# Recording Guide

## Actor Preparation and Rehearsal

Actors need to be able to be natural, clear, and expressive readers. It may be wise to select actors by hearing them read some script lines, by looking away or listening to a recording. The sound should have an appropriate volume and pace. Common mistakes are to speak too softly and quickly, or too far from the microphone. Their voices should be distinguishable from each other, including the host.

Actors need to be able to commit to the work involved, including practicing beforehand and attending rehearsals and recordings. Make the roles and commitments clear from the start.

Print a script for each actor, so that everyone has the same version of the script. They can highlight or mark their own lines, if helpful. They should perform the script as written, without improvising.

It’s important to rehearse the script several times. Ask actors to read aloud their lines to someone in their household. While they don’t need to memorise their lines, they do need to read them in a flowing and natural way.

Ask actors to note any phrases they find awkward or unclear. Update these on the master script and print it for the next rehearsal.

Rehearse the script together, and gather feedback on awkward phrases. The Director will need to use their judgment to adapt the script to suit the actors while maintaining the message.

Do a reading in front of a small audience, ideally by the voice actors that will act for the recording. Gather feedback from the audience, and gauge their level of understanding against the learning goals of the episode(s).

Bible references spoken by the bible pastor and host must be spoken fully, clearly and with a slight pause between book, chapter, and verse (e.g. ‘Genesis, chapter twelve, verses one to 3’ rather than ‘Genesis three one to three’). This will help the audience look up the passage for themselves.

## Equipment

The following sections outline a very simple production with a single microphone and laptop in a standard room. However, you might have access to a fuller recording studio with multiple microphones and trained technicians, in which case you can be guided by them.

Install and learn the basics of Audacity, a free and popular audio editing software tool (https://manual.audacityteam.org/). Newer AI-powered tools such as Descript (descript.com) might be a good alternative.

A laptop, if available, is the easiest to set up for recording.

Obtain a microphone. We have used the Samson CO3U and the Blue Microphones Yeti USB Microphone. These can be plugged directly to a computer via USB and are able to pick up sound on a ‘omnidirectional’ 360 degree pattern.

## Preparing to record

You should allocate half a day for the recording of each episode, assuming that the actors have already rehearsed and the equipment is already set up. Recording requires concentrating and is quite tiring, so plan breaks with a chance to walk and get some fresh air. The first couple of episodes will likely take longer, as you learn how to work together.

Choose a room that is quiet, with doors and windows that can be shut tightly, and with soft furniture and/or wall hangings to absorb sound waves. Mattresses and blankets can help. Clap your hands to check there is no echo.

Consider recording in an authentic setting for each scene. For example, bible study scenes can be recorded in a room in a house where people might meet. Scenes of friends walking and talking outdoors could be recorded outdoors where traffic and people can be heard in the background.

Be consistent in the recording location and set up for each scene setting. For example, all scenes set in a bible study should be recorded in the same room, the same actor layout, and with the same microphone/audio settings.

You will need a table for your laptop.

Put a sign outside every entry, noting a recording is underway and asking people not to enter.

Arrange the recording at a time when it’ll be quite in your recording room (i.e. beware of other scheduled activities, traffic, etc).

It may be wise to announce the recording to people who might be around at the time, and ask them to be quiet or re-schedule their visit.

Ensure everyone has the same version of the script, with page and line numbers.

Have a nearby area where actors can rest and wait without disrupting the recording. There will be times when the actors need to wait. For example, a scene without them is being recorded, or the equipment is being adjusted. They can bring something to do while waiting, but must remain available to return to the recording room when asked by the director. Althought actors should come rehearsed, this is also a time when extra rehearsing can be done between the actors.

Plan and schedule the recording of the scenes according to the setting and characters required - you don’t have to record in chronological order. The ‘Director Guide’ for each episode notes the charactes needed for each section, the word count for each character. Some small segments may only need to be required once and then copied in the editing stage. For example, the host’s reminder to the audience to read the passage with the drama characters. However, it may be simpler to just record each time. Host is always recorded by herself, and so all her lines may be recorded in one session. They can be edited into the episode after all the other recordings have been done. Likewise, Sam’s prayer at the end could be recorded separately. The script styles start each section in a new page, to help record them out of sequence. If you do record the sections of out sequence, ensure you mark when each is complete to avoid forgetting one. Naturally, you might prefer to record the episode in sequence for simplicity, especially if all characters are available in the session and prepared.

These are the characters typically required for each section:

* Intro, Outro: Host, could be recorded separately.
* Life Story Setup: Variable in characters and setting. Will include minor characters.
* Friends Discussion, Life Story Resolution: 3 friends. Resolution might have a (short) flashback scene sometimes.
* Bible Study, Interactive Questions, Questions to Pastor: all main characters.

## Setting up

The audio technician should have the equipment ready and working from the start, so it doesn’t delay the recording.

Place the microphone on the middle of the table. It should be set at roughly the height of the actors’ faces, so it may be helpful to sit it on its cardboard box. If a piece of styrofoam or even a pillow can be placed under it, that will help to absorb any vibration from the table.

Set the microphone’s switches. For example, in the Samson CO3U3:

* Polar Pattern: Circle symbol (called ‘omni’, which will record from all directions).
* Hi-Pass Filter Low frequency block on (broken line, rather than the straight line).
* PAD Switch (sensitivity): 0 (rather than -10dB)

Actors should lay out the script pages for the scene being currently recorded on the table or a stand, so the script is at a 45-degree angle. They should not have to turn pages while the scene is being recorded.

All mobile phones should be turned off (even a silent ‘vibrate’ may affect the recording). All other sound alerts must be disabled (e.g. wall clocks, laptops).

Ensure the laptop is as far away from the microphone as possible, to minimize the noise from the fan. Plug headphones into the laptop for monitoring audio. Check it’s plugged in to the power.

Arrange actors aroudn the microphone, and do a sound check by getting each actor to say one or two of their lines. Check that the volume is OK, usually peaking at the 80% level or so.

## While Recording

Everyone:

* Remain quiet, avoiding background noise: do not flick pens, touch or kick the table, cough/sneeze, move chairs, shuffle paper, etc. These can be picked up by the microphone easily and distract the audience.
* Use line numbers in the script when referring to lines to be discussed.

Director:

* Manage the overall process, giving feedback to actors as necessary.
* Decide to re-record a take if necessary.
* Clap or click to mark the start or finish of scenes and ‘takes’. This will help the editor identify segments.
* Identify each take. This can be done digitally on the laptop by the audio technician, or by the director by clapping once, speaking the episode number, section name, and take number, then clapping again.
* Have a clear hand signal for when recording is started. For example, raise your hand when you’re about to start, making eye contact with actors and the audio technician to check they see you, then start the recording while pointing to the actor with the first line.
* Check that actors are sticking to the script.
* Stay alert to the audio technician in case there are technical problems.
* It may be helpful to say outloud the ‘FX/ATMOS’ lines when they come up in the script to mark. Alternatively, you might have a different sound to the start of a take sound. This will help the editor know where to insert the special effects. Naturally, any FX lines spoken by the director should be removed.

Actors:

* Read their lines with a good volume and pace, flowing naturally with other actors (i.e. without unnatural pauses between lines).
* Try to speak in the microphone’s direction. Beware not to look down too much while reading the script.
* Stick to the script’s words, without changing them. Any suggested changes should have been submitted to the producer/director during rehearsal.
* Accept the director’s feedback and follow their requests.
* Bible references spoken by the bible pastor and host must be spoken fully, clearly and with a slight pause between book, chapter, and verse (e.g. ‘Genesis, chapter twelve, verses one to 3’ rather than ‘Genesis three one to three’).

Audio Technician:

* Keep monitoring the sound levels, to check there isn’t too much distortion. Levels should peak at about the 80% level most of the time.
* Signal to the director if there is a problem, but do not speak or stop the recording or the acting. The director should manage the performance.

## Audio Editing and Special Effects

Once the audio is recorded, it’s time to edit the audio and adding special effects. Ensure you back up all your audio files first. This step can take considerable time, depending on the tools and skills available.

Editing includes these tasks:

* Use the labels and/or claps from the director to deliniate each of the scenes and takes.
* Remove any ‘out takes’: takes where a mistake was made.
* Remove any recording of the special effect instructions, if they were spoken for the benefit of the actors.
* As appropriate, remove any ‘uhms’ that the actor might have said, as long as it’s not part of the script. The director should have made the final decision on which take is best.
* Add in the special effects, as instructed by the scrpt.

Special effects are noted throughout the script and will need to be added after recording the actors.

There are two general types of special effects in the scripts:

* FX: Notes a specific sound.
* ATMOS: Describes the background sound of the scene that should continue ‘under’ the dialogue. For example, a city with traffic and people talking in the background or a small crowd chatting after a church meeting. This should be set at a volume level that keeps the dialogue between the main characters clear. The dialogue should be the focus in general, so be careful about anything in the background sounds that may distract the audience.

Some of the special effects were introduced after feedback that the audience found it difficult to understand the different scenes in the episode: the host speaking to the audience, the pastor and friends in their Bible study, the friends going through a situation in their lives outside the Bible study, and the protagonist praying by himself. Special effects thus play an important role in guiding the audience through these scenes.

The following are common special effects with some comments:

* Theme music: A simple happy jingle to start off each episode. This will typically transition into the host background.
* Flashback Intro/Outro: Important signal that tells the audience that the episode is going into a scene with the characters in their life situation, and then out of it. They should sound related but distinct (e.g. two sets of 3-5 bell tones, one going up for Intro and the other going doing for Outro). Mainly used in the full version of the scripts.
* Response prompt: A simple tone that prompts a quick response from the audience without pausing the audio, such as a one-word answer to a question. It’s typically followed by a few seconds of silence to leave space for the response.
* Pause prompt: Needs to be distinct from the ‘response prompt’, and it can be followed with some background gentle music without words.
* Host background: music or simple ongoing sound that signals the host is speaking directly to the audience. Can be faded out in long blocks of the host speaking.
* Prayer background: ambient sound that signal the protagonist praying by himself.

The director and audio technician need to make these special effects authentic to the local setting. The scripts often give general directions, to leave room for local interpretation.

You can record some of these special effects yourself (e.g. a city soundscape or church gathering). Alternatively, there are websites where you can download audio special effects, often for free (please note and follow copyright licensing). These include:

* Freesound: https://www.freesound.org
* Soundsnap: https://www.soundsnap.com

We plan to have a track with special effects for each episode provided as part of the production pack. These have been timed to the English dialogue, so will probably need to be edited to sync with the translated dialogue. The special effects are noted in the script under the labels ‘FX’ and ‘ATMOS’, with instructions on their editing.

The special effects need to be *consistent* across the series, especially those prompting a response from the audience (e.g. question )

Below are some specific notes:

* Phone conversations over speakerphone: Record lines over an actual phone call, or record on the phone then play back, recording with microphone close to phone.
* Announcements from the radio: Actor can record the lines, which can then be played back over a small speaker (e.g. a radio or PC/laptop speakers), with the microphone close to the speaker.
* Music: Be careful to not record and/or distributed any copyrighted music. It will often be enough to use music loops licensed for distribution.

# Exporting distribution version of the audio

Now that the audio is finalised, we need to create the version of the file that will be distribted to small groups. It needs to be an appropriate file size for downloading include a few details about the file.

Actions:

* Keep the original high fidelity audio, and back it up.
* Export each episode as an MP3 audio track. Choose a brief descriptive filename, that starts with the episode number.
* Choose audio settings that will be appropriate for your audience and context:
  + While MP3 is a well known standard, the Ogg standard is now also widely supported and may be a better choice.
  + Select ‘Mono’ rather than stereo, unless you’ve recorded and edited the audio in stereo.
  + Choose a quality or bit rate that will keep the audio quality good while making the file size small. Since this resource is mostly spoken audio, it can use a much lower bit rate than music would.
* The file size and audio quality will depend on the audience and their context (how it will be shared, internet access and cost, how it’ll be listened, etc.). You may want to create multiple distribution versions, e.g. a very small one for those downloading it over slow and expensive internet connections, and a higher quality one for those with better internet access or for sharing directly.
* Add MP3 metadata, which describes the audio tracks. This is shown in the audio player and helps the listener. Below is an example as a guide that you can translate and adapt: Artist: Cursed to Bless Track Title: 03-00-Series Introduction [needs to be in local language] Album Title: [your translation of the drama series title of ‘Cursed to Bless’] Track Number: 00 Year: 2024 Genre: Drama Comments: Copyright © 2024 Martin Olmos, Wollongong, Australia. Web: cursedtobless.com
* Provide us both the distribution MP3 and original files. We will then upload them to our website and apply to include them in the 5fish app.