

# HOW TO COLLECT AN ACCENT SAMPLE

An accent sample should consist of:

1. Extemporaneous speech
2. A reading of a sample passage or passages

You can record these in either order, of course, but recording extemporaneous speech first often helps the accent donor relax and feel more comfortable, resulting in a better reading of the sample passage.

## Extemporaneous Speech

The goal, of course, is to ask questions in such a way that the accent donor forgets (or ceases to think about) the fact that she is being recorded. Lively, expressive, engaged speech will be the most natural, and the most useful to the actor using the sample, both because many accent features will be more evident in this kind of speech, but also because the sample itself will be more interesting and engaging to listen to.

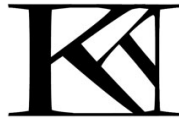
Sociolinguists and other interviewers have long known that questions about childhood memories, sex, and death and the danger of death tend to elicit more unguarded, expressive, casual speech.

Here are some possible questions<sup>1</sup>:

1. What games did you and your friends play when you were kids?
2. How did you meet your spouse/partner?
3. Have you ever been emotionally, verbally or physically attacked?
4. Have you ever had a dream that really scared you?
5. Were you ever in a situation where you were in serious danger of being killed? When you thought, 'This is *it*'?
6. Did you ever get blamed for something you didn't do?
7. Tell me about your first crush.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of these questions are taken or adapted from the work of William Labov, the father of sociolinguistics.



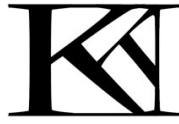
Of course, you must gather the basic demographic data on your accent donor. It is often convenient to start the interview by asking about these basic facts. You'll want to know subject's age or year of birth; gender; ethnicity; profession; educational background; place of birth and places lived since. (You don't necessarily need to ask about all of these, of course—you may already know some of this information.) For non-native speakers, you should also find out what their first language was and when and where they first started learning English. By all means expand beyond these basic facts, but these are the essentials.

The following questions focus more specifically on the donor's place of origin, and her thoughts and feelings about various aspects of its culture. These kinds of questions may be particularly valuable for our purposes, as cultural context is an essential part of accent acquisition. A great sample will include not just the full range of sounds and intonation patterns characteristic of the individual's speech, but also **emic**<sup>2</sup> information about culture, people, and place that will serve to activate the actor's imagination and help her find her character through the accent, and vice versa.

1. Tell me how you feel about your accent.
2. How do you feel like other people react when they hear you speak? Do you think they have any particular associations with your accent?
3. What was it like growing up in \_\_\_\_\_?
4. What was your favorite thing to do when you were growing up in \_\_\_\_\_?
5. If I had a single afternoon to spend in \_\_\_\_\_, what should I do? What's the one thing I shouldn't miss?
6. [If the donor no longer lives in her place of origin]: What do you miss most about \_\_\_\_\_?
7. Is there any food you miss [or would miss]/particular to \_\_\_\_\_ that you really love/that you loved growing up? Can you tell me how to make it? [or: did your mother/father make it? Did you watch them? Did they let you help?]
8. Tell me about \_\_\_\_\_ music. Are there any artists or bands you think the world should know about and appreciate?
9. How do you feel about being \_\_\_\_\_? [If they feel proud/conflicted/whatever, ask them what makes them feel proud/conflicted/whatever about being from \_\_\_\_\_.]

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<sup>2</sup> **Emic** and **etic** are terms we might use to describe two different kinds of perspective on a culture. **Emic** (like phonemic), is from the inside, and has reference to the organizing system that makes sense of everything. **Etic** (like phonetic), is from the outside, and merely aims to describe, insofar as possible, in purely objective terms.



10. What stereotypes do you think people have about \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_s, accurate or inaccurate?
11. Can you share some \_\_\_\_\_ slang with me?

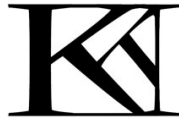
Some of the questions from the famous [Proust/Pivot questionnaire](#) might be useful conversation starters, as well.

## Interview tips

- Make the questions your own—ask them just as you would in a regular conversation.
- Avoid reading questions off the page—this is likely to elicit stilted responses.
- Volunteering your own experiences will often get interview subjects to open up more.
- React and respond when new issues arise. Follow the conversation wherever the subject wants to take it. Allow enough time for the subject to start a new topic or go off on a tangent, rather than jumping in with a new question as soon as you think they’re done speaking. Ask follow-up questions. “Tell me more about...” “That sounds incredible! What did that feel like?” The more you demonstrate genuine interest in your subject, the more they will open up. HOWEVER...
- Keep your vocal feedback and reactions to a minimum. Eliminate them entirely, if you can, or at least strive to keep them ‘in the clear’ (i.e. in pauses) so that they can be edited out later. You can compensate for the loss of this natural and rapport-building human behavior by (silently) being very *physically* engaged, interested and responsive. Smile, widen your eyes, frown, drop your jaw open in amazement, put your face in your hands, even laugh silently, as appropriate.
- Cultural context is an enormously important part of accent acquisition. A great sample will include not just the full range of sounds and intonation patterns characteristic of the individual’s speech, but also information that will serve to activate the actor’s imagination and help her find her character through the accent, and vice versa.

## Reading Passages

The two passages, *Dali’s Last Hurrah* and *All About Foxes*, reprinted at the end of this packet (available as pdfs at [ktspeechwork.com](http://ktspeechwork.com) as well as [www.eriksinger.com](http://www.eriksinger.com)), have been specifically designed for accent elicitation purposes. Other such passages exist, *Arthur the Rat*, *The Rainbow Passage*, and *Comma Gets a Cure* being the best known. *Dali’s Last Hurrah* and *All About Foxes*



possess the advantage of being shorter than any of the above passages, while still including all of the phonemes and possible allophones of spoken English, many of them more than once. A guide to the passages may be found at [ktspeechwork.com](http://ktspeechwork.com).

Recording them should be a simple matter. Encourage the accent donor to read them through a few times, and ask you about any words they're unsure of. Then record them speaking through both texts.

## Recording Equipment and Best Practices

Try to find an area that is as free as possible of background noise. If you're recording outside (not ideal), be especially aware of the possibility of picking up wind noise. If in doubt, it's best to make a quick sample recording to check the conditions. Make sure you place the mic close to the subject—they're the ones you want to record, after all, not you!

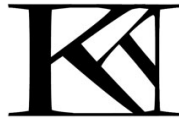
### Hardware

A smartphone or similar device is ideally suited to making field recordings. They are portable, have a large amount of storage space, and make it easy to save, share, and backup your recordings.

The built-in microphones on these devices are serviceable, but not wonderful. If the built-in mic is your only option, by all means use it. But if you make a lot of recordings, consider investing in a portable lavalier microphone, such as the [Rode smartLav+](#). If you might be recording samples at home, or don't mind lugging around heavier equipment and a laptop or tablet, you might look into a plug-in USB mic, such as the [Blue Snowball](#).

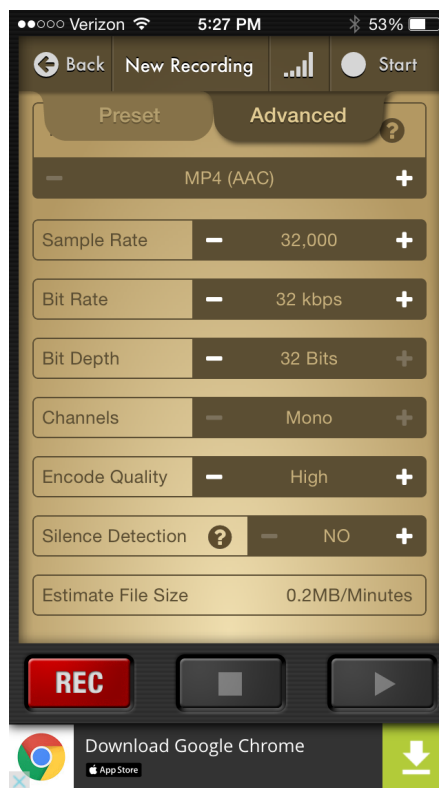
### Software

Smart phones come with their own voice recording apps natively installed, but it's worth a little effort to equip yourself with an app that's better suited to our purposes. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of recording apps. Two that are highly recommended, however, for ease of use and flexibility, are [Voice Record Pro](#) and [Dropvox](#). Both are free. Voice Record Pro will let you share your recordings immediately by email, SMS, Dropbox, Google Drive, OneDrive, Box Cloud, Sound Cloud, Facebook, or Youtube. It can also do basic editing, and even slow down your recordings on playback, something that's very useful for accent study. Dropvox is not quite as full-featured, but is even easier



to use. Once you've connected it to your Dropbox, recordings are uploaded *automatically* as soon as you've made them (provided you're connected to wifi).

One advantage Voice Record Pro has over many other similar apps is that it lets you specify your recording format and parameters. This means you can record at a high enough sample rate to guarantee a high-quality sample (providing recording conditions are good), but not so high that you end up with unmanageable file sizes. If you are able to set your recording parameters, remember the number 32. A good set of defaults for accent samples are to record at a sample rate of **32,000**, a bit rate of **32 kbps**, and a bit depth of **32 bits**. Those settings will look like this in Voice Record Pro:



## Obtaining Permission

If you and your donor are willing, please have them sign the 'Accent Donor Waiver and Liability Release' (included in this packet), granting Knight-Thompson Speechwork full rights to use and reproduce the recording freely for accent research and education. A pdf of the release can also be obtained from [ktspeechwork.com](http://ktspeechwork.com). (Note: you don't need to include the copyright notice in the audio recording if you obtain a waiver from the donor and are planning to share the recording with Knight-Thompson Speechwork.)



## Labeling Files

If you plan to share your accent sample with us, it would be helpful if you would follow the following format in labeling your audio files:

LOCATION\_FURTHERSPECIFICATION\_G\_age\_sample

**LOCATION** should be the city, state, country, or whatever is the most useful geographic identifier.

**FURTHERSPECIFICATION** is an optional additional accent descriptor if one is needed, e.g. AAVE, RP, SCGA, BROAD, EE, etc.

**G** is gender. Most samples will be tagged M or F, but there's no need to confine ourselves to binaries if they don't fit. By all means use T (transsexual), I (intersex), or whatever other tags may be needed to adequately represent the speaker's gender.

**age** is self-explanatory. If the subject is unwilling to give an exact age, either make the best guess you can or specify the decade, e.g. 40s, 70s, 20s.

**sample** will be one of three possibilities: **dali**, **foxes**, or **extemp**, depending on whether the file is a reading of *Dali's Last Hurrah*, a reading of *All About Foxes*, or extemporaneous speech

Examples:

NYC\_F\_27\_foxes

NYC\_QUEENS\_F\_60s\_extemp

NYC\_M\_33\_dali

NYC\_NYLE\_M\_40\_extemp

NYC\_AAVE\_F\_21\_foxes

LONDON\_BROAD\_F\_32\_dali

LONDON\_MODERN\_RP\_M\_20s\_foxes

LONDON\_MLE\_M\_17\_extemp

EDINBURGH\_F\_44\_extemp

TEHRAN\_F\_24\_dali

TEHRAN\_M\_49\_foxes

CALIFORNIA\_SCGA\_M\_30s\_extemp

CALIFORNIA\_AAVE\_F\_23\_foxes

CALIFORNIA\_F\_16\_dali

COMPTON\_AAVE\_M\_20\_extemp

CAIRO\_M\_40s\_extemp

CAIRO\_F\_22\_foxes

## Accent Donor Waiver and Liability Release

I hereby grant and assign to Knight-Thompson Speechwork (KTS) exclusive rights, including copyright, to use, license, and sell this recording of my voice. Each and every such recording made for Knight-Thompson Speechwork is a "work made for hire" commissioned as a contribution to a collective work, and I understand that I will not be the copyright owner thereof and will have no rights thereto. I understand that the recordings may be published and distributed by means of various media, including, but not limited to, the Internet. I make my voluntary, unremunerated contributions to Knight-Thompson Speechwork in the interests of dialect research. I further understand that Knight-Thompson Speechwork may distribute and/or offer for sale copies of my recordings to inform students, professionals, and the public about accents, dialects, and language variety. I understand that Knight-Thompson Speechwork, as well as any partners, publishers, employees, editors, and agents KTS may work with, cannot warrant or guarantee that use of my sound recordings, made available on the World Wide Web or otherwise, will be subject to their supervision or control. Accordingly, I release Knight-Thompson Speechwork, as well as any partners, owners, publishers, employees, editors, and agents KTS may work with, from any and all liability related to dissemination of the material I have contributed or will contribute. I understand that Knight-Thompson Speechwork undertakes to keep my identity private and that my contribution will appear anonymously any place it is used. I have read this document and understand its contents.

Donor's name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Donor's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: (dd/mm/yyyy): \_\_\_\_\_

## Dali's Last Hurrah\*

What frosty land is this?

How was its fate decided?

Coal-black mountains loom;

Glassy pools reflect their huge, queer forms.

A bird-like woman searches slowly through the trees;

Flocks of trembling sparrows cluster about blood-red barns.

I feel the flashing claws of chalk-white terror rip at my breath.

My courage fails.

A furious, hoarse voice whispers from the inky shadows,

*“He knew his duty. We cannot be afraid.”*

Fighting a fog of sudden nightmare visions—

Savage lambs,

Fork-tongued horses,

Sleek otters, subtle as jazz—

I struggle to recall the verse drama of old—

My heart turns to ice.

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## All About Foxes\*

1. The quick brown fox took four small sips of strong coffee.
2. Oh boy, Kathy! Father is mad as hell! Why did you lie? You're not even sorry.
3. Carry these cheeses to the train before it's too late!
4. That fluffy little kitten *slashed* the cotton sofa apart! And now her poor paw is hurt!
5. Do you fear death, fair one?
6. Cut the flow! Now! The bathroom is flooding! Get the bags!
7. Where will you go, do you think, when the earth turns cold? Will you walk north?
8. Hurry it up! Sheesh. Does anybody take *pride* in their work anymore?
9. Two students planted big fir trees all around the zoo.
10. The abbot liked to fish without a lure.

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