

AUDIO-BOOK PRODUCTION

A PRIMER FOR INDIE AUTHORS FROM AN AUDIO-BOOK PRODUCER

Ray Greenley

A note from Louise

I'm so grateful to **Ray Greenley** for taking the time to write this primer. I'm a copyeditor and proofreader, and I've self-published in print and digital formats. But I've stuck to *words*. Audio's one of those things that's remained a mystery to me – something of a Dark Art, if I'm honest!

I love *listening* to audio books, but creating them? That's quite another matter. And yet I wanted to know more, and I figured some of you would too.

And because it's one of those aspects of self-publishing that's just too expensive to get *wrong*, I felt that my writing a guide to the process simply wouldn't do. I wanted to offer you something more than a 400-word soundbite – something that would give you honest and usable insights. That way, if you do decide to create an audio book, you can do it *right*.

I hoped a professional narrator could furnish you with those insights, and Ray hasn't disappointed. What follows is over 5,000 words of guidance from an experienced artist whose narration work includes Philip K. Dick's *The Unreconstructed M and Other Stories*.

Enjoy!



louiseharnbyproofreader.com

An introduction from the artist

Hello, dear author! Congratulations on your latest book!

Have you considered having an audio book of your work produced? If not, you should! More and more consumers are buying audio books for a variety of reasons, and audio-book sales are booming compared to digital print sales (see Resources: Michael Kozlowski, Editor in Chief, Good e-Reader).

As an author, you absolutely want to be a part of that growing market. But audio books are an entirely different beast from print books. Getting into a new market is always intimidating. Where do you even start?

I'm here to help. I'm an audio-book narrator who has worked with indie authors to produce audio-book editions of their work.

In this primer, I'll give you a high-level look at what you need to know to get your book produced as an audio book.

There's work to be done, but it's probably not as difficult as you might think. Read on!



Ray

'So how can I get my book produced as an audio book?'

It wasn't all that long ago that virtually all audio-book production was handled by a few big publishers, and getting your book produced was probably a similar feat to getting a big print publisher to publish and distribute your book. That's all changed. Getting your book produced as an audio book is easier now than it's ever been.

Probably the biggest factor in that change is a site called **ACX**. That stands for Audiobook Creation Exchange. It's run by Audible.com (the world's largest distributor of audio books, and owned by Amazon.com). It's essentially a meeting place where **rights holders** (that's you!) can list their books in order to find **producers** (like me!) who are interested in producing the book as an audio book.

Producers (that's the term used by ACX; consider it synonymous with **narrator** for the sake of this discussion) can see the listed book and submit an audio audition for it.

The rights holder listens to the auditions and can offer a contract to the producer they think will do the best job.

Once the producer accepts the contract, they produce the book and submit it through ACX. The rights holder can then listen to the book, and if they approve it, it gets prepared for release. ACX manages the contract, the payment of royalties, and distribution to the associated platforms (Audible.com, Amazon.com, and iTunes.com).

'That doesn't sound so bad, but cut to the chase: How much will all this cost me?'

Cost is, of course, always a factor. With ACX, there are multiple options that allow virtually anyone to have their book made into an audio book. But as with many things in life, you often get what you pay for.

First a quick note that there is no fee from ACX for registering on their site or for listing your book. They get their money on the back end once the book goes up for sale, so they just want to encourage as many books to be produced as possible.

ACX allows rights holders to offer producers two types of contracts: **Pay for Production** and **Royalty Share**. Note that regardless of the type of contract, the rights holder always gets full ownership of the audio produced.

A Pay for Production contract means that you're paying the producer a **flat fee** for their work. Once you've paid the fee, the audio book is published and you'll receive royalties from sales of the audio book.

So what's a typical fee? Well, first off, the fee is based on the length of the completed audio book. When you offer a contract, you agree to pay a certain amount **Per Finished Hour (PFH)** of the audio book. So if the audio book ends up being 10 hours long, you'll pay the agreed-upon amount times 10.

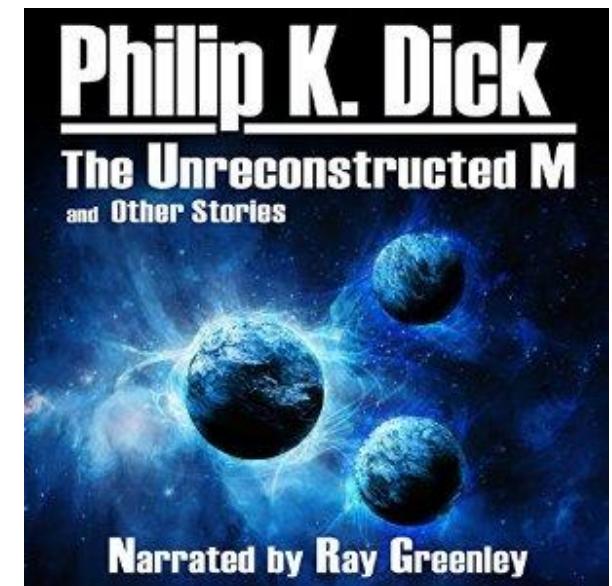
What sort of PFH rate can you expect to pay? Well, it depends on the type of talent you're looking to attract. If you want a top-rate, full-time professional narrator, you can expect to pay around \$300 PFH, or even more.

'Wait, what!? That means for my 10-hour book ...'

... you'd pay around \$3,000, yes. Sounds like a lot, right? Well, it is a lot, and I'll touch on why that number is what it is a little later. But for now, let's get back to the discussion on cost. Because you don't have to offer that much for a Pay for Production contract. You can offer less, and are likely to get producers willing to record your book for less.

Just keep in mind that as you go lower in what you're offering, so the caliber of producers you attract to your project will change. I'd say that once you get below \$200 PFH you're pushing out of the zone where most quality producers feel like they can get a reasonable return on their time, but that may not always be the case.

A quick note: There absolutely can be an aspect of negotiation with regards to the contracts you offer. ACX doesn't care what the final number is. That's entirely something to be worked out between you and the producer.



'I really don't want to put up that kind of money. Is there another option?'

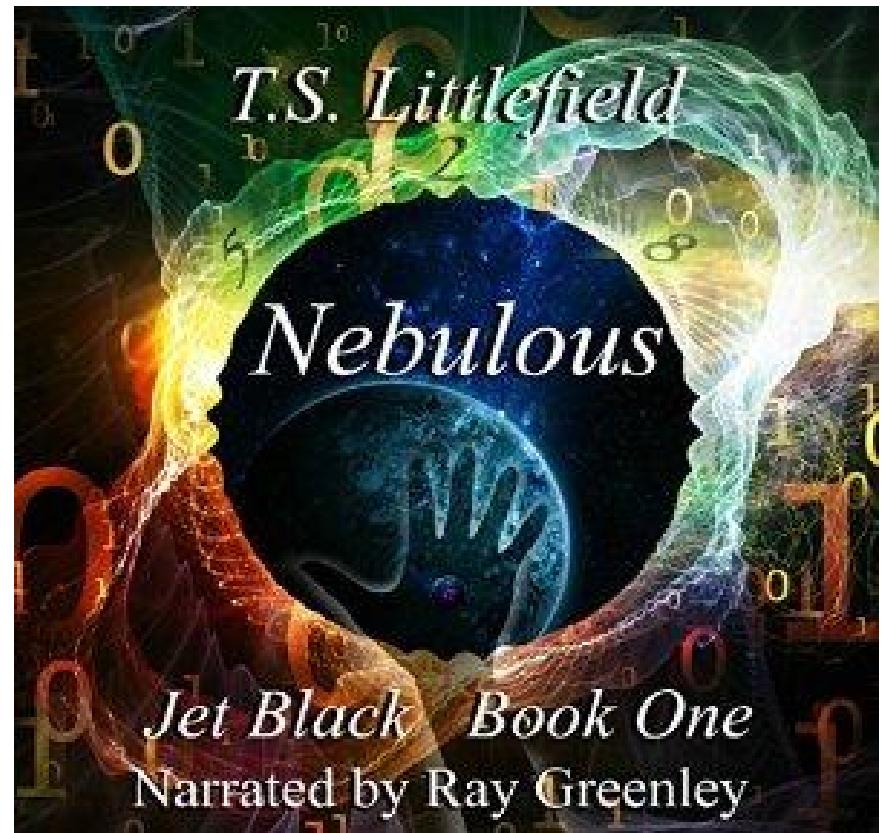
Yes, there is!

It's the Royalty Share contract that I mentioned above.

In this contract, you don't pay the producer anything up front, but instead **split the royalties** on sales of the book with that person.

'Hang on – I can get my book produced as an audio book without having to actually pay anything?'

Yes, that's pretty much it! Sounds great, right?



'It sounds too good to be true. What's the catch?'

The catch is that the top producers are VERY selective about the Royalty Share contracts they're willing to accept. It takes lot of time and effort to produce an audio book, and producers who are trying to pay their bills and feed their families with money from their work won't take a second look at your book unless it has a record of strong sales.

Even if your book isn't breaking any sales records, you can still list it and are likely to get some auditions. Just be realistic about the kind of producers who are going to be sending those auditions. They may be low on experience, talent, or both.

That's not to say it's a hopeless case. We all have to start somewhere.

Once upon a time, I was that producer who was low on experience and sending out my first auditions. The author who picked me to narrate my first audio book was an indie author who had just written his first book.

While I've learned quite a bit since that first book, and there are definitely things I would do differently now, I'm still proud of my work on it and the critical reception has been overall quite positive.

But it'll be entirely up to you to make that determination. Just as ACX allows rights holders to sign up and post their book for free, they also allow anyone to sign up as a producer and send in an audition for free. And I do mean ANYONE. **Do NOT assume that just because someone is a Producer on ACX that they actually know what they're doing.**

'But I don't know anything about audio books. How can I tell if a producer will do a good job on my book?'

That's a tough question with few solid answers, but I can offer some tips.

First, take some time to listen to some good, well-produced audio books. You are usually safe with most stuff from the larger publishing houses and big-name authors. Try to listen to not just the narration but also to how the narration SOUNDS. Then compare that to the auditions you've received.

How loud is the recording in the pauses between sentences? There shouldn't be a lot of background noise, but neither should it sound like the recording drops off a cliff in between sentences. Are there ANY extraneous sounds in the background, like a barking dog or a car driving by?

Those sorts of sounds should NEVER be in the recording and I would consider them an instant red flag. Can you hear a lot of 'mouth noise'? Strange clicks, smacking lips, that sort of thing.

This is a challenge for almost all narrators, and if you catch a little, it's not a cause for major concern. But if you find yourself distracted by the sounds, be careful.

See, the thing is that a Producer on ACX really does have to be more than just a narrator. They have to be a narrator, a director, an editor, and an engineer.

There are a lot of skills involved and not everyone is equally good at all the facets of each job.

This is why **you need to listen to more than just the performance** when evaluating auditions.

Note that no one is perfect and you can get a good audio book from someone who has at least a base level of competency in some the various skills while excelling in a few others.

Again, it's up to you to determine if a producer is capable enough to do a good job with your book.

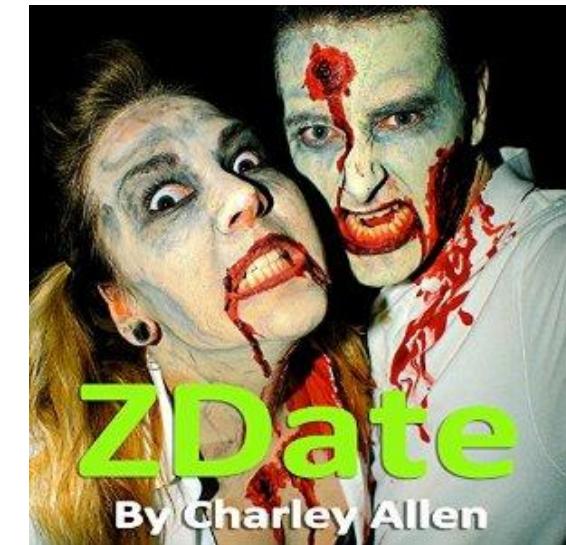
Also, when evaluating any producer, be sure you look them up to see what other books they've done. Do they have a bunch of books already out there?

- Listening to the samples of those books, how do they sound?
- What sorts of books are they?
- Are they about the length that your book is likely to be or longer, showing that they will be likely to complete your project?
- Have they done books in a similar genre to your book?

Note that some producers publish **under a pseudonym**, so if you can't find anything on your own, ask.

If they're really brand new and have absolutely no history to go by, don't be afraid to ask about what sort of training they have that can give you confidence that they'll do the job.

In short, do your homework on your potential producer, or you'll only have yourself to blame if things don't work out.



‘You haven’t really made me feel much better about all this ...’

‘Isn’t there some other option besides making a big up-front investment for a seasoned professional or rolling the dice on an unknown talent?’

Yes, there actually is another option. How astute of you to ask!

So if you think about it, the bottom line for a **Pay for Production contract** is that the risk is entirely on the rights holder. You put up all the cash and hope the audio book sells enough to make that money back and more, while the producer gets paid and moves on to the next project.

Meanwhile, the bottom line for a **Royalty Share contract** is that the risk is entirely on the producer. We do all the work involved in getting the audio book recorded and don’t see any return on our time until it starts selling, while the rights holder doesn’t have to put up a dime.

The third option is a split between those two, known as either a **‘Hybrid’ or ‘Stipend’ contract** (the name ‘Stipend’ comes from an incentive program offered by ACX; just be aware that that program is something different than what I’m describing here).

A Hybrid contract is ostensibly a Royalty Share contract, but the rights holder offers a modest Pay for Production payment in addition to the Royalty Share. The producer gets enough up front to cover some of their production costs, while the rights holder can attract a higher tier of talent to their project.

Exactly how much a producer will be willing to take for their payment as part of a Hybrid contract depends on the producer, but I’d venture that most would be happy with \$100 PFH. That can still add up to a fair amount of money. However, at one half to one third of what you’d expect to pay an experienced pro, it’s much more affordable.

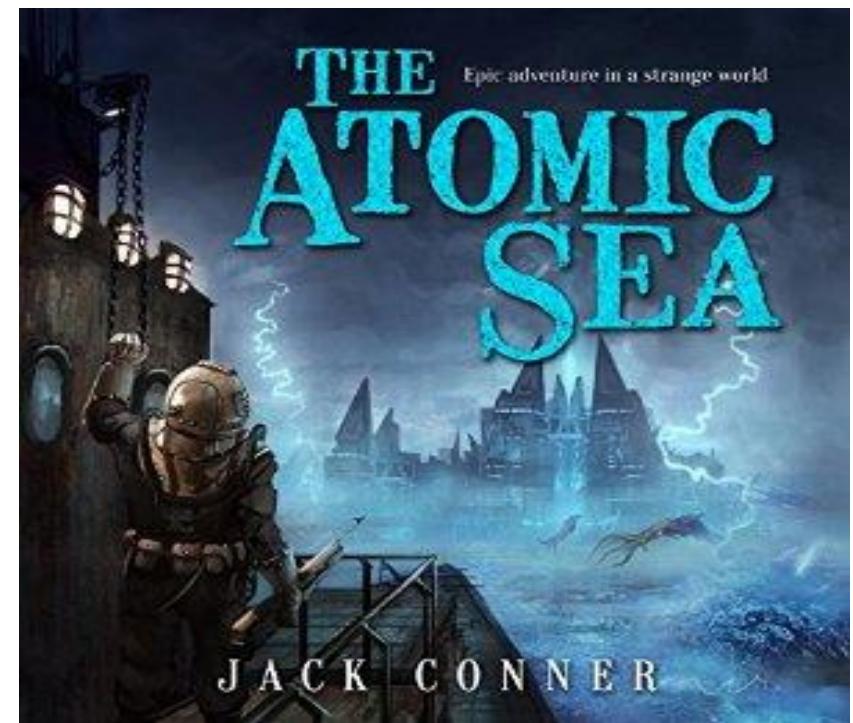
The key is that you're going to want to be able to **at least cover the post-production costs** for the producer.

Remember when I talked about all the things a producer needs to be good at in order to do a good job on your book? Well, most producers would really rather focus on the narration side of things, so they look for editing and mastering professionals to handle that stuff for them.

They end up as better narrators, and the post-production is higher quality because they're working with people who dedicate themselves to that aspect of the production.

It's a win-win, but it does cost the producer money. Few producers will be willing to put up that cash on a Royalty Share project with uncertain prospects. It's bad enough to produce a book and not make any money on it. It's even worse to produce a book and LOSE money on it!

One tricky part with the Hybrid contract is that it's not officially supported by ACX. To do one, you'll need to set up the contract in ACX as Royalty Share and then handle the additional payment on the side.



'There's another option you're not telling me about on purpose ...'

'I could avoid all these issues and just record my book myself!'

... Yes, that's true. You could.

'Well? How do I do it?'

Okay ... Are you sure? I mean, REALLY sure? Because producing an audio book does take quite a bit of work. As a rule of thumb, a producer who knows what they're doing will generally spend about **six hours working to produce a single hour of finished audio**.

So if your audio book ends up being about 10 hours long, that means you could expect to spend about 60 hours working to produce it once you've invested the time in learning how, and the money in the equipment you'll need.

Speaking of, you'd need a microphone (no, your built-in microphone on your laptop or iPhone really won't cut

it), probably a USB preamp to go between your microphone and your computer, and a computer to record onto. There are some decent microphones that plug directly into your computer via USB, but generally you'll get a better sound with an XLR microphone and a preamp.

Also, vitally, you'll need a good space to record in. It should be quiet with plenty of sound-absorbing material in it to make the space sound as 'dead' as possible. A walk-in closet can do the trick in a pinch, although chances are you'll need some additional sound treatment to really get it acceptable.

By the way, if you live in a busy area with a lot of traffic or other outside noises that you can hear from your space, then your space is no good unless you can somehow insulate against all those outside noises or are willing to record in the middle of the night when (hopefully) things are quiet.

'Can you be more specific about the equipment I'll need?'

'What microphone should I get? What about recording software, or the preamp you mentioned?'

Okay, well if you're really on a budget, you can record using **Audacity**, which is free recording software. It has some solid tools and can do what you need.

If you're willing to invest some money, you can get some reasonably priced software that can do a bit more. I use **Studio One Artist from Presonus**, and I know some other narrators work well with **Reaper**. Both of those programs can be had for less than \$100.

There are many others as well.

For the preamp, there are some good options at a reasonable price. I currently use a **Focusrite Scarlett 2i2**, but I'm looking forward to upgrading to a **Presonus Studio 2|6** soon.

Another reasonable option would be the **Presonus AudioBox USB**.

One of the nice perks to getting one of the Presonus preamps is that it includes the recording software I mentioned earlier, Studio One Artist.

Once again, there are lots of other options, many of which would probably be sufficient for your needs.

'Then what about the big question, the microphone?'

So I can tell you that I use a **Shure KSM32** and it works well for me. I'm pretty fortunate that I can sound good on such a relatively inexpensive microphone.

Unfortunately, there's absolutely no way to know if YOU will sound good on it, too.

Microphones really are very personal tools. One that works great for me might be terrible for you, and vice versa.

Your best bet is to try several out and see what works well. The easiest way to do that is to find a specialty store that sells them; the store will often let you try some out before you buy because they're aware of the difficulty in matching the microphone to the voice.



'Okay, so once I've got that all set up I'm good to go, right?'

So ... no, not nearly. You still need to learn how to USE all that stuff, which takes a lot of time and effort.

I know this isn't a surprise coming from me, but I think you'll REALLY want to consider carefully when it comes to narrating your own book.

If you think you might really want to get into narration and put in the time and energy to learn how to do it right, then have at it. It's very challenging work, but also very rewarding.

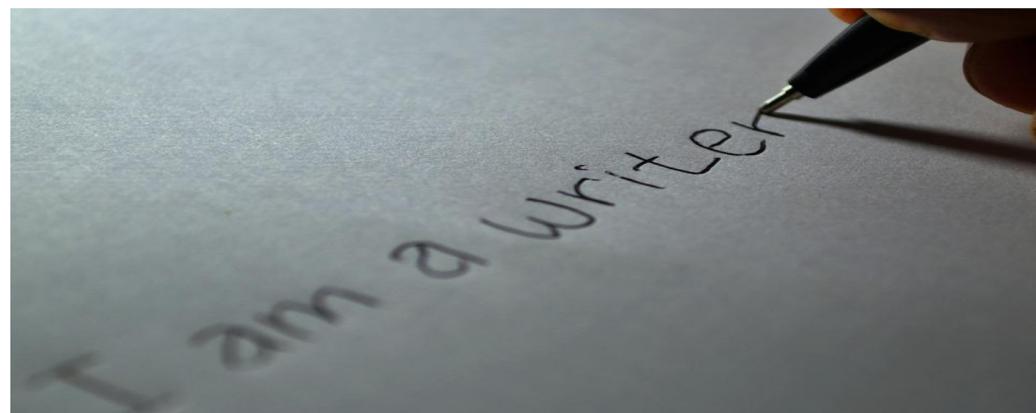
There are **very few people who have the right talents to be both a writer and a narrator**, let alone have the time to train and use both sets of skills. My hat's off to you!

However, if you're thinking you want to record your own book because you just want to try to save some

money over paying a narrator to do it, or hoping to avoid the work of finding a good narrator who'll take your book on as a Royalty Share project ... please don't.

I promise it'll take time you'd probably rather spend writing, and the chances of it really being a high-quality production are not great (no offense).

In the long run, I'd bet it will cost you more than you'll save, one way or another.



'Right, I get it. I'll do the writing, you do the narrating ...'

'So let's say I've done what you said and found a producer for my book. What do I need to do now?'

Great! So you've listened to your auditions, you've researched your potential producer and think they're the one for your book, and you've come to an agreement on payment terms. There are a few other bits you'll need to work out before you can offer the producer a contract.

One is whether you want to **distribute exclusively** through Audible, Amazon, and iTunes for a higher share of the royalties from sales (royalties are 40% of sale price), or **non-exclusively**, which means you can set up distribution yourself through other platforms, but you'll get a smaller share of royalties from sales through Audible, Amazon, and iTunes (royalties are

25% of sale price). Note that if you want to do a Royalty Share or Hybrid contract on ACX, you MUST do exclusive distribution.

There's some other information you'll need to work out with the producer:

- The date for the **First-15-Minutes evaluation** (more about this later)
- The date for **project completion**

Different producers work at different paces; and many will have other books already waiting to be recorded. They might be able to start on your book right away and have it done in a week or two, or they might be scheduling out months in advance. Talk to your producer and let them know if you have any schedule in mind, but **be ready to be flexible**.

Once you have those dates, you can offer the contract, and when it's accepted you're almost ready to go! There's just one more thing you need to do, and that's **provide the producer with your final, ready-to-record manuscript.**

Now, I promise this isn't just me sucking up to my gracious host, but please, for the love of all that's good and holy, **make sure your manuscript is edited and proofed by someone who knows what they're doing.** It makes the project many times more difficult when we have to struggle through bad grammar, missing punctuation, and poor formatting. In some cases (as happened with me early on), we can't do it and the contract has to be canceled.

If you find a producer who you like working with and does good work for you, then you'll want to build that relationship into something ongoing. Handing them a manuscript that they can barely get through isn't going to help.

And while those grammar errors may seem innocuous enough on the page to your eyes, they're VERY hard to hide in audio.

Now, we producers know enough to not expect perfection. We can handle a reasonable number of errors in a manuscript. But in the end, it's best for you, for us, and for your readers to get your manuscript properly edited, so please do it before sending the manuscript to us.



'Okay, understood. What happens next? Do I just wait around for the book to be completed? Is there anything else to do?'

From here on out, it sort of depends on you and the producer.

One thing that's often very handy for a producer is to get some additional information about the characters in the story, including:

- Your preference for vocal qualities or accents
- How important the character is
- Whether the character will be in future books (and especially if the character becomes more important in future books)

Also, if your book has words that your producer might have a hard time finding pronunciations for (particularly with made-up names in science fiction or fantasy books), **having a key is really helpful.**

It's really important to get this sort of information as early as possible while the producer is preparing to narrate the book, but before they've actually hit 'record'.

None of that stuff is vital; if you picked your producer well, they'll be ready to handle all of that on their own. But having some guidance can definitely help.

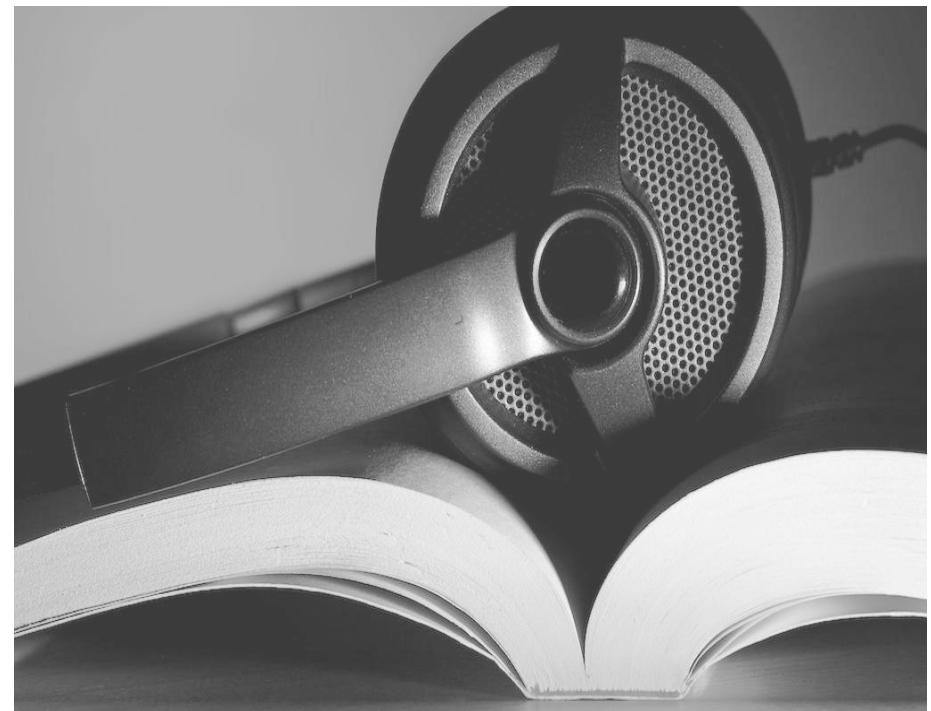
‘Tell me about the First-15-Minutes evaluation ...’

Once the producer starts recording, the first thing they'll do is send you the **First-15-Minutes evaluation.**

This is a **quality check** so you can hear what the end product will sound like.

This is your best (and in some cases, last) opportunity to evaluate your chosen producer and to be sure that they'll make the audio book you want them to. Listen carefully to this sample.

If it sounds good, you can approve it and your producer is off to the races. If not, you'll have to decide whether the issues can be reasonably fixed, or whether you need to dissolve the contract and try to find another producer.



‘What kind of issues can be “reasonably fixed”?’

This gets a bit tricky. Again, none of this is absolute and each producer will be a bit different. But here’s a general guideline to give you some frame of reference.

Things like ‘Can we try something different with that character’s voice?’ or ‘The pronunciation of these names isn’t quite right,’ or ‘The overall tone of the narration seems off,’ are **reasonable** to bring up.

Things that are **not really reasonable** are, ‘This line by this character should sound more emotional,’ or ‘The way you read that sentence is different from the way it sounded in my head,’ or ‘It sounds like you’re leaving too much space between paragraphs.’

That’s not to say you should ignore those sorts of problems if the sample doesn’t sound right to you. Rather, having a lot of those sorts of concerns is more an indication that your producer isn’t actually a good fit and you need to think about finding another one.



'So if I don't like the first 15, I should just fire the producer and try to find another one?'

Well, not necessarily. It's a judgment call and it comes down to trust.

You need to be able to **trust the producer to do their job**. The producer will not be able to make a multitude of tweaks so that it sounds just like how you hear it in your head.

Also, depending on their process, your producer may not upload another file for the book until it's entirely complete, at which point only the most important changes can reasonably be made (things like misreads, where your manuscript says one thing and the narrator said something else).

Creative decisions regarding the performance are the purview of the producer.

In the end, it's their decision on how to say a given sentence, how much emotion a particular line should carry, and so on.

So while you're certainly allowed to share your input on those sorts of issues, the producer is also allowed to say 'No' when it comes to making changes.

All that being said, many producers will be happy to work with you in a variety of ways to make sure the completed audio book is one that you'll be happy with. So don't be afraid to open up a dialog.

Just be aware of where the final responsibility lies, and be ready to trust your selected producer to know how to make a great audio book.

However, in the end, if after listening to that sample you can't trust the producer to make the audio book you want, you may need to move on and try to find someone else.

Approving the First-15-Minutes sample signals your implicit agreement that you are happy with the decisions your producer has made and that you trust them to make the decisions they're going to have to make throughout the production of the book.

A quick tip on the First 15 Minutes ...

It doesn't HAVE to be the actual first 15 minutes of the book. If you have a particular section or group of character voices you'd like to hear in that sample, tell your producer what you want them to record.

They may consider it a somewhat unusual request, but hopefully not an unreasonable one.

'So it's yet another major decision I have to get right ...'

'Thanks so much! Do I finally get to relax now?'

You're getting there! After this point, things will vary depending on your producer.

Your producer is going to get started on full production. Depending on their process, you might get notification of files uploaded regularly along with questions regarding the text and characters and requests that you do a final proof of the audio to catch read errors; or you might hear nothing until you are notified by ACX that your producer has hit the 'I'm Done' button and the completed audio book is awaiting your final approval.

How you engage with the producer during the process is up to the two of you. What your producer's expectations are of that interaction is something that's probably worth bringing up ahead of time, just so you're on the same page (assuming your producer doesn't lay out his process/expectations on his own).

Final approval is your chance to listen to the full book and make sure it's okay.

The main thing that you'll want to look for is read errors (that's where the manuscript text differs from the narration).

Again, you're welcome to make other suggestions, but your Producer is unlikely to be happy to make more than a handful of minor adjustments.

Be warned that if you end up feeling that the final product is, overall, unacceptable, there may not be a lot you can do.

You can try to work with ACX to resolve the issue, but you may need to end up allowing the book to be published or pay the producer a kill fee to cancel the contract and leave the book unpublished (while also allowing you to try to have it produced again).

This is why it's so important to be careful when picking your producer at the beginning of the process.

‘What happens when I approve the production?’

The book goes to ACX for a technical QC (they’re checking to make sure it meets their specifications) and then it heads to retail! From the time you approve the book (for a Royalty Share contract) or the producer notifies ACX that they’ve been paid (for a Pay for Production contract) you can expect it to be around 2 to 4 weeks before the book is actually up for sale.

When it goes up for sale, make sure you contact support@acx.com and ask for your 25 promotional codes for the book.

Those codes can be redeemed for credits on Audible.com and they’re intended for you to give out

so people can download your book and (hopefully) write a review. Just be warned that the codes are not tied to your book in any way, and could be used to download pretty much ANY book on Audible. So have some care about who you give them out to.

You’ll be able to check sales reports for your books daily (they usually lag by about 2 days, so new sales you see today will actually be from the day before yesterday). You’ll get royalty payments from Audible monthly, and ACX will handle splitting the royalty payments for your Royalty Share contracts.

'Are you done yet, or is there still more?'

There's definitely more, but I think this covers the vast majority of it. Just one more fairly important point I'd like to touch on.

I've spent all my words here talking about the process with respect to using **ACX.com** as your platform. However, some of you may not want or be able to use ACX. If that's the case, there are **other options** out there.

Another company who can get your book distributed is **Listen2aBook.com**, and you may be able to find others if you try. The downside is that, for the most part, they don't have the same system for allowing producers to find your book and audition for it, so if you want to use one of those other channels, you'll need to find a producer some other way.

So I think I'm finally done! If this isn't enough for you, see the Resources for some additional help. I'll be happy to answer what questions I can.

Good luck!

Contact Ray Greenley

- Website
- Facebook
- Twitter



Resources

- ACX Rights Holder's Checklist
- Royalty Share Contracts and Marketing
- So You Want to be an Audio Book Narrator
- 5 Tips for Successful Audio Books
- Michael Kozlowski, Editor in Chief, Good e-Reader