AIRSHOW

Audiobooks and the Independent Author
Extend your Message and Earn New Revenue
Audiobook Production Demystified by Audio Pros

Airshow's studios are well-equipped for an author to self-produce an audiobook with the support of knowledgeable, experienced engineers in a studio purpose-built for voice-over recording.

Jon Gold has extensive experience recording, editing, and mastering spoken word for a variety of media. Anna Frick began her career with a leading publisher in spirituality, yoga and self-empowerment.

We pooled our thoughts to arrive at some recommendations for a self-publishing author to affordably release their ideal audiobook.

— Ann Blonston, General Manager

Left to right: Jon Gold, Ann Blonston, Anna Frick

A fast-growing market

The ease of creating and retailing audiobooks has led to an explosion of audiobook releases by independent authors and the growth of a vibrant ecosystem for their production and distribution. This trend follows the pattern that independent authors have enjoyed in the ebook marketplace. Self-publishing authors, and in particular those writing in self-help/motivational, spiritual, or business book categories, find a ready audience for audiobooks among the affluent, educated audiobook customer base.

As Amazon's Kindle marketplace is the major retailer of ebooks, likewise Amazon-owned Audible.com's subscription service facilitates audiobook consumption. iTunes is also a prime outlet for audiobooks, offering thousands of titles as downloads. There are at least a dozen more general interest online audiobook retailers, in addition to numerous special-interest sites selling audiobooks to their niche. The audiobook market in the U.S. is estimated at $1.2 billion. By way of comparison, recorded music sales in the U.S. are estimated at around $7 billion annually.
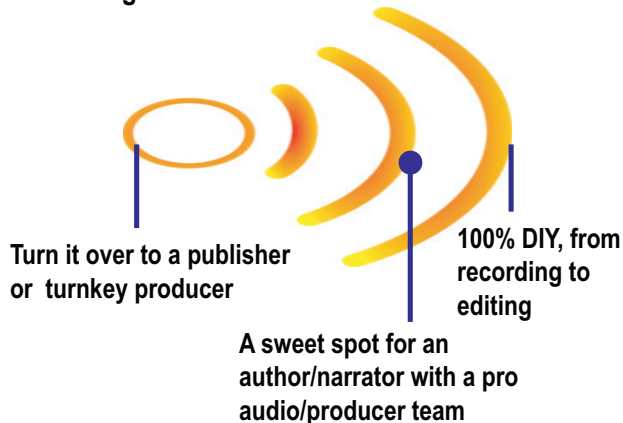
Audiobook authors we interviewed are enthusiastic about repurposing their written works for new audiences. They feel audiobooks give them another content product for their catalogs at a reasonable cost, and an opportunity for their works to be discovered anew.

To make smart business decisions about an audiobook, an author needs to do some market research, as pricing varies widely among genres, retail outlets, and even among release formats. Research includes comparing prices of downloads and CD box versions of audiobooks, as well as learning about the level of production common among publishers in the author's genre.

A contiuum of creative control

In audiobook production, there is a continuum of author involvement with the process, from hands off to 100% DIY.

Range of Author Control of Production

Turn it over to a publisher or turnkey producer

100% DIY, from recording to editing

A sweet spot for an author/narrator with a pro audio/producer team

In a hands-off scenario, an audiobook publisher may afford the author little say in the choice of a narrator or in the resulting audio content, including details like emphasis, pacing, and segment or track divisions. Likewise, posting an ebook to ACX (Amazon's Audiobook Creation Exchange for production and distribution) can yield a narrator, producer, and engineer to take on the project, but the author's level of involvement may be limited, especially if he or she is working remotely with an ACX team.

At the other end of the spectrum is the total creative control that results when the author is the narrator, producer, and recording engineer.

In our discussions with independent authors, we learned that they value both creative control and budget control of their projects. Their appetite for tackling the technical aspects of the audiobook creation process varies.

After describing each of the steps involved in making an audiobook, from pre-production through mastering, we'll apply some realistic time estimates to a 200-page, 50,000-word book.

Pre-production decisions to make

To arrive at some of the decisions you'll be making during pre-production, we strongly suggest that you

listen to other audiobooks in your field. Find peers, competitors, and the superstars in your area of expertise and listen critically to their audiobooks. You'll learn whether you need to use music in your presentation, what clean editing sounds like (and perhaps what bad recording sounds like, too!), and how your own spoken presentation compares to others whose work you enjoy hearing.

1. What is your audiobook content? Will your work mimic your written ebook? Will it be a stand-alone audio product (perhaps based on a successful talk or seminar you developed)? If your ebook relies on charts or exercises, your audiobook may benefit from text supplements or online video supplements your listeners can access.

Whispersync™ may inform your production decisions. Whispersync™ is the Amazon technology that enables a Kindle reader to buy the companion audiobook and switch between the two media. To work together, your audiobook must track very closely with your ebook. This is something to consider as you decide the content of your audiobook.

2. Will your audiobook be released as a digital download only? Or will you also press a CD version? Your decision will be driven by several considerations: the incremental cost to manufacture multi-CD packages, the demographics of your audience, and the sales venues open to you.

If you conduct in-person seminars or sell information to organizations who bulk-buy, then physical audiobooks may be a profitable choice because you have sales venues that will generate retail or near-retail income to you.

If you are going to sell physical CDs, your book will be subject to the CD format's 80-minute maximum length, necessitating decisions about breaks in the audio that may not mirror chapter breaks. If your reading audience skews older (averaging 51+

years), research says you have an audience of listeners who mostly prefer CDs over digital downloads, which are preferred by younger listeners.

3. Who will narrate your audiobook? For fiction it's almost a must to hire a narrator, but in nonfiction you have latitude. Professional narrators often work from home studios and essentially "produce" the audiobook themselves. By virtue of their full control of production, they will be making decisions large and small that will determine the sound of your audiobook.

The decision about who narrates your audiobook may be driven by your judgment of who your readers want to hear, your own reading/speaking skill, and cost. If the audiobook you hear in your head includes your voice, then by all means, follow your muse. Do some test recordings using your mobile device, and critique them. A speaker coach can give you feedback on your readiness to read and help you improve your delivery, before you begin recording.

4. Who will produce your audiobook? The producer's job is to direct the actions of the narrator and the engineer to create the sound of the audiobook. In the studio, the producer is focused solely on the content. Tasks involve establishing pacing, listening critically to the recording as it's being made, calling for retakes, and overseeing the editing of the narrated components into the finished whole. Selection of music, if used in an audiobook, is a producer's task.

If you feel you can be objective about how your reading sounds and make judgments about inflection, pace, vocal traits, and retakes, then you can be your own producer. If you work with a professional engineer experienced in audiobook production, you may find you can perform the producer tasks without compromising your narrator duties.

5. Who will record your audiobook? Do you have a home studio, one with good sound isolation, a recorder you understand, and a good mic? If so, you can be your own engineer, freed from budget constraints for studio rental. If that doesn't sound like fun to you, remember that the plus side of paying to record in a professional studio is that the sonic variables are under control; the work you do—expressing your ideas, effectively conveying your information—will be correctly and consistently captured.

6. Who will edit your audiobook? In a project with a producer, the producer may perform the edits either alone or side by side with the engineer. If you are the producer, your engineer can edit your audiobook in collaboration with you.

Your answers to these pre-production questions will help determine your production process and your budget.

Recording tips for self-producing and narrating authors

Working with professional voice talent can add up to 50% more to an audiobook production budget. Therefore, acting as one's own narrator and producer is a common strategy for an author who is funding his or her own audiobook. Here are tips that can make a real diference in the quality and pace of production, and also make a real difference in the audiobook budget.

1. Be ready for recording.

Rehearse by reading your book aloud—a lot. Make notes in your script about points to emphasize, tricky phrases to pronounce, and pacing. Make sure your script is easy to read—that it's double-spaced in a large enough font, with extra space where there should be an audible pause. If you come to the session very well prepared, expect recording to take about 2+ times the content length.

In other words, for an hour of audio content, expect to spend two or more hours in the studio. This allows for voice rest, content review, and some overdubbing/retakes.

2. Use pro readers' recording tricks:

• Keep recording sessions to a manageable length so that your performance stays consistent and doesn't deteriorate over time. Try working in half-hour segments for no more than a few hours on any given day.

• Read when your voice is at its best. It may be mornings or later; once you know, stick with your voice's best time of day.

• Surrender to your producer (or your collaborating engineer) while in the recording studio. If he or she calls for a retake or offers a suggestion, go with the flow.

• Have your studio menu in mind: drink cranberry juice or eat apple slices between takes to reduce clicks and other mouth sounds that are expensive to edit and often lead to retakes.

• Keep working. Taking weeks-long breaks between sessions can result in an uneven performance. If retakes are done weeks after the original session, they may be harder to edit smoothly into the earlier recording.

Post-production and mastering

Post-production includes editing, overdubs, and retakes. Music interludes, if used, are added in post-production. Mastering yields sonic continuity and includes placement of chapter breaks and other track markers. Mastering tasks include adding room tone in places where there is breathing space, and editing the tops and tails of each chapter, track, or CD-length file to ensure they are faded correctly. Expect post-production and mastering studio time to take about 4 to 6 times the amount of final audio for a polished audiobook.

Post-production

If you are the audiobook producer, you can reduce the time spent in post-production by reviewing the recorded content against your script and making very detailed notes to your engineer for each edit: note the elapsed time, sentence, and word that requires editing. If you hire a professional producer, your producer may also edit the content; the engineer makes only final sonic changes, like smoothing out the producer's edits and mastering the finished recording.

By laying down your best performance during production and reducing retakes, you will save time and money in post-production.

Mastering

Your audiobook will have track marks that may—or may not-—mirror chapters or subchapters. They enable a listener to keep track of where they are and provide a natural stopping point in playback. If your audiobook has exercises, for example, it helps the listener if each exercise has its own track marker so the listener can easily navigate to it. Know where you want to place your track marks.

Audiobook release formats have different specs for file size or track length. Know your technical parameters. Once all of your content markers have been placed and the audiobook is divided up into sections, you can make decisions regarding CD breaks, which should be the final set of decisions you make about your content.

What will your audiobook cost to produce?

Our example audiobook started life as a 200-page book of about 50,000 words and resulted in six hours of finished audio. In our example, the independent author, for budget reasons and a desire for creative control, chose to narrate his or her own work, perhaps with a producer, and with the support of an experienced studio team—like us!

Pre-production

For our six hours of finished audio, we'd expect a producer to spend 12 to 15 hours preparing for recording, some of that time with the narrator.

Recording

A ratio of 2:1 or 2+:1 studio time to audio content is a realistic pace. The time in the recording studio involves the narrator, the engineer, and the producer. Our book can take 12 to 18 hours of recording time for three professionals in a studio. (Typically, the engineer's hourly rate includes the studio itself and all the gear required for the project.)

Post-production

The time required for editing and retakes is hard to estimate in advance. Plan to do a good job as narrator, and post-production may take 2.5 to 4 hours for each hour of audio content, or 15 to 24 hours in our example. If a pro producer is part of the team, the producer may edit outside of the studio control room and involve the engineer and the studio only in a portion of this time. In the scenario where the author is narrator and producer, editing takes place side by side with the engineer in the control room.

Mastering

In record production, mastering plays a big part in the overall flow and sound of the music. With audiobook production, mastering involves some sonic polishing (equalization, compression, limiting) but is primarily concerned with the creation of master parts to the specifications of the CD manufacturer and the digital distributor. Expect that mastering will take 1.5 to 3 hours per hour of audio, or 7 to 15 hours in our example.

Master parts

Your audio files will become masters as electronic files or physical CDs or both. The master parts will be formatted for digital download release; formatting includes chapter and subchapter breaks, summing stereo to mono signal, and converting masters to MP3 files per the distributor's delivery guidelines. If you are also releasing a CD version, the files for the CD version will be stereo and compiled into CD-length (maximum 80-minute) sections. Both versions will have your ISRC (the international code that identifies audio and visual intellectual property) attached to each chapter or CD-length master. Once the parts are created, they are quality checked, which involves both a software test and listening from end to end in real time. Budget another $150 to $250 per hour of finished audio for master parts, or $750 to $1,250 in our example.

In our example of the 200-page book, with a two-person production team of engineer and author, a realistic production and parts budget at Airshow ranges from $5,000 to under $7,000.

Manufacturing

For our six-hour audiobook, a five-CD package will be required. Manufacturing a small quantity (500 units) can cost from $6 to $18 per package, depending on packaging type, and you will need artwork for the package and each disc face. CDMP3 is a hybrid format, where a physical disc holds the digital files. Many U.S. auto brands come with in-dash CDMP3 players. The MP3 files created for download are repurposed for this format and in our example would all fit on one disc for greatly reduced manufacturing costs.

Airshow Boulder's vocal recording space and control room.

Audiobook pricing: Can you make money with your audiobook?

We've covered the production budget, but only you can figure out if releasing an audiobook is a good business choice. As you research the audiobooks of your peers and of top sellers in your field of expertise, you will be able to refine the pricing and royalty information we provide here.

What's the retail price of an audiobook? How much can a self-publishing author earn? That five-CD, six-hour audiobook might retail via Amazon or other large retailers for $18 to $24 in CD form, or $15 to $18 as a download. (By comparison, the ebook might sell for $8 or $10.) Audiobooks in CD form vary widely in price; check some online prices in your topic area.

When you sell CDs or downloads directly, either in person or via your website, you retain most of the revenue, save for fulfillment and payment-processing costs. Selling audiobooks via digital download only, through Audible and iTunes, yields a top royalty of 40% of the retail price. Your Kindle ebook customers can buy the Whispersync™ companion for just $2. While smaller general-interest retailers and niche retailers have varying royalty rates and pricing structures, expect that the bulk of your sales will come through your own channels or the two majors.

Considering releasing an audiobook?

We're happy to explore all the options for assembling the right production team for your project. Please contact Ann Blonston in the Boulder studio: ann@airshowmastering.com 303 247 9035.