



The Voice Over Entrance Exam

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This e-book is dedicated to:

My parents, who, after investing much money in private schools didn't *visibly* wince when they learned I had a passion for media and thereby a questionable financial future.

My family, who, make me a better person while I simultaneously drive them nuts.

My fellow voice over professionals for letting me learn from them.

Every voice over client I've ever had, have or will have...thank you for your business.

Acknowledgements

I'm so pleased that as I get older, I have realized how much I didn't and still don't know. That kind of humility has served me well while writing this e-book. Many fine people helped me with this project so I would avoid falling on my face. Whatever success this e-book enjoys is due in part to their collective efforts. If it sucks, that's on me. My thanks to:

- **Mary O'C. Sheedy**, my sister, for editing the book with me. “Commas are your *friend!*”
- **Toni Silveri** (<http://www.allcoasttalent.com/>) , my voice coach, agent and great friend who knows more about V.O. performance than anyone I know.
- **Frank Frederick** (<http://thevoice.ispeek.org/>), who'll get mad if I tell people what a great friend and V.O. mentor he has been to me, so I won't.
- **Dave Courvoisier** (<http://www.courvo.com/>) , a great newsman, a talented writer (*great* blog), and a wonderful voice talent.
- **Jeff Kafer** (<http://JeffreyKafer.com>), an award winning voice talent with a serious and infectious passion for audio books.
- **Stephanie Ciccarelli** (<http://www.voices.com>) co-founder of her company, whose personal and corporate dedication to customer service still truly amaze me.



Help Me!

How will this e-book help me?

This free e-book could easily be much longer if I dared cover **every single item a new or emerging voice talent needed to know** about working in voice over. *That* book has been written and rewritten by talented folks smart enough to get paid for it.

However, a few of those books offer a kind of “anyone can do it” spirit to voice over which concerns me. From a performance and business stand point, my experience has shown me that everyone **does not** have the talent to be in voice over.

My desire here is to take a prospective voice talent (you) back a step and help you decide if **you really want to be or should be a voice talent**. That’s a topic I *haven’t* seen honestly addressed.

How will this e-book help me?

It's easy to understand the allure of voice over today. First, there's the fun of performing in voice over, and boy, it sure looks easy enough to just talk and get paid for it.

Then there's the enormous growth of technology which has allowed **people to develop their creativity** in a variety of ways like graphic design, web sites, video and audio production.

Creating broadcast quality audio once required a really substantial financial investment, but today almost anyone can do it fairly inexpensively.

With technology no longer an obstacle, some see voice acting or performing **voice overs** as an easy way to make money.

How will this e-book help me?

However, **successfully navigating the waters of the professional voice over world** is not as easy as simply producing some audio on a computer and making an MP3 file.

There are **questions** you need to ask yourself, talents and skills within yourself that you need to assess, and time considerations you need to be willing to commit to if you would like to make some real money as a voice talent.

Don't worry, *The Voice Over Entrance Exam* won't contain essay or multiple choice questions, as the title might suggest. This e-book *will* provide **an overview** on the big questions to consider and some **resources** for you to work with should you decide voice over can be less of a hobby and more of a **career** for you.

How will this e-book help me?

Finally, let me be clear that messages in this e-book are **not meant to be primarily negative or at all dismissive** of anyone's genuine quest to be a professional voice over talent. I truly respect your passion for voice over as I share it.

But with over 27 years of professional voice over experience, I want to **help you avoid the mistakes** I've consistently seen new talents make. Some mistakes are made because a V.O. lacks training, business acumen, and some because they simply don't have the raw talent to perform voice over professionally. Some of these challenges you can work around, and some are deal breakers.

I trust you'll take all this advice, apply as you see fit, and make the right decision for your career. **I hope this e-book helps you.**



Failure *Is* An Option

Just so we're clear

First-year medical students, law students, police cadets...almost anyone who trains in a profession is warned that **more than a few students who begin their training will ultimately quit** before the training is completed. The same is probably true for voice talents, though those stats aren't tracked.

Rather than some rah-rah book about all the potential there is in this business, **I want you to know the realities.**

Most people who enter into the voiceover field find very little success professionally or financially.

So here's your first question: are you looking to get into voice over for the money or the art? You may have to choose.

Understand the risks

Certainly voice over is **an immensely rewarding field** where talented performers with a passion for the art of voice acting can enjoy a great sense of purpose and accomplishment.

The creativity voice over offers, the chance to be paid for something you'd probably do for free (because you love it so much), is seductive enough to make otherwise smart people make possibly bad business decisions. **But voice over is a business - know the risks.**

Only a relative few voice talents make significant livings. Most **voice talents make an average to below average living** from their V.O. earnings. Yet more people dive (unprepared) into the V.O. pool every day landing face-first in disappointment.

Stop dreaming and start thinking

To help you decide how serious you are and explain **how serious you need to be** to make a career for yourself in voice over, the *Voice Over Entrance Exam* was created.

This **brief and honest overview** of the voice over business – good and bad - will force you to focus on your abilities and commitment as a performer and...a business owner! Much of it is stuff I wish someone had told me years ago when I started.

Honesty *can* be harsh, but by creating an honest assessment here of your potential in the industry and how you might fit in to it, you can **ascertain your probability of success now**, not later.

I sincerely wish you great success on your quest. Let's go!



Reality Check

This may hurt a bit...

“I’ve been told I have a **nice voice** for commercials.”

- ▶ *About 250,000 other people have been told the same thing.*

“Clients have often commented on **how soothing my voice is...**they think I should be on the company voice mail.”

- ▶ *Is that voice choice a matter of quality or convenience?*

“My neighbor said I had a **voice as deep** as James Earl Jones and that I should be a TV announcer.”

- ▶ *Turns out that James Earl Jones gets most of the James Earl Jones voice work.*

You need to listen to yourself...

> *INTERNALLY*

Don't be brave, prideful or boastful when you answer this question:

“How did the responses to those statements on the previous page make you feel?”

Did they hurt?

Did they make you angry?

Did you ignore them?

This *also* may sting...

“Nice”, “soothing” and “deep” are nice compliments for your voice, but it is **highly unlikely** you’ll make one dime off your voice no matter what your “neighbor”, “clients” or “someone” thinks.

They are the listeners, but they are NOT the audio production **decision makers**.

To the paid, professional voice talent, one matters **much more** than the other.

You need to listen to yourself...

> *EXTERNALLY*

Make a recording of your voice using any recording device you have handy. Take an ad from the newspaper and read it like an announcer.

Play it back for yourself.

How do you sound?

If you're like most of us when we started, you'll wonder whose voice you just recorded because that voice *couldn't be yours!*

Tough love for a tough business

If you want to pursue voice over on either a full or part time basis, get ready for **some pretty *personal* rejection**. You will likely get 5-10% of the jobs you audition for...**AFTER** you're truly established.

It will be **your voice** they are rejecting.

It will be **your performance** they are rejecting.

It will be **your script interpretation** they are rejecting.

That's pretty personal stuff - some folks can't take that for very long or at all. It's supposed to be business but it can *feel* personal!

You could truly have a lousy voice

Also, **you may not have the performance, vocal, or interpretative skills to be a professional voice talent.**

Whether you're chasing your dream or merely chasing a buck, you need to **review with some honest, omniscient judges** whether you have the skills necessary to succeed in the business.

If you hear a chorus of "no's", it's probably not people trying to hurt you. In fact, they are helping you to stop spinning your wheels, or worse, keeping you from embarrassing yourself." Be honest with yourself, LISTEN.

Don't let your ego force the rest of you into an embarrassing decision you will certainly regret.



Puzzled

Why did you *punch* me?!

It's possible that **some readers didn't make it to this page** after reading the last 15 pages or so for any number of personal reasons...they may be done with this e-book, or they may be done with voice over.

And that's a **good thing**.

While voice over isn't as serious a business as, say, being a soldier, it is a very real business, in which - from a strictly career stand point - some people might not survive.

The wash-outs didn't or wouldn't pay close enough attention to basic training. **Sadly for them, that's where the fun starts.**

Help is on the way

The reason one has to look honestly at their own talent and commitment to voice over is because of the **enormous and growing talent pool** of people performing voice over.

Many of them are - in *my* opinion- unprofessional, talentless hacks who believe plugging a microphone in a USB port and recording on free audio software makes them a pro. Think that's mean? Visit Voice 123[®] and randomly select voice demos. **Some are *unlistenable!***

New entrants into the business who **do** have talent will want to dismiss the hacks. You can't. They do, sadly have an impact on the industry. You can, however, outshine them right out of the gate. **Proper preparation** will be your key difference.



Listen | Practice | Train

Listen | Practice | Train

Here's the performance part of this e-book. It's very basic and relatively short. Why?

One reason is because there are dozens of books on voice over performance and acting...I don't currently see the need for another one (ditto for why I also don't go into reviewing audio gear here).

Second, as an "Entrance Exam", the goal is to ensure you have the basic, rudimentary skill set to go forward and pursue your voice over dream. If you don't have *that basic skill set*, my hope is that you don't go forward with a dream you will likely never realize.

You'll have to be honest with yourself, then, as to whether or not you should proceed with the rest of this book...and your career.

Listen | Practice | Train

If you did take to heart the advice at the beginning of this book, and you truly ARE ready to proceed, then here we go.

I'll start with a personal bias. With performance, I think we all **learn better working with and learning from people** rather than reading a book. The interplay between student and teacher or your fellow students if it's a group class will help expand your knowledge and understanding of voice over performance beyond measure (You'll hear this more in the upcoming "Train" section.)

So enjoy some of the basics I share with you here to help you get started, **but** know that I heartily recommend in person or phone training with a recognized, professional teacher!

> Listen

It's funny, sometimes, when you listen to singers and musicians talk about going to the Grammy® Awards. When they're asked what most excites them about going to the awards, they say how they can't wait to hear live performances from nominated artists. **They respect their fellow artists**, and they love the art they create.

While not often invited on the red carpet, voice talents respect and love the work of other voice talents, and you had better believe **they listen to their fellow professional voice talents all the time**...whether it's via broadcast or by listening to demos on web sites. It's part appreciation and part learning too.

Listen

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. While my suggestion is *not* to try and sound like another voice talent, *do* learn from them.

For those new to voice over, **listen to as many voice over demos as you can.** At first you may be captivated (or even intimidated...don't be) by the amazing professional styles you hear.

Soon, though, I want you to **listen with a critical ear,** asking/answering some questions and considering how what you're learning from these demos could apply to your future on-mic performance, your script interpretation, and even your own demos.

Listen

With the **voice over demos** you listen to, consider:

- > What do you like or dislike about the voice you're hearing?
- > What qualities make the voice unique? Are there ANY unique vocal qualities?
- > Do you notice anything special about the quality of the performances on the demo? What stands out for you?
- > How would you rate the production quality of the demo?

Know that when a casting producer hears your demo, **these are the kinds of conscious and sub-conscious questions he/she will focus on.** How will your work compare?

> Practice

Remember how earlier in this e-book I asked you to record your voice and play it back? I noted how most folks think they sound weird...*they* are NOT used to hearing their recorded voice.

That's likely because they haven't regularly practiced, rehearsed, and become **familiar with their own voice**. They've simply allowed their ego to be stroked by someone who complimented their voice, and they've decided that compliment alone was reason enough to begin a voice over career. Ugh!

On the TV show *American Idol*[®], the audience loves to watch the awful singers, most of whom think singing in the shower constitutes proper rehearsal. Uh, such ridicule happens in V.O. too.

Practice

Should you progress in your career, the exercises you execute in your professional voice over classes can/should get pretty involved (breathing, speech, diction, character development etc.). Your teachers will also help identify any bad habits that may be germinating inside you. All are critical things that you must expose yourself to so your performance consistently improves.

Here, we're going to keep things MUCH more basic.

There are some very fundamental but, I think, essential **goals you must establish** for yourself as you practice. You may think they are silly or repetitious - you may not want to do them. You don't have to, but then please pursue some other career because *you've just decided you're **not** committed enough to be a V.O.*

Practice

Goal #1: Read out loud in full voice (as if you were performing on-mic) every day for at least 15 minutes. Read advertising copy from a magazine and make it a commercial; voice copy from a text book as a narration; create voices from a children's book as a character voice read....but do it. You must develop a basic comfort level with your performance voice. In training (which I'll address coming up) you'll get properly tweaked on performance.

Goal # 2: Study your copy. Whether ad copy, a text book or a fable – learn to read *before* you speak. You must come to understand what the words are trying to convey *before* you present them. Ask “who is the audience?” & “what is my message to them?”

Practice

Goal #3: Record your practice sessions. You don't need any expensive equipment for this, as I've previously noted. Your objective is to practice the same copy over a period of time...more likely *days* not hours....so that you can **compare** your initial performance against reads done after much rehearsal. You should not only notice a difference in performance, but an improvement as well. If you don't, that might be a **yellow flag** for you.

As with anything new, new voice talents need to **develop a comfort zone** and working towards these basic goals will help. Professional, personal training will then help you truly perform.

> Train

I don't think I know of any professional voice talent who has not sought out professional voice over training. Some do so sporadically and some consistently, but each with the goal of having **an omniscient set of ears gauge the current state of their voice over abilities.**

As you begin your quest for a career in voice over, seeking and securing qualified, professional training is job #1. Your abilities as a voice talent must be critically analyzed. For some, the news will or should bring an end to their voice over dreams. Look, if someone you trust cares enough to be honest with you, **you must have enough self-respect to be honest with yourself.**

Train

For some others, the news will be better. The results may range from “*needs much work but can improve*” to “*only slight tweaks will be required*”. But don’t stop training. Ever!

The next question is: **how do I find a professional voice over teacher, coach or trainer?** There are a few things to look for, but ultimately it will boil down to chemistry...how you react and interact with a potential coach in that first meeting should tell you a lot. Listen to your gut when all else fails.

There are a few simple suggestions I would offer on your search.

Train

#1 Be clear on what you want to achieve from your training. There will likely be no crystalline moment when a coach says “now, you are a voice talent!” So don’t make that an objective.

A realistic goal might be being able to more accurately interpret scripts. Another example might be to become a character voice actor. A third possibility might be to add more vocal versatility to your repertoire – a case in point might be a Top 40 disc jockey who would like to be able to read copy in an “everyman” voice and not his radio voice (yes, even broadcasting professionals can experience voice over challenges).

Talk it over with your potential coach, and see what she says.

Train

#2 Decide whether you'd prefer in-person training or over-the-phone (remote) coaching. Everyone learns differently, and only you know what works best for you. There are pros and cons to each approach.

In-person training allows the teacher and student to **study both verbally and non-verbally**...talents gesticulate almost as much as movie actors...you just don't see it. For some, seeing *is* believing.

Remote coaching sometimes offers students **a wider range and, occasionally, a better caliber of instructors from larger markets.** For some, variety is the spice of life.

Train

#3 Consider whether you would prefer to train one-on-one with a coach, or if you would benefit from a group session. Some folks want the chance to strictly focus on their own needs and have the **undivided attention of a coach**. This allows the student to completely direct their own course of study. Others enjoy **learning in a group environment** where they can get direct training but also benefit from observing the successes and misses other performers experience. These groups become very collaborative – sharing in each others successes and commiserating when things go off kilter.

The only right answer here is the one you choose.

Train

#4 Ask for references and seek referrals. You will quickly surmise whether this coach has been at this a day or a decade. An honest, legit coach will have no problem with these requests.

The provided references are going to be from voice professionals. Ask them what they were looking to get out of their training, and if they got it (or are getting it).

From those same calls to references or with other voice over professionals you may know, ask them about any voice coaches that they know of or are comfortable referring you to, based on their personal experiences.



Voice Over INCORPORATED

More business than performance

If your desire to **own your own business** isn't at least as strong as your passion for performing voice over, you've got a true career conundrum.

Accounting, sales, marketing, operations, engineering and more are all **your** jobs in a voice over business, not *kinda, sorta...fully your responsibility*. On average, more of your day will be taken up with these tasks than actual recording.

Sure, you could outsource these responsibilities but all your business expenses come from only one place – your profit line.

Can you **manage** a business? Should you manage a voice over business? Let's consider a couple of issues.

Have money to make money

This fact is true whether you want to start a voice over or a plumbing business...there are **tools you need** to perform your job, there are **services you must access** to start your business, and you'd be hard pressed to do your job without them. Be smart – make a budget, a business plan, and find start up cash.

Sure, you can skimp on some things if you want to start on the cheap. You could get an inexpensive microphone...but your voice will sound like crap. Hmmm, ok you could get some generic looking business cards or skip printing them all together. What kind of impression does that leave with prospects? Uh, web site? Yup, you better have a good one – it's your introduction to the world.

Where are those pesky clients?

Technology's great blessing on the voice over business is that it gives us tools to perform our craft and **present ourselves as open for business to the world**. Its curse is that marketing to the world is expensive and time consuming.

Complicating things further are the **thousands of people marketing themselves as voice talents** to the world with a great brand, strong demos, and an established client list.

Besides possibly being unsure about *how* to develop your brand, you also have to decide *where* to direct your marketing efforts – web, direct mail, e-newsletters? And to *which* audience – video producers, ad agencies, small business? Got a map?

You are the business

You may have heard the quote “If you don't drive your business, you will be driven out of business.”

What many well-meaning and talented voice professionals forget or try to ignore is that voice over is a business and must be run as such. Funding a business and managing the marketing are **only two elements to a fairly involved equation**. Be prepared to handle all aspects of your business – it's a lot of work!

Many performers are not **business savvy**...it's just not how they're wired. But some performers are. Know where you fall on that scale and be prepared to *manage around it*. You'll have a better chance for V.O. success if you do.



Final Thoughts

Why do I bother?

As my *audio'connell voice over talent* clients and my *Voice Over Workshop* students will tell you, I don't do very much for free. My talent and my knowledge have value...fair financial remuneration validates my professional worth. I hope that is how you view or will view your voice over talent and professional experience too.

But when I see people traipsing along, blissfully ignorant of their imminent encounter with a very high cliff, I just know I have to stop and warn them – no charge. Should they fail to heed my free advice, I wish them good luck and God bless.

Quantity vs. quality

That's why I created this e-book. I care very much for my profession and the great people that practice it. But *quantity* is undermining *quality* in the voice over business.

Quantity doesn't mean competition. There really is no competition in voice over as **actors are only ever competing for the subjective ear of the producer doing the hiring.** He or she decides how talented any voice talent is based only on that producer's opinion that day; since no voice talent can control that, I believe we work in a business pretty much void of competition.

The issue of quantity in voice over really results from people's access to technology and ignorance of what the art of V.O. involves.

Don't Tread On My Industry

Seeing voiceover as a **quick way to make a buck**, people assume modern audio technology will make them appear talented enough to succeed in voice over. Anyone can read out loud, right?

No... **technology is merely a tool**. A truly professional voice talent offers a performance and business skill set that overwhelms mere technology in usefulness and profitability.

So in addition to the slap in the face these new audio technophiles get when sacks of voice over cash ***don't*** show up at their door, their unprofessional presentation (from both a performance and business stand point) also diminishes the value of my profession for the past 27 years. That's *not* OK with me.

Need (not want) a V.O. career

If you do not possess the very basic performance skills to be a voice talent, no matter how much you want to be a professional voice talent, you're chances for success are very slim. I fully understand your disappointment, and I **am** sorry...but please above all else, ***don't lie to yourself***. Face facts.

Should the talent be within you, you must not just *want* to be a voice talent, you must need to be in voice over (like you need air to breathe). Please seriously consider that difference.

The quantity of great quality voice talents with experience and connections is enormous. You'll be starting from scratch. You can make a career of it, but you'll need drive to thrive. Enjoy the ride!



Some* Resources**

** Not ALL, so don't be mad if you're not on the list*

*** Strictly from my personal experience/usage or those of industry professionals whose opinions I trust*

> Resources

Great Voice Over Business Reading

The Art of Voice Acting by James R. Alburger

Secrets of Voice-Over Success by Joan Baker

Voice for Hire by Randy Thomas & Peter Rofé

The Sales Bible by Jeffrey Gitomer

Swim with the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive by Harvey Mackay

How to Become a Rainmaker by Jeffrey J. Fox

The Voice Over Entrance Exam by Peter K. O'Connell*

* Having now read this free e-book, you can cross this one off your to-read list. Congratulations.

Resources

Great Voice Over Business Browsing

The Voice Over Bulletin Board <http://www.vo-bb.com/>

Voice Overs.com Forum <http://www.voice-overs.com/forum/>

Voiceover Universe <http://irockthemicvo.ning.com/>

The Voiceover Boblog <http://bobsouer.com/blog/>

Voice Over Times <http://www.voiceovertimes.com/>

Yahoo Voiceover Group <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Voiceovers/>

Voxmarketising* <http://www.voxmarketising.com>

** That would be some shameless self-promotion of my blog*

Resources

Great Voice Over Teaching

Pat Fraley – *Pat Fraley Teaches**

Debbie Munro – *Mic-N-Me Workshops**

Stevie Vallance – *Tooned In Workshops**

Toni Silveri – *W.N.Y. Voice Actors Workshop**

Marice Tobias – *The Voice Whisperer*

Nancy Wolfson – *Braintracks Audio*

Peter O'Connell – *The Voice Over Workshop***

* *Professionals with whom I have personally studied...and paid my own way, thank you very much!*

** *Again, shameless self-promotion*

About the ~~goofball~~ author

Peter K. O'Connell began his announcing career in Dayton, OH at WVUD-FM (now WLQT) and later at WLVL-AM in Lockport, NY serving in various capacities at both radio stations, including afternoon-drive news announcer, disc-jockey and commercial production manager (producing, writing and providing voiceovers for station commercials and promos.)

It was during this time that Peter established audio'connell Voice Over Talent (www.audioconnell.com), which today continues to provide professional voiceover services for national and international clients. audio'connell Voice Over Talent also coordinates and assists in the casting of professional female voice over talents.

audio'connell's International Voice Talents (www.internationalvoicetalents.com) is a casting service the company provides for corporate and individual producers who need foreign language professional voice talents as well.

Peter also owns and is the primary instructor for audio'connell's Voice Over Workshop which provides professional voice over training to novice and experienced voice talent around the world. His companies are all a part of O'Connell Communications, LLC.

From his studios in Upstate New York, Peter's voice over talents have been heard in local markets across every state in America, in each of the country's top ten broadcast markets as well as on many national commercial and corporate narrator projects. London, Sydney, and Toronto are just a few of the international markets where his voice talents have been prominently featured in productions.

He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Radio and Television Communication from the University of Dayton (OH). A pathetic (yet dedicated) golfer, Peter O'Connell lives with his wife and children.

