

A Handbook for Audio Storytelling

The fundamentals of telling stories
with sound.

More information:
www.soundstory.info

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Everyone has a story to tell.



For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by oral histories, radio broadcasts and the power of the recorded human voice to reach across time and space. There is something deeply intimate and powerful about this method of one-to-one communication.

A Handbook for Audio Storytelling evolved out of a fascination with sound, audio production and storytelling.

Today, free software and inexpensive digital tools have made it easier than ever to record the world around us, and to tell our stories using sound. I hope this handbook and the accompanying website will help you get started telling yours.

Getting Started



You will need these three things to begin making stories with sound:

- 1. Some kind of digital recorder.**
- 2. Access to a modern computer with USB ports, a sound card and memory card reader.**
- 3. A decent set of headphones.**

A good inexpensive [microphone](#) is a nice tool to have too, but it is not absolutely necessary.

Selecting a Digital Recorder

Starting out, you can use anything that will record audio. You can even use your iPhone, or Android phone if you have one. A cheap digital recorder will set you back \$50 - \$200, depending on quality and features. It all depends on your budget and what makes you comfortable. Just make sure that your audio recorder has a mini jack to output sound and a mic jack to accept an external microphone. Flash recorders are the easiest to use, because you can transfer the audio directly to your computer using an SD memory card.

Of course it is entirely possible to record using analog equipment. Just remember that you will have transfer the audio to your computer for editing. This means you will have to re-record your into your computer in real time. This it takes a lot of time, and requires an audio patch cable. Avoid doing it, if possible.

You can find an incredible amount of useful information about all types of digital recorders here at Transom.org's "Tools" page.



Using Headphones

Headphones are essential equipment. You need decent headphones in order hear exactly what your microphone hears while you are recording. To understand the difference, try recording an interview without headphones, then go back and listen to your recording afterwards using them. Small things that you don't notice when you don't use headphones – like wind noise, noise from clothing, or microphone handling noise can ruin your final product.

Stay away from earbuds. Try to find a set of inexpensive closed-ear headphones for recording in the field. Try the [Sony MDR-V150 Monitor Series Headphones](#) (\$15). Also, an inexpensive headset/mic combo will work for voice over work and for audio editing in a pinch.

Selecting a Microphone

The two microphones listed below are both indestructible workhorses. You can't go wrong with either one.

	Shure SM58 Dynamic Cardioid Microphone link Average price: 50-\$100 This microphone is nicknamed ‘the hammer’ by radio reporters. It is inexpensive, super-durable, and no phantom power required. an sound boomy or dull if not positioned correctly. It is somewhat susceptible to plosives (“P” popping) and wind.
	Electrovoice 635A Dynamic Omni-directional Microphone link Average price: 50-\$100 This microphone is super-durable, resistant to wind plosives and handling noise. Because of its low output, it can sound thin. Indestructible.

What is the best microphone for small flash recorders?

Most flash recorders will give you better results if you use a small condenser microphone, like the Technica 8010. This model has an omnidirectional pick-up pattern similar to more expensive professional mics. It costs about \$160 new, but you can also find one used on eBay, for less. Other microphones can be good matches as well, but as a rule, a higher-output mic like this one will give much better results with digital flash recorders.

An incredible amount of good information about microphones can be found [HERE at Transom.org](#)

Essentials of Editing Audio



Tools for Editing Audio

Digital audio editing software used to be expensive and difficult to master. Now there are so many choices, it's hard to know where to start. There are several free editing programs that have everything you need to edit your story start to finish.

If you have an iPhone or Android phone, it may not be necessary to use a computer to do your editing. There are free audio editors available for download from the [App Store](#) or the [Android Market](#), that will allow you to put a story together in minutes. It's your choice how to proceed.

For the sake of this manual, let's assume that you will use a personal computer to perform your audio editing. Let's look at some free tools available online:

Free Audio Editing Software

1. [Audacity](#)

Audacity is an open source audio editor that is available for multiple platforms, including Windows, Mac, and Linux/Unix. It is the most popular free audio editor in use today mainly due to its excellent set of tools. Audacity is compatible with MP3, WAV, AIFF, and OGG file formats. You can use Audacity to record live audio, or to convert analog audio like cassette tapes or vinyl records. [More Info](#)

2. [Wavosaur](#)

This compact free audio editor runs on Windows XP, and Vista. It has a good set of tools for editing audio files, has several useful effects, and can handle MP3, WAV, OGG, aiff, and a variety of other exotic audio formats. [More Info](#)

3. [Wavepad Sound Editor](#)

Wavepad Sound Editor is a feature-rich program that supports a good selection of file formats, including MP3, wma, wav, flac, ogg, real audio, and more. The program has an intuitive interface that allows you to cut, copy, and paste. Wavepad also includes rudimentary noise reduction, click/pop removal, and basic effects like echo and reverb. The program also includes its own CD burner function. [More Info](#)

4. [DJ Audio Editor](#)

This is a very basic MP3 file editor. The program's interface is clean, well laid out, and simple. This program is ideal for the home user who needs the basics and nothing more. DJ Audio Editor only supports the MP3 format, but it's efficient and easy to use. This is a good editor for down-and-dirty MP3 edits (ringtones for example) , It has the basic cut, copy, and paste tools to get the job done without a lot of fuss. [More Info](#)

5. [Power Sound Editor Free](#)

This is a great looking audio editor with some unique noise reduction tools such as voice breath reduction which can be useful if you want to clean up voice recordings. The downside to this program is that the free version only allows you to save your processed files as Wav files. Upgrading to the deluxe version unlocks more features. [More Info](#)

How to get your audio into the computer

There are three basic ways to do this:

1. Use the USB cable to transfer files from your recorder to your computer.
2. Remove the SD or other memory card from your recorder, then place it in the memory reader of your computer. Find the memory card on your computer and transfer the audio files.
3. Use an audio patch cable

Tips for Interviewing



Being There

Interviewing is a fundamental skill of audio storytelling. When you are recording, it is critical to be present in the moment with your subject, in a way that will allow that person to communicate without reservation or distraction. It is important to establish a level of trust and respect with your subject, or the interview will go nowhere. This involves doing your homework, being prepared for the interview and acting confidently. Here are is a short list of things you can do to to make things go smoothly: Arrive early. Be familiar with your equipment. Be prepared for the unexpected. Make yourself familiar with your surroundings. Introduce yourself clearly. Make eye contact and explain everything you are doing. Be yourself. Smile.

Setting up the Interview

Make sure to be clear about where and when you will meet your subject. If possible, choose a location where you have been before, and you are comfortable recording. If that's not possible, and you're not sure how a recording might come out at a potential

location, go there beforehand and record some audio with your headphones. If there are problems with the recording (ie. the hum of an air conditioner, too much traffic noise, too much crowd noise) contact the subject and explain the problem, then suggest a different location. Always send a confirmation email to the person you'll be interviewing at least two days in advance. Always attach the original email if possible, or cut and paste the original time and location so there is no mix-up.

Learn to Juggle Tasks

To become a good field interviewer, you must develop the capacity to do two, three, or four things at once. As you begin gathering audio in the field for the first time, you will find yourself distracted by a host of variables that you never thought about before: Are your recording levels set correctly? Is the recorder working? Is your microphone placed correctly? Are you facing the wind? Are your batteries fully charged? Did you bring extra batteries, or battery packs? Do you have enough onboard memory to keep recording, if the interview goes longer than you expected? Did you pack spare memory cards? Is there distracting background noise that might render your recording worthless when you try to edit it?

Let's assume you are halfway through the interview, during an especially captivating piece of audio, your subject's cell phone rings." That's funny," you think, "I remember asking my guest to turn his cell phone off before the interview began." Wait. *It's your cell phone.* Ugh. You recover, and ask the question again. Now the interview takes an unexpected turn. How closely were you listening to what the subject just said? Are you prepared to offer a meaningful follow up question?

Know Your Equipment

The number one reason an interview fails is because of technical or equipment error . You should know your recording equipment like a soldier knows his gun. Read the user's manual. Learn what all the buttons and switches do, even if you never plan to use the advanced features of your recorder. Make sure you understand when your recording device is working correctly and when it is not.

Ask the Obvious Questions

Remember that your audience does not know what you know. Your audience does not know what your subject knows either. You must assume your audience knows nothing. Start out with the basics. Think like a reporter. Remember to ask who, what, where, when why and how. Always ask the person to spell their name and give you contact information while you are recording. This is invaluable.

Let Silence Happen

Don't feel compelled to fill every moment with a question. Some of the best moments

during a good conversation come when people have time to think, and to respond meaningfully. Listen to what your subject is saying. Let silence happen. Give people time to be themselves.

Don't Be Afraid to Ask Again

Don't be afraid to ask the same question in different ways. Sometimes asking in a different way will get a better result.

Get People Moving

A good way to get people to feel less nervous about an interview is to ask them to move around and show you things. This is often more interesting for the listener, too.

Look Around - Take Notes and Take Pictures

Always bring a small notebook and jot down your impressions of your surroundings. These notes will prove invaluable when it's time to put your story together. Walk around and take pictures. They will help you remember what you saw. Keep your photos and notes organized. Scan your notes into digital format. Put them along with the photos in the same folder with your audio files. After you have done three more interviews, you'll be glad you did.

Leave Markers, but Always Go Back and Review your Sound

When interviewing a subject, or recording an event, it is sometimes easy to identify or "hear" the key moments as you are recording them. For most people starting out, hearing the bite is the biggest challenge. Decent quality consumer grade and professional digital audio recorders will allow you to leave a digital marker during the recording session. The "Mark" button on your recorder will add a small digital stamp to the audio file which can be helpful in leading you back to the moments that are most memorable during your recording. But don't make the mistake of relying on those markers alone. Review your audio. Transcribe important interviews, then read them again later. The interviewing process is a highly subjective one. It's easy to overlook a great moment, if you pre-judge your audio. Listen to your whole recording.

Be Prepared, and Roll with the Punches

When you first start out, things will go wrong all the time. There are a hundred ways to ruin a recording, or sour an interview. Anyone who tries to make stories using sound can confirm that fact. Talking to people is easy. Recording people is a different activity. Unfortunately, unless you are interviewing your Mom, your spouse, or your cat - you will probably have only one shot at getting it right. In the real world, there are few "do-overs." You need to make your interview count the first time through. Don't be nervous. Just try your best to be prepared, and to pay attention.

When things start to go haywire, *and they will...* don't panic. Stop. Take a deep breath. Gather your thoughts. Identify the problem and address it. Keep your sense of humor. Keep going. This gets easier, the more you do it.

Getting Your Stories Heard



The Internet is Your Friend.

Podcasting is the Ultimate form of "DIY" Distribution! Podcasting is an easy, inexpensive way to reach a large number of people on the Web. [Click here to learn more >>](#)

Public Radio and Other Outlets for Audio Storytelling

Public radio programs and local radio stations are often looking for good stories, or for people willing to record events. The organizations listed below can help you learn more about the craft of audio storytelling. Each one offers good resources to help you learn to market your stories to radio programs and online content providers. These organizations are made up primarily of people who make radio stories for a living. Joining one of these organizations is a great way to connect with other people who are interested in audio storytelling.

Public Radio Exchange

[Public Radio Exchange](#) is an online marketplace for distribution, review, and licensing of public radio programming. PRX is also a growing social network and community of listeners, producers, and stations collaborating to reshape public radio. The mission of PRX is to create more opportunities for diverse programming of exceptional quality,

interest, and importance to reach more listeners. <http://www.prx.org/about-us>

Transom.org

[Transom.org](http://transom.org/) channels new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and discusses that work, and encourages more. Transom is a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to pass the baton of mission and good practice in public media. <http://transom.org/>

AIR - Association of Independents in Radio

[The Association of Independents in Radio](http://www.air.org/) (AIR) is a worldwide professional network of 750 producers – both independent and those employed by media organizations – representing an extensive range of disciplines, from NPR news journalists and reporters, to sound artists, station station-based producers, podcasters, gearheads, media activists, and more. The medium of sound is what unites our membership, and in this 21st century world, AIR's members are rapidly diversifying and expanding their craft as they cut new edges in digital public media.

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Learn more on the web at:

www.soundstory.info