



Starter tips for making a great field recording

There are lots of in-depth, technical guides for field recording out there, but this quick note covers a dozen top tips to help you get started if you don't have much experience in recording sound. Here are some of the biggest mistakes and how to avoid them, and some tips on how to get the best possible quality recording from the very beginning.

1. Don't forget to press record!

Many recording devices require two clicks of the record button to start recording. The first simply puts the device into 'ready to record' mode, the second actually starts the recording. Make sure you're definitely recording (!). Checking that the numbers on the time display are moving is one good double-check that your device is definitely recording, as well as the record light being on.

This is the number 1 basic error, and every recordist has done it at some point.

2. Wind sounds are your worst enemies - avoid at all costs.

You might think that's only a gentle breeze, and it can't possibly do anything to your recording, but IT WILL. Even a light wind sounds like someone's ripped your mic in half, and will render your recording unusable. Use wind shields, use shelter, avoid wind at all costs.

3. Verbal ID every take and rename your files something useful - this will save you loads of time later.

At the beginning or end of each take, just say where you are, when it is and what you're recording. When you come to sift through dozens of recordings you've made weeks later, you'll be thankful it's much easier to find that one take you thought was a beauty, instead of sifting through loads of similarly-named filenames.

You might think at the time "I'll definitely remember where this recording was", but it's surprisingly easy to lose track of what you've recorded, where and when.

Pro tip - we have our phone set up to automatically record the location of every photo we take, so each time we take a recording we snap a quick phone photo, so we remember the scene, but more importantly have a backup record of the location in the photo file info.

4. Always monitor with headphones on while recording anything.

You don't hear what your microphone/recorder is hearing, so you MUST wear headphones when recording anything, to identify things like wind sound, see if your recording levels are set up OK, and also to help you identify interesting details in the sound environment that you might want to focus on more.



Because microphones hear differently to human ears, they will tend to “telescope” towards the loudest sound they pick up, which means your recording could be dominated by a sound you weren’t consciously listening for at the time.

The solution? Always monitor with headphones on so you’re hearing the same things as your recorder, and if you need to move yourself physically towards the sound you’re trying to bring out, then get moving - using a field recording device is like using a fixed prime lens on a camera. You need to frame your sound, just as a good photographer frames the shot and doesn’t leave it to cropping in post-production.

5. Go for high quality

Always record in WAV (uncompressed audio) format, in stereo. You can always reduce the file size later, but you can’t increase the quality of a source recording if you’ve originally captured it as a low-quality mono MP3.

It’s the same principle as not being able to blow up a low-quality JPG image into a high-resolution image - you can scale quality downwards, but never upwards.

6. Get some over-the-ear headphones

In-ear headphones like iPod headphones don’t cut it - there’s so much bleed of external sound into your ears that you can’t monitor properly with them.

7. Watch your recording levels

It’s better to have your recording levels set slightly too low than too high - one sudden increase in volume in the sound environment and you’ll find your sound clipping, and digital distortion is impossible to get rid of and will ruin your recording.

If the sound is a bit too quiet, you can always boost it in editing later on. Err on the side of caution with recording levels.

8. Stay clear of the microphone

Don’t move towards, tap or click the mic, or knock the surface your audio recorder is on. Any knock or vibration can affect the sound. Clothing and jewellery can also make intrusive and unwanted additions to your sound.

What’s called “handling noise” is one of the commonest issues affecting field recordings - if you’re holding a recording device, even the smallest adjustment of your hand on the device will be audible on the recording. If possible, fit the recording device with a small tripod and put it down on a fixed surface while recording. If you don’t have a tripod, try to put the recorder down while it’s recording.

If you need to move around while making the recording - for instance, if you’re recording a walk through a market - try to fit a tripod to the recorder and don’t



touch the body of the recording device itself if you can help it. As a last resort, if you need to hold the device, hold it firmly but not too firmly, and once you have pressed record, try not to alter your grip at all.

9. Record more, not less

When you're recording and listening through headphones, 30 seconds can seem like an awfully long time, but it isn't really. Always record for two minutes more than you think you need to at the time, to give yourself more raw material to work with.

If you need to clip out 30 seconds because of a wind sound you didn't notice at the time, you'll be glad of the extra wiggle room. And if you ever find yourself thinking 'should I record this sound or not?', record it! It's better to delete unwanted recordings later than to miss out on that one magic moment because 'record' wasn't pressed.

10. Back up your recordings. Always.

As soon as you can, download and back up. If you're on a multi-day trip, download and back up every night.

11. Your batteries WILL run out.

Take spare batteries for your recording device with you.

12. Never leave home without it.

We've lost out on so many great recordings by simply not taking a portable, lightweight recording device with us everywhere we go. Take your recorder with you, and you'll always be able to capture that amazing sound - and believe us, you'll start listening to the world differently too, which is a fantastic experience.

If you're in a pinch, you can get a decent recording on a mobile phone device - but if you can, try to make sure your phone voice recorder app is set up to record in WAV or AIFF format, ideally in stereo, rather than mono MP3.

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