

The Podcaster's Audio Handbook

**A Technical Guide for
Creative People**

Corey Marie Green

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The Podcaster's Audio Handbook: A Technical Guide for Creative People

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Table of Contents

About the Author	ix
About the Technical Reviewer	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Preface	xv
Chapter 1: File Formats and Settings	1
What Is Audio?	4
Digital Audio, the Sample Rate, and the Bit Rate	7
Compressed and Uncompressed File Formats: wav vs. mp3	11
Working with Files in the wav and mp3 Formats	13
Stereo vs. Mono	15
Just Give Me the Executive Summary	19
Choosing File Formats and Settings in Audacity.....	20
Setting the Bit Rate and Sample Rate in Audacity.....	20
Choosing Stereo or Mono in Audacity.....	22
Bouncing Your Files in Audacity.....	24
Chapter 2: Gear Part 1	27
Dealing with Background Noise When Recording at Home	30
When to Record on a Smartphone	32
Audio Interface: The Analog to Digital Connection	33
Inputs and Outputs	36

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Audio Quality of the Presonus Studio 24c.....	40
Latency	42
Other Considerations	44
Portable Recorders	44
Recording with the Inbuilt Microphones of a Portable Recorder.....	46
Inputs and Outputs	49
Using a Portable Recorder with an External Microphone	50
Other Considerations	51
Headphones	52
Cables	54
Intermission	56
Chapter 3: Gear Part 2 – Microphones.....	57
Sennheiser e945	58
The Benefits of Dynamic Microphones for Podcasting	62
Understanding Microphone Sensitivity	63
Choosing a Microphone with an Appropriate Frequency Response.....	65
Polar Patterns and How They Help Reject Background Noise.....	66
USB Microphones.....	69
Microphone Stands	70
Spider Shock Mount.....	72
Mic Sock	73
Summary.....	75
Chapter 4: Getting a Good Take	77
Sound Check... Check... 1... 2...	79
Positioning the Microphone for Recording Speech.....	84
Setting the Best Angle for the Microphone.....	86

Setting the Distance Between the Microphone and the Speaker 89

Avoiding the Recording of Mouth Noises..... 90

Positioning the Microphone for Different Types of Recordings..... 91

Setting Levels 95

 Recording Sufficient Audio Data..... 98

 Peaking..... 100

 Setting a Level for Recording Human Speech 103

 Making Allowances for Human Nature 104

 Setting a Level for Recording Things That Aren't Human Speech 105

Getting a Good Take When Recording Outside 107

Summary..... 111

Chapter 5: Recording Inside 113

 Recording in a Studio..... 114

 Public Libraries and Community Spaces 115

 Radio Stations 115

 Recording at Home 116

 Reducing Background Noise 117

 What's in a Studio?..... 119

 Look for Asymmetrical Surfaces to Randomize Reflections..... 120

 Consider the Surfaces of the Walls, Floor, and Ceiling 121

 Consider the Size of Your Room 123

 Finding a Place to Record at Home 125

 Listening to the Space..... 126

 Summary..... 127

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 6: Recording Outside 129

- Be Prepared 133
- Settings on a Portable Recorder 134
- Background Noise..... 138
 - Strategy 1: Find the Right Location 138
 - Strategy 2: Plug an External Microphone into Your Portable Recorder..... 139
 - Strategy 3: Move the Microphone Closer to the Mouth of the Person Talking 142
 - Strategy 4: Understand the Polar Pattern of Your Microphone 142
 - Strategy 5: Choose the Right Kind of Background Noise..... 146
- Using Atmos to Tell a Story 147
- Creating a Balance Between Speech and Atmos 150
- Recording Sound Effects..... 152
- Consider the High Pass Filter When Recording Atmos or Sound Effects 154
- Using the Acoustics of Your Location to Set a Scene 156
- Recording Outside, but Actually Inside..... 158
- Plugging in to a Sound Reinforcement System..... 158
- Climatic Conditions 164
 - The Wind..... 164
- Note Taking 166
- Summary..... 167

Chapter 7: Recording Remotely 169

- Issues Faced When Recording Remotely 170
- Recording Remotely with Zencastr 172
 - High Quality Meets Low Quality..... 173
 - Setting Up Zencastr 175
 - Making a Recording with Zencastr..... 177

Performing a Sound Check in Zencastr 180

Uploading the Recording 186

Recording a Phone Call 187

 Routing a Phone Call from Skype to Audacity 189

 Step 1: Sound Check Your Microphone..... 191

 Step 2: Routing Skype 194

 Step 3: Making Your Skype Call 197

Summary..... 198

Chapter 8: Editing 199

 Your Editing Setup..... 200

 Backing Up Your Audio 202

 All Killer, No Filler 204

 Creating an Outline Document..... 207

 Piecing Together Your Audio 208

 You *Can* Edit It, but Should You? 213

 Managing the Loudness of Your Podcast 218

 Loudness in Context 221

 Managing Loudness in Audacity..... 222

 Understanding Compression 227

 Applying Compression Manually 228

 Compression in Streaming Services 232

 Normalization 233

 Fades 234

 Summary..... 237

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 9: Music, Atmos, and Sound Effects	239
Atmos.....	240
Sound Effects.....	241
Music	244
Negotiating Music Copyright	245
Layering Music with Speech	246
Listening Back to Your Podcast.....	248
Some Parting Words.....	250
Glossary	253
Index	259

About the Author



Corey Marie Green is an audio engineer from Melbourne, Australia, who specializes in podcasting and radio. She has filled many roles in her radio career, including journalist, producer, editor, and sound engineer at live events. Through her business, Transducer Audio, she provides a range of services for podcasters including editing, content development, and training.

Photo Credit: Karoline Morwitzer

About the Technical Reviewer

After completing studies in both sound production and electronic engineering, **Riah Williams** has been professionally active in the communications, broadcast, and music industries. As Station Technical Worker at 3CR Community Radio in Melbourne, Riah has set up remote live broadcasts from rallies and blockades, parks, pubs, and inside prisons. In 2014, Riah designed talkback equipment which was installed in 16 community radio stations in Timor-Leste. Riah's time is currently divided between 3CR and repairing music instrument amplifiers at Open Ear Audio.

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Preface

UK comedian Deborah Frances-White was about to quit comedy due to the grind of dealing with sexism in the industry. Instead, she decided to start a podcast: *The Guilty Feminist*. When she shared her experiences, she found a community of like-minded people and created a much-needed space for diverse comedians.¹

The audio quality of your podcast is important, because your podcast is important. Most podcasters start out because they're passionate about a topic and want to share that passion with other people. Your podcast might make people laugh, teach them a new skill, or inform them about an important issue. Podcasts are an excellent way to build community. However, poor-quality audio can be an impediment to reaching your audience.

The Importance of Audio Quality

Audio quality sends a message to your listeners about how much you value your ideas. And it's not just your ideas: if you invite a guest onto your podcast, you will want to give them the best platform possible. If you value your work, then it will encourage others to do the same.

Good-quality audio is not just an extra, it's an accessibility issue. Improving your audio quality will make your work available to a much wider audience.

¹ Frances-White, D., 2018. *The Guilty Feminist: From Our Noble Goals To Our Worst Hypocrisies*. London: Virago.

PREFACE

You should also consider that the audio you release into the world might not reach your listeners in the same state as you sent it. Even if your initial recording sounds OK, a podcast that has been played through a streaming service undergoes processing. On top of that, you have no control over the equipment your listeners are using or the circumstances in which they're listening. You do have control over the recording and editing process.



You can't stop a member of your audience from listening to your podcast in a laundromat out of an old shoe, but you can release a podcast with high-quality audio

High-Quality Audio Is Accessible Audio

Maximizing your audio quality makes your podcast accessible to a wider range of people. When creating a podcast, you should consider who your audience might be and what needs they have. Low-quality audio could make it impossible for certain people to access your work.

People who are hard of hearing particularly need a podcast to be clear. This might be a specific consideration if you expect your audience to be older or to be made up of people who frequent rock concerts.

Another thing to consider is that you or an interviewee might have difficulty speaking. Alternatively, you could be speaking with an accent that is different to your listener's. It's incredibly important to include a diversity of voices in the media, and independent media such as podcasts often take up this work. In this instance, a high-quality recording will be helpful for the listener.

Your listener's attention may be divided between your podcast and another task. In 2019, Edison Research surveyed podcast listeners in the United States and found that 59% of respondents had listened to a podcast while doing chores.² You may be competing for your listener's attention with the task of removing mold from between bathroom tiles. You will know from your own experience that it takes your full attention to be able to understand poor-quality audio. You want to make it easy for your listener to be able to concentrate on both tasks.

Often people listen to podcasts in noisy environments: on the train, while driving a car, or while working. Audio that has inconsistent volume levels is impossible to listen to in these circumstances.

Your listener might be using poor-quality equipment, or they might have a poor Internet connection. It's not uncommon for people to listen to a podcast using low-quality earbuds or out of the tinny speaker of their smartphone.

² Edison Research. 2019. *The Infinite Dial - The Podcast Consumer 2019*. [online] Available at: www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Edison-Research-Podcast-Consumer-2019.pdf



Podcasts are often played through the speaker of a smartphone. This can significantly reduce audio quality

I have prepared an audio file so you can appreciate how much audio quality can degrade between your original work and the final playback. In this case, I have uploaded the file to the Internet, streamed it through Apple Podcasts, and played it back through the speakers of my smartphone on my parents' porch (Audio 0-1).

Audio 0-1 How your podcast might sound when played through the speakers of a smartphone in a noisy environment

You can hear quite a difference between the quality of the audio at the beginning of the file and the quality at the end. The words I am speaking are still clear at the end of the file, but only because the original recording was of a high quality.

If you do everything you can to maintain the quality of your audio files through the recording and editing process, you'll be making your podcast accessible to the widest audience.

Maximizing Audio Quality to Compensate for Challenging Conditions

One of the great things about podcasting is that if you live somewhere with an Internet connection, there's a low barrier to entry. That does not mean that podcasts are created on an even playing field.

Sometimes your recording environment can be quite noisy, or you might have to work with low-end equipment. You might need to conduct an interview over the phone or the Internet, which is convenient but can compromise audio quality. It is at these times that it is particularly important to understand audio engineering techniques.

Regardless of your circumstances, you can improve the quality of your podcast using the audio engineering techniques contained within this book.



Understanding audio engineering techniques will help you make a clear recording in a noisy environment, such as a UFO convention

How This Book Works

The information in this book will help you to optimize the audio quality of your podcast in the easiest and most effective ways. Once you have a handle on some audio basics, you can focus on expressing yourself creatively and making content that will connect with your audience.

This book is intended for both new podcasters and well-established podcasters who wish to improve their audio. For many people, podcasting is their first exposure to audio engineering. While there are many online resources available for podcasters who wish to improve their audio, it can be hard to know where to start. Many podcasters will make a few recordings, run into problems, and then look for a way to fix them. The solutions they find can be difficult or expensive and often unsatisfactory. This guide provides an overview, which will help you avoid common audio issues before they arise. I know that people often dip in and out of technical books, but there is a benefit to reading this book in chapter order.

Many online resources assume a high level of technical knowledge. My aim is to make the information in this guide accessible to people who don't have that background. As mentioned, I have concentrated on the simplest and most effective techniques for improving audio quality. I have presented the information in plain English and demonstrated my points with real-world experiences. I explain key audio terms as they arise, and you will also find a glossary. The most important points in every chapter are summarized so that you can refer to them later. This guide will provide you with a solid foundation in basic audio techniques: enough information to get started, make a really good recording, and shape it into a podcast. If you then decide you want to learn more about audio engineering as it relates to podcasting, then having this solid foundation will make it much easier for you to access audio industry resources.

One of the principles that I work from is that it's easier and more effective to make a high-quality recording than to fix a low-quality recording. As such, most of the book concentrates on the process of

making a high-quality recording, with only two chapters on editing at the end. Even though a large part of my work as a sound engineer involves repairing audio, I barely cover this topic in the book because it gets quite complicated. You can think of fixing a bad recording as being a bit like trying to fix a cake after you've baked it. You can cut the burnt bits off the cake and add more icing, but if you really want a good cake, you'll need to start again – this time with a recipe book.



Trying to fix a bad recording can be a bit like cutting the burnt bits off a cake and adding more icing

It's easier to make a high-quality recording if you're using suitable audio equipment, but not everyone has a huge budget to spend on the latest gear. Where possible, I have made suggestions on how to get the best sound for the least money. Following on from the principle that it's easier and more effective to make a high-quality recording than to fix a low-quality recording, I recommend spending more money on the recording stage of your podcast than the editing stage. As such, I advise you in Chapter 2, "Gear," to invest in some good-quality recording equipment, but then I demonstrate editing techniques using the very basic audio editing

PREFACE

program *Audacity*. Audacity might not be the best audio editing program, but it's the most accessible – it is free, it runs on Windows and Mac, and it is adequate for creating a basic podcast. If you wish to undertake more advanced editing, then I discuss a few other options in Chapter 8, “Editing.”

Throughout the book, I demonstrate techniques using specific pieces of audio equipment and computer programs, but you might already have a setup. The audio techniques and principles that I am discussing apply to similar equipment and programs.

Some people might find the idea of presenting a very polished podcast as being inauthentic. They might feel that removing some of the rough edges compromises their DIY ethic. Why might people feel this way? It's because technical choices are a part of the creative process. While everyone needs to know the basics, technical choices can be an important part of the storytelling, helping you create atmosphere and individual character. I don't want you to see this book as a series of rules about recording and editing. Instead, I hope to demonstrate that a good understanding of the technical side of podcasting will enable you to express yourself and to reach the people who are important to you. I have included audio clips throughout so that you can hear the outcome of technical choices and learn to be the judge of your own work. For those who are reading the print version of this book, the audio files are located at <https://www.transducer-audio.com/audio-files-for-book>. Saying that, there is a focus on creating clear recordings of human speech, so as to make podcasts accessible. Not every podcast has to sound like it was produced in a professional studio, but every podcaster should make the utmost effort to record and edit speech so that it's intelligible to the listener. Podcasting has become an important way for people to share information, and I would like to see as many people included in that as possible. I will be discussing issues of accessibility throughout the book. Once you have made a high-quality recording, you can present it in any way that you like.

Everyone has to begin somewhere. Some of you will be new to podcasting and some more established. No matter where you are in your journey, I would like you to join me in the next chapter at a time when I was just starting out in radio so that I can share an important lesson that I learned.