

Getting Started with Audacity

You have just given one of the best lectures of your teaching career when a student hurries up and asks about his grade. After a heated but hushed discussion you head back to your office. On the way, you are stopped twice by colleagues, one sharing an off-color joke and one complaining bitterly about another colleague. Back behind the closed door of your office, you spend the next twenty minutes singing the theme song to Gilligan's Island, at least the parts you can remember, as you read your email. Having dealt with your email, you turn to the task of downloading that exceptional lecture from your iPod. It is only now that you discover that your iPod is still recording.

Even if you do not want to routinely edit your audio files, there are times when you may want to make a few simple changes. Benefits to editing include:

- extraneous content can be removed, e.g., the 15 minutes when you were giving a quiz,
- you can produce smaller files that require less storage and can be downloaded (and listened to) more quickly,
- you can change the encoding of the file, e.g., convert a .WAV file to an MP3 file,
- break recording into more manageable parts,
- simple errors can be deleted or corrected, and,
- additional content can be added, e.g., a date or book title you couldn't recall in class.

But there is also a downside to editing. If you get carried away, it can be extremely time consuming. If your goal is professional quality audio, something that is really unobtainable using an iPod in your pocket, you'll easily spend more time editing your lectures than preparing and delivering them. Even simple tasks that initially seem trivial may create time management problems as the semester progresses. And if you trim or add material, the length of your recordings will change which can make finding content more difficult for students.

It is up to you to decide how much time you really want to put into editing, but until you become more experienced, you should probably limit your editing to very simple tasks. This set of tutorials will provide you with the minimum information you need to get started.

If you are going to edit files, you'll need the appropriate software. At a minimum, editing software should allow you to

- record audio files,
- playback recording,
- delete sections from recordings,
- add, merge, or replace sections of a recording,

- selectively change the dynamic range (volume) within a recording including blanking out a section of the recording, and,
- change the encoding you are using.

We will go over each of these tasks in this tutorial. Keep in mind that audio editing tools are freestanding applications. You can use them to create podcasts independent of an iPod. You can also use them for general audio editing independent of podcasting.

Depending on whether you use a Mac or PC and depending on how much you are willing to spend, you may have several choices when selecting what software to use. This set of tutorials is for Audacity, an open source program that is freely available for Linux, Windows, and OS X. While Audacity can be a little rough around the edges, it is very easy to learn to use and should meet your immediate needs. If you want something more sophisticated, there are commercial packages such as SoundStudio3 or GarageBand (part of iLife) on the Mac or Propaganda or Adobe Audition on the PC. But with any of these, expect a higher learning curve in addition to the added cost. These are probably all better choices if you have access to them and are willing to invest the time it will take to learn them. But if you want a free program that will meet your immediate needs and is easy to learn, read on.

This set of tutorials includes the following lessons:

- Getting Started (this lesson)
- Downloading and Installing Audacity under Windows
- Downloading and Installing Audacity under OS X
- Simple Editing with Audacity

If you need to install Audacity, then you should go to the appropriate installation lesson for your computer. Otherwise, you can go directly to the tutorial on using Audacity. To use the editing tutorial, you'll need the appropriate audio files. These can be downloaded from the web page.