

VOICEOVER

Got Voice?

Think you have what it takes to compete with the pros? Get thee to a class.

By Heidi Schooler

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I've been asked many times over the years, "How do I break into voiceover?" It's my hope to demystify the process and provide insight into what's expected of professional voiceover artists. Having worked as an actor in this field for more than a decade—in addition to performing on-stage and on-camera—I've got a solid handle on what it takes to make it and stay in the game. I look forward to sharing my experience with you and welcome your questions.

First, just because people tell you that you have a great voice, doesn't mean that you can succeed as a voiceover artist. To be a successful voice actor, you need to be a good actor. Yes, your voice is important and it will be your calling card, but it's your ability to create distinct characters and situations through your voice that will get you hired--hopefully again and again. So hone your acting skills before even thinking of trying to work in voiceover. The good news is that while the voiceover world is relatively small and insular compared to other acting fields, there's always room for new talent. Again, the emphasis is on "talent."

Think you've got the acting chops down? Good. Now you're ready for the next step: taking a class or two. As with on-camera or stage acting, proper technique is expected of voice actors and the best way to learn it is to study it. Depending on the type of voiceover work (commercial and animation voiceover are the most prominent), you'll want to find a class that best fits your interests and goals. Besides learning proper technique, a good voiceover teacher can refer you to a demo reel producer when you're ready to compete with the pros.

If you don't know anyone in the voiceover profession who can recommend a teacher, don't despair. Go online to the Voice Over Resource Guide (www.voiceoverresourceguide.com) or purchase a hard copy, published quarterly and available at Samuel French in L.A. or Dramatists Bookshop in New York. This online and print resource lists contact information for teachers, as well as casting offices, talent agencies, recording studios, demo producers, and CD duplication houses. Don't just sign up for the first teacher you speak with. Call as many as you can and ask prospective teachers any of the following questions to determine who might be best to suit your needs.

1. How many years have they been teaching? Do they also cast projects?

Usually, their websites will provide such background information, but feel free to ask. Are they experts in their area you'd like to study in—commercial, animation, or both?

If a teacher also cast projects, this may be a bonus, since once you've completed the class you will have direct contact into that casting director's office. Such teachers/CDs have a good idea of what your capabilities are and if your voice quality or characters would be right for any upcoming projects.

2. Do they have extensive experience as a voiceover artist or are they solely a producer and/or teacher? While there are gifted voiceover teachers and producers who are not actors and that you should consider, I feel there's an extra element of osmosis that translates to a voiceover student when the teacher has been or is also a performer, and he or she can give specific examples by launching into sample characters to prove a point or by showing a certain vocal quality or sound.

Another angle to consider is if the teacher is also a demo reel producer. If so, does the teacher give you a price break on producing your demo reel once you've completed the class? Some teacher/producers may help you save a little in cost for taking your business to them; others may keep these services separate.

If a teacher does not produce demo reels, most instructors can recommend a good producer upon completion of the class. Some teachers will provide you with a list of several choices.

3. What is the length of the class? If your goal, as a beginner, is to learn as much as you can, it's easier to digest a four-six week program versus any kind of intensive, where you may be overwhelmed by too much information at once. Any intensive should only be looked at as "getting your feet wet". Eventually, if you're serious about a voiceover career, you'll need to get into a 4-6-week formatted class to break down all of the information in detail. There's just too much information to cover to study any less. Just be sure each student gets equal time in front of the microphone and adequate time to go over the exercises with the instructor. You'll probably have to take several classes before you start to feel confident in your abilities, so if you start with any kind of intensive, consider a longer four-six week course to further your technique.

4. Does each student get a CD of his or her work upon completion of the class? Many classes will record your progress chronologically from week to week and provide you with (such) a CD. The material is important to review, as you can hear what you sounded like before and after the teacher's notes, and you have the ability to listen to and recall how you specifically changed your voice. For animation voiceover, this is crucial if you are still formulating certain animated characters that you'd like to have in your arsenal. This way, you'll be able to hear all of the nuances of your characters and recreate them flawlessly in the future.

5. With regards to animation, does the teacher provide a concrete method for remembering how to recall characters you created?

When I was starting out, some of the best animation classes left such an impression on me of how to "catalogue" your characters. Time may pass before you get to actually work on a specific character again. If that character is catalogued using a specific method, you won't forget how you created that specific voice or vocal quality. Eventually you'll be able to develop a plethora of characters, and you'll appreciate having an organized system to access the many possibilities of your original voices.

6. What's the cost? Expect to pay anywhere from \$280-\$675 for four to six weeks. Eight-week classes range from \$375-\$750. Weekend classes, seminars, and intensives can range from \$225-\$750. Hourly private coaching varies from as little as \$75 to as much as \$250. NOTE: Animation courses are typically more expensive. Many times, there's added technique and information included in an animation class vs. a commercial class.

(ie.) more "script" material from cartoons handed out, character description sheets for each character, and more new info. to be learned in the same amount of time. It's very similar to an atmosphere like an intensive, because you are creating full characters, and memorizing how to get in and out of them vs. just learning techniques of how to speak on the mic, and/or reading different types of commercial copy.

7. Do classes offer auditing? No, most places don't allow it. The reason being is: these classes are small and the actors rely upon the instructor for the class to be a safe environment to experiment in, so if a person who is NOT taking the class were just observing one night, it would disrupt the dynamic of this safe environment. (It may make the actors uncomfortable and/or not be able to feel like they can really "go for it", due to embarrassment, etc.) There are a few, so I'd advise to phone around, and see which places may allow it or not, if it's needed as a prerequisite.

My next column will focus on proper voiceover technique for commercials. Stay tuned!

Heidi Schooler has lent her voice to such campaigns as Denny's, The Gap, Nissan, Lexus, Fuji, Toyota, United Airlines, Wonder Bread, Hostess Cupcakes, and most recently Walmart and Neutrogena. She's voiced animated characters for Nickelodeon, TV Land, Cartoon Network, Warner Bros., and numerous video games including the upcoming *The Chronicles of Riddick 2: Assault on Dark Athena*. Her recent on-camera credits include *CSI: NY* and a TV spot for OnStar.