensure you have something to put your script on i.e. a lectern or music stand, that is at eye level, so you are not extending your neck to look upwards or rounding your shoulders to look down.



Top Tip

Rule of Thumb – a finished hour is roughly 9,000 words.

12. How do I read the script when recording?

I always use my iPad as I can move pages easily without the noise of page-turning. I just scroll up with my finger i.e. I don't use an iPad pen or anything like that (sorry if this sounds precise but several people have asked me!).

I use an app called i-annotate which allows me to write notes in the margins, highlight text, search for words and navigate to a page of my choice.

www.folia.com/iannotate

13. What do I do if there are mistakes in the text?

When I spot an obvious typo, I record it as written, then I click my fingers (so the editor can find the mistake easily) and record it as I think it should be written. When I upload the files, I email the studio with a list of the typos, noting the page number.

14. How many words are in a finished hour of recording?

My rule of thumb is 9,000 words an hour.

15. Do I need to warm up my voice?

Definitely! This isn't the medium to go into how to do a vocal warm up and there are good resources online such as the National Theatre's Voice Coach on www.youtube.com/watch?v=tF_vO_q5X3s.



It is also important that you are hydrated before you start recording: not with a massive glass of water just before you begin but with regular sipping of water before and during a recording. Mouth noise due to dehydration is a big issue. My other tips to reduce mouth noise are:

- use lip balm to stop your lips smacking together
- have a bite of a green apple before recording – no idea why it works but it does
- before you start, swill a spoonful of coconut oil around your mouth which seems to clear the gunk! (or just clean your teeth).

PART D

POST RECORDING

POST RECORDING

16. How do I save and send recorded files?

This will depend on whether you are working for a studio or uploading the final version to a self-publishing platform such as ACX:

- A.** Studio: Save each chapter as a different file using WAV (not mp3). Have a naming convention for your files '001_BOOK TITLE_CHPT1' unless the studio instructs you differently. Then send your daily recorded files using a service such as WeTransfer. That's it!
- B.** Self-publishing sites: Their instructions are very specific so read what they say about naming conventions, file sizes and technical requirements. If I narrate a self-published book which is going onto a platform, I always work with an editor and as part of my contract with them, I ask that they upload the final version to the platform, so it's their responsibility to get the technical requirements right, not mine!

17. Talking of which, should I edit my own recordings on self-publishing platforms?

That really depends on how proficient and quick you are at editing. I once edited a book – never again, I'm a quick narrator and a very slow editor! You could spend hours on something you're neither skilled at nor enjoy, so I usually advise narrators to employ an editor. That editor should do the following:

- Edit (I know, you'd hope so!) – removing unnecessary breath noise, mouth noises, any background
- Proof – read the whole book and come back to you with a list of 'pick-ups'
- Master – essentially make it sound nice, but also ensure that the specifications are those required by the platform
- Editor fees vary but rule of thumb approx. £40-60 per finished hour, so you need to factor this into your final fee.

Top Tip

Ensure the contract with your editor includes them uploading the final product onto the Platform.

18. What happens if I make a mistake when I'm recording?

In Twisted Wave (see section 3), there is a function called 'Punch-In Recording'. If I make a mistake, I go back to the most obvious breath before the mistake, press the 'punch-in' button and it lets me listen to a few seconds of my narration before I have to come in with the line I messed up. This means you submit a clean copy to the editor. I make mistakes all the time!

19. How do I deal with corrections or 'Pick-Ups': once the book has been recorded?

When I work with UK studios, I don't usually have that many pick-ups because they have good engineers who can usually manage to cover up the errors I make, and their proof-readers tend to be less picky. However, when I work with American studios or an independent editor, I have dozens of corrections, some of which are to do with them not understanding my Scottish accent – so do not panic when this happens!



You will be sent a spreadsheet with the corrections listed out by page, but ideally you will also receive a sound file which has each recorded clip where you made an error. The key thing is to match the clip in terms of volume, energy and tone when you re-record the line. They will probably send you instructions about how to record but if not, record all pick-ups onto one file with a space in between each pick-up.

PART E

PAYMENT

PAYMENT

20. The most important question: How much can I charge?

- A.** Studios: UK studios pay somewhere between £70-90 per finished hour in my experience.
- B.** US market pays more.
- C.** Self-publishing platforms are about negotiation and/or doing it for a rights share on a book you think will be successful. The ACX website has brilliant advice on this.

www.help.acx.com/s/



PART F

OTHER FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

OTHER FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

21. Are there any differences in narrating non-fiction?

Out of the 100 plus audiobooks I have narrated, only about 5% have been non-fiction, I think because I have a regional accent. There are people out there who specialise in teaching non-fiction narration, but here are my top tips:

- A.** I always attempt to do an approximation of the author's voice, particularly if they are well-known. I don't try to impersonate them but I try to provide a similar tone and accent.
- B.** It is a very fine line between making something sound interesting and sounding like you are 'acting';, which does not work for non-fiction. You need to sound like you wrote it, which means an honest interest in the subject and a desire to convey the intent of the book, rather than trying to make it 'fascinating'.
- C.** If you are reading direct quotes made by people other than the author, do not do what I did in my first non-fiction and try to give them 'voices'. Read them in your narrator's voice unless the producer specifically tells you otherwise. Doing 'voices' in non-fiction sounds at best cringeworthy and at worst, you get the accent of the person completely wrong. Just avoid it – I wish I had!
- D.** It is unlikely the author will have thought through what your audience needs when they are listening, so you need to do that. For example, 'on page 52, you can read more about this' is of no use to a listener. Refer to the relevant chapter instead. Likewise, if there are diagrams in the book,

ask the studio whether those are being provided as a PDF alongside the audiobook, and refer to the PDF rather than the page.

22. What are the 5 things to watch out for as I start?

Some of these are mentioned above but I thought a summary might be helpful:

- i.** Allow enough time for preparation – for a normal-length book, about 8 hours.
- ii.** Do not undercharge, because narrating an audiobook is gruelling and it has to be worth your while. If you're on a self-publishing platform, ensure you either factor in an editor's costs or your time to edit it, which will be substantial (at least the same amount of time as it took you to record). Guides on fees are set out in the section above.
- iii.** Do not try to push your voice too low for male characters – make your voice less breathy, more staccato and more emphatic. Also hear the voice in your head and envision the person who is speaking. Do not do a falsetto for female characters. Just use a lighter tone, make it breathier and more fluid.
- iv.** For non-fiction, do not do 'voices' for people who are quoted in the book – just use your narrator's voice, unless the producer specifically tells you otherwise.
- v.** Do not read your Audible reviews! If you want feedback, go to a vocal coach or someone who knows how to narrate.



How can I work with you further?

If you want to know more, or would like some audiobook narration coaching, you can book with me on my website

www.sarahbarron.co.uk/contact

or email me on **mail@sarahbarron.co.uk**



www.sarahbarron.co.uk