



Best Practices in eLearning Audio

10 techniques for using audio to engage users
and keep them hearing what you have to say.

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Introduction

As technology progresses, the ability to use audio in elearning has become much much easier. In fact, so much so, there are theorists out there who claim we're over-using it. Maybe we are. Or maybe we're just not using the "right" audio.

As sound designers and engineers for over 40 years, we've seen the recording industry grow and change. Everyone can record now. They have "studios" made out of closets, corners, or even, it seems, cardboard boxes. They pull in friends and coworkers to be their Talent. And you know, sometimes that's okay. But we would argue that this access to easy audio is not doing your elearning designs any favors when it comes to engagement and effectiveness.

So what, you might ask, would we recommend when it comes to the best ways to incorporate audio into your elearning? Well, here are our top 10:

1. Keep it in focus
2. Sometimes silence really is golden
3. Make it real
4. Not all recordings are created equal
5. A picture is worth 1000 words.
6. Author!
7. Moving beyond narration
8. Money, Money, Money, MONEY!
9. Effective effects
10. Work with the best

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Keep it in focus

Though this first best practice is really about your entire program, it's still the most important element in successfully using audio in elearning. Every good program needs a focus, a mission, an objective. When you have successfully defined your focus, your audio questions (along with everything else) are easily answered.

To create that laser perfect focus, consider asking yourself the following questions:

- Who's my audience?
- What's their demographics, including educational level?
- What do they care about?
- What will make them want to sit through my entire program?
- What do I want their experience to be like?
- What is the tone of the learning—is it a subject that can be handled in a fun and creative way? Or is it a serious subject where too much fun could distract from the importance of the issue?
- How dense/complex is the content? Is the subject detail-heavy? Is it in the arena of "soft skills" that can be difficult to convey through elearning, or is it something simple and straightforward?
- How much control do you want users to have in how they navigate the program?
- If my users could walk away with only one thing from this program, it would be _____.

Now, run your decisions about audio use through your answers. As you'll see in the following best practices, there are many ways to use audio to address all of your focus factors.

Revisit this list often, especially when new decisions need to be made. Keeping a clear focus will help make sure you are using the right audio for your program.



Sometimes silence really is golden

Of course, in our business, we're big fans of audio. But we also understand that it needs to be used in the right places, and for the right purpose. For example:

- Setting a tone, painting a picture of the concept, environment, or influencing the state of mind of the user are great times to use audio.
- Reflection, assessments, quizzes, and sections where users might want to pause and process information are times where silence is the better option.

There's no rule that says you have to use all one or the other either. In fact, it's actually the most effective to balance both sound and silence throughout the program. Just follow an internal logic, such as 'key learning points are processed by a narrator while interactions have no sound', allowing the user to move through at their own pace.



Keep it real

At this point, most elearning is being created for humans...right? So treat your user like humans. eLearning programs can often be, well, sort of dry. Or even cheesy, simplistic or otherwise eye-roll inducing. The best way to deal with this is audio. Of course a good script is a big part of it, but the technique itself is to anticipate these moments and what people may be thinking and use the audio to reflect those thoughts back to the user. If your narrator acknowledges those thoughts either directly or indirectly, your user knows you're not intending to talk down to them.

This also brings up the point that the narrator should be human, too. The most effective narrators are not the voice of authority, but instead the trusted advisor. A friend—as human as you are—that has learned to appreciate the content, so therefore you should, too. Use real language. And contractions. It's amazing how much the simple use of contractions can do for the approachability of your course.

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Not all recordings are created equal

Does quality really matter? Of course it does. The audio quality tells your users a lot about your program. If users start listening and hear snaps, crackles, and pops, their natural assumption will be that the quality of the content is equivalent to the audio quality they're hearing. They'll tune out without even giving you a chance.



But we're also realistic enough to know that you don't always have the time, budget, and bandwidth to use the highest quality recording out there. So how do you find the right balance for your project? The answer to this lies in your process for the first best practice, *Focus*. If your audience contains non-readers, quality must be high enough that there could be nothing on screen and they would still understand. If you want the experience to be entertaining and attention-grabbing, again, quality should remain high. If your *Focus* tells you that it's a very quick program for very few people, you might be able to get by with a slightly lower quality.

However, we'd have to argue that you should never cross into the territory of low-quality. At that point we ask, "why bother?" In reality, if you can't afford (either in dollars or in bandwidth) to have quality audio, we recommend limiting the audio to some key sound effects, or even not using it at all. Poor audio runs the risk of destroying the effectiveness of even the best program.

And, speaking of quality...

Just like the quality of your audio recording and production, the voices you use can catapult your program from the doldrums of a monotone lecture to a brilliant tale that users want to listen to. Pulling Suzie from the office down the hall into the studio to narrate may be easy, but we guarantee that, unless Suzie happens to do voice-overs on the side, your users will recognize that she doesn't understand most of the content she's trying to teach, that she's simply reading a script, and that she probably doesn't care much about the subject. And that's on top of the basics— does she have a nice voice (that we can listen to for the length of the program) and know how to read fluidly?

Voice talent is truly a talent. If you haven't used a professional voice talent before, you don't know how dramatically the voice of a pro can alter your programs, nor how much easier they can make your lives (and budgets...but we'll get to that later). Their voices have inflection, variety, character. They have resonance, richness, and that certain something that makes us want to listen. Plus, they work quickly and take direction, making your experience as a producer a breeze.

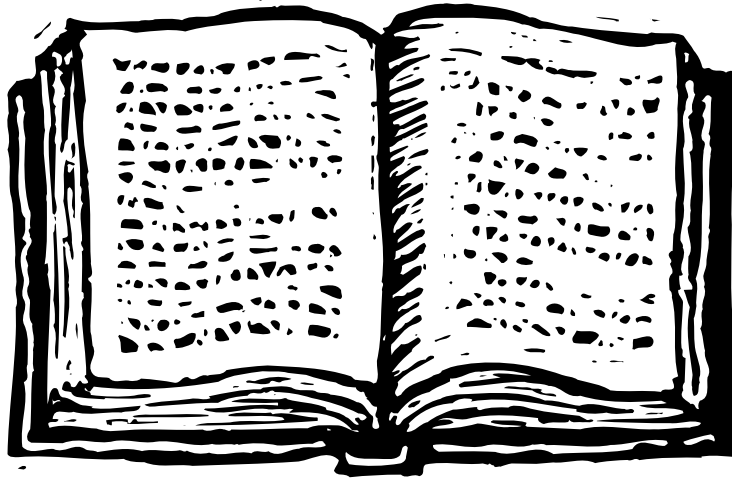


A picture is worth 1000 words

Yeah, this document is about audio, so what are we doing talking about pictures? Well, if the goal is to make the best use of your audio, how you couple it with images on the screen is a HUGE factor in audio's effectiveness.

Let's say you've made the choice to use narration through pieces of your program. What you have on the screen while the narrator is talking can affect the way that users actually listen to your narrator. If you have the entire script on the screen, users are more likely to read it. And not just read along, but read ahead. Most people can read faster than a narrator can speak (especially if the narrator is using inflection and good narration technique—see *Keeping it Real*). It's a natural instinct to read what's put on the screen and most users will have a hard time paying attention to both at the same time, so the text on screen wins.

In order to get users to really hear what you have to say, take all that text off the screen. Use the audio to tell the story, and on the screen visually tell the story with animations, images, or illustrations. Or pull key words from the narration and float them across the screen with a lot of space in between or mixed with your visuals. But just a word or two. Keep it clean. Keep their attention on the learning.



Author!

When it gets right down to it, quality recording and quality voice talent are nothing without a quality script as a foundation. Start again with your focus. With the experience you're hoping to give your users, what's the right tone for the script? For maximum engagement, a script shouldn't be too straight-laced and straightforward if at all possible. Users are more likely to pay attention to a narrator they believe is an expert at the content they are teaching. And, they will have more patience for sitting through an entire program if that narrator isn't a strict professor, but instead a trusted advisor, friend, or colleague. Tell us who the narrator is, if not literally, through their personality.

The biggest element to remember when writing a quality script is to write for the way people speak. This is not grammar-perfect writing. This is not academic writing. Go back to the third best practice and *Keep it real*. Use contractions. And most importantly, read what you're writing out loud several times in the process. This helps make sure your voice talent will be able to read the script smoothly, easily, and with confidence.

Also, a common pitfall of a script is redundancy. Notice we didn't say repetition. Repetition is useful, as any instructional designer will tell you. Repetition is intentional. It reiterates learning points and helps the content stick. Redundancy, however, is often unintentional, overburdening the script with information that could be easily simplified and made concise and meaningful. Keep your learning points clear. Don't try to cram too much into a paragraph or even into a sentence. Guide the user. Share a passion for learning with them. Even if you don't have it for this particular subject. Fake it.



Money, money, money, MONEY!

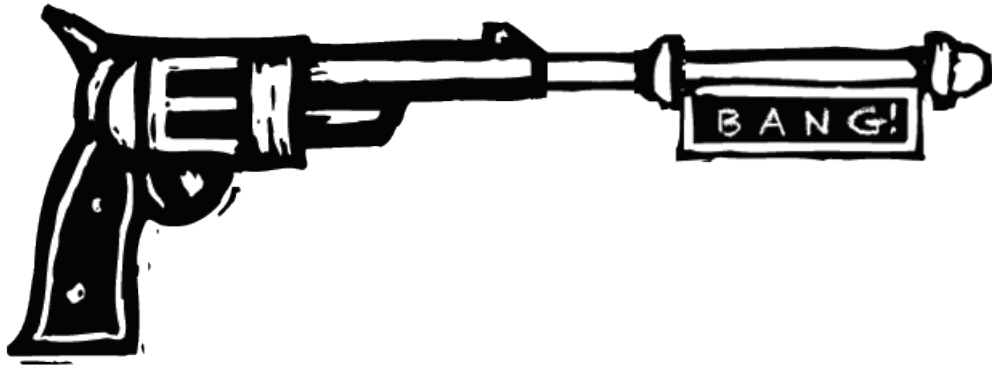
(got the song in your head now?)

Of course we wish we didn't have to work with them, but let's face it, budgets are often a huge factor in our decision making—if not the biggest factor. But here's the best practice around getting quality audio production on any budget:

Don't let your assumptions of expense prevent you from getting bids. You might be surprised.

On the surface, using professionals may seem like it's cost-prohibitive, especially when you're comparing hourly rates of the pros versus the studio in your neighbor's basement. But that's not really comparing apples to apples, is it? Beyond the quality comparison, we have witnessed time and time again that professionals—engineers, scriptwriters, voice talent, etc.—can complete a project in about half the time of a non-pro, and sometimes even less than that. And time equals money. Using professionals may cost more on an hourly basis, but if they are taking half the time, it might be a wash, or, you could even save money!

That's not even including the savings of *your* time. How much cost are you adding to projects in the extra hours you're spending? How much is your time worth?



Effective effects

It's easy to forget about sound effects. Don't. Sound effects can be very powerful, and very helpful, when it comes to both engagement and retention. Well-used sound effects tell a user what they should pay attention to, or they add a level of realism that can paint a more accurate picture, or help them better accept the world within program. For example, use an effect that repeats whenever a major content-processing question is posed on the screen give an auditory cue to pay attention, or the sound of a bustling office behind a fairly simple dialogue to help users to pay more attention to the content of the dialogue instead of whether or not it sounds real.

Just be careful not to overuse effects. Keep them simple. Clean. Clear. And only when they're warranted—when they'll add to the user's experience and learning.

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Work with the best

You are an expert at what you do, but you probably aren't an expert at engineering sound, or casting and directing talent, or script writing. The good news is that there are people out there who are. And just like in *Money, money, money, MONEY!*, sometimes working with them could even save you time and money. Often professionals will be able to find ways to work within your budget.

Of course, not every project needs this level of attention. When you go all the way back to your *Focus*, and when looking at all the factors—how many people will be using the program, how long does the company intend to use it, and how important is it that people be engaged and retain the content—and make your decision accordingly. When longevity, engagement, and retention of content is important, working with professionals will get you there.



And in conclusion...

Audio for elearning is becoming much more common. But why use it if you're not using it in a way that will add value to your program?

Using audio can be a great tool for engagement and retention if you're using it correctly. The trick is to be intentional about your audio use. And, by simply reading this document, you're halfway there.

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About Sound80

Sound80 is a full service audio production facility with a long history of pioneering firsts. We came into existence in 1969 and were, for example, the very first studio in the world to engineer and release digital recordings. This before iPods—before computers even. We've won GRAMMYs and worked with artists like Bob Dylan & Cat Stevens. Our history is important—but we don't live in the past. Today we're still pioneering. As the industry advances, so do we. We've incorporated up-to-the-minute technology and techniques to ensure we can keep up with everything our clients need from us, like adding web and eLearning specialties to our list of capabilities. But one thing that will never change in this age of impersonal interactions is the customer service we provide and the strong client relationships we build. We just feel work gets done better that way—how about you?

To see a demo of our audio in action and learn more about Sound80's elearning and interactive services visit www.sound80.com/elearning, email us at info@sound80.com, or call us at **612-339-9313**.