Historical Fiction audiobook scripts

30 practice scripts from VO Journey Academy. Free to record, free to use in your reel. Download the PDF to mark up in the booth, or print it straight from here.

The Salt Road to Ostia

Ancient world, Rome · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

My mother bought her freedom with fish sauce, and she never let a senator forget it.

We were three miles out on the road to Ostia when the wheel went. Forty jars of the best garum in Rome, sweating in the sun, and a man in a purple-edged toga stepping down from his litter to look at us like spilled wine.

"You are blocking the road," he said.

"The road is blocking me," said my mother. "I have a ship to meet."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I know what you eat." She wiped her hands on her apron. "Your cook buys from me every market day. He says you like it strong."

I wanted the ground to open. The senator looked at the jars, and then at her, and something moved at the corner of his mouth.

"Four of my bearers," he said, "to lift your cart."

"Six," said my mother. "It is very good sauce."

The Boy Who Counted Grain

Ancient world, Egypt · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

The first thing Nakht learned in the House of Scribes was that a number could get a man beaten.

He was eleven. He had been given a reed pen, a cake of black ink and the grain tally for a village he would never see. Two hundred sacks owed. One hundred and sixty delivered. He wrote it down in his best hand, and felt proud of the neat little strokes.

"Good," said the old scribe, without looking up. "Now the tax men will go there."

"What will they do?"

"What tax men do."

Nakht looked at the forty missing sacks. They were only marks. He had made them himself. He had not known, until that moment, that ink was heavy.

Wool for the Abbey

Medieval, England · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 1 minute

Brother Anselm had a soft voice and a hard pair of scales, and Maud Fletcher trusted neither.

"Eleven sacks," he said. "Last year you brought fourteen."

"Last year my husband was alive to shear them."

"The abbey is sorry for your loss." He made a small mark in his book. "The rent is unchanged."

Maud had walked nine miles with a borrowed mule. She had rehearsed her speech at every one of them, and now it had left her entirely. So she said the true thing instead.

"If you take fourteen, Brother, I cannot keep the flock through winter. Then next year you will have none. Not from me, not ever again." She folded her arms. "I am told you are good at sums."

The monk looked at her for a long moment. Outside, the bell rang for prayer. He did not move.

"Twelve," he said at last. "And you will tell no one in the village."

"Eleven," said Maud, "and I will tell them you were kind."

The Year Without Bells

Medieval, plague year · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

Nobody rang the bell that spring, because there was nobody left who knew how.

I was nine. I remember the quiet more than anything. No cart on the lane, no hammer at the forge. Just the barley coming up green in fields that belonged to no one now.

My grandmother put a hoe in my hands. "Green does not wait for grief," she said.

So we planted. That is how I know the world goes on. I watched it.

The Queen's Laundress

Tudor, court intrigue · Adult (25-40) · Neutral British · 1 minute

A laundress knows a court's secrets before the court does. We see what is spilled, and on whom.

So when I shook out Lady Wrenham's sleeve and a letter fell from the lining, I knew better than to read it. I also could not read. That did not save me.

"You found something," said Mistress Pell. She had eyes like a pike.

"A paper, mistress. Folded small."

"Did you open it?"

"No, mistress."

"Did anyone see you find it?"

I thought of the scullery boy at the door. "No, mistress."

She held out her hand. I gave her the letter, and she dropped it into the copper with the boiling shifts, and pressed it under with the paddle until the ink came off in a grey thread.

"There," she said. "Now neither of us found anything. Fetch the lye."

I fetched it. My hands shook for a week. Lady Wrenham was gone from court by Michaelmas, and nobody ever told the laundry why.

The Player's Boy

Elizabethan, playhouse · Young adult (18–25) · Neutral British · 45 seconds

My voice broke on a Tuesday, in the middle of the queen's death scene, in front of nine hundred people.

One moment I was a dying empress. The next I was a goose. The groundlings roared. Somebody threw a nut.

Afterward Master Brome found me behind the tiring house, still in the gown.

"Well," he said. "That is the end of your queens."

"I know, sir."

"Do you know what it is the beginning of?"

I shook my head. I could not trust the thing in my throat.

He smiled, which he never did. "Villains, lad. Kings. Men who get all the best lines." He tossed me a wooden sword. "Stop weeping. You have just been promoted."

A Printer in Harbour Street

Colonial, 18th century · Adult (40–55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The man who came into my shop that night did not give his name, which told me most of what I needed to know.

"You print handbills," he said.

"I print whatever is paid for. Sermons, mostly. Notices of lost cows."

He laid a page on the counter. I read the first line and stopped reading.

"This will get a press broken," I said.

"It may."

"It will get a printer jailed."

"It has before." He was younger than his voice. There was ink on his cuff, so he had written it himself. "Your husband would have set it by morning."

"My husband is in the churchyard, and he left me four children and one press." I pushed the page back across the wood. Then, God help me, I kept my finger on it.

"How many copies?"

"Five hundred."

"Two hundred," I said. "No imprint. And you were never here. I was up all night with a lost cow."

The Midwife's Ledger

Colonial, New England · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

In thirty years I delivered four hundred and eleven children in this valley, and I wrote every one in the book. I wrote the ones who did not live, too. Somebody ought to.

The Tolliver girl sent for me in February, in snow to the mare's belly. It was her first, and it was coming wrong way round, and her husband was nineteen and no use to anyone.

"Is she dying?" he asked me at the door.

"Not yet. Boil water."

"What is the water for?"

"For you. It gives you something to do."

He went. I rolled my sleeves and knelt by the bed. Hannah Tolliver had hold of the bedpost with both hands, and her face was the colour of the sheet.

"Mistress Crane," she said, "my mother died of this."

"I know she did. I was not there."

"Does that matter?"

"It matters to me." I put my hand flat on her belly and felt the child, stubborn as a mule in a gate. "Now listen. I am going to turn him, and it will hurt, and you will call me names. I have heard all of them. You may make up new ones."

She laughed. It was half a sob, but it was a laugh, and that was when I knew we had a chance.

By dawn the snow had stopped. I opened the book and wrote: a son, living. The mother, living. And then, because nobody reads it but me: stubborn, both.

Miss Arden Declines

Regency, comedy of manners · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral British · 1 minute

Nobody tells a young lady that a proposal is far easier to refuse when the gentleman is kneeling on her embroidery.

"Mr. Fenwick," I said, "you are on my peacock."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The cushion. Six weeks of silk thread. Your knee is on his head."

He shifted, went rather pink, and carried on. "Miss Arden, you cannot be insensible of my regard."

"I am not insensible of anything, sir. It is my chief fault."

"I have four thousand a year."

"And I have a peacock with a dent in him."

"Is that a refusal?"

I looked at him properly then. He was not a bad man. He was kind to his horses and dull to his friends, and he had ridden twelve miles in the rain to ask a question whose answer he must have known.

"It is," I said, more gently. "But it is a grateful one. Do get up. Mama will be listening at the door, and I should like her to hear you leave with dignity."

Three Dances

Regency, ballroom · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral British · 30 seconds

Three dances with the same gentleman, and by breakfast the whole county has you married.

I knew the rule. I had known it since I was twelve. So when Captain Lyle bowed and asked for a third, I looked at my aunt, and at the forty fans that had gone suddenly still, and I thought of every sensible thing I had ever been told.

Then I gave him my hand. Let them count.

The Matchgirl's Sister

Victorian, London · Adult (25-40) · Neutral British · 1 minute

Nell came home on Friday with her wages short by sixpence and her chin up, and Dora knew at once there would be trouble.

"They fined you again."

"For talking."

"Then don't talk."

"I was telling Polly Reed her hands were bleeding." Nell sat down on the bed they shared and began unpinning her hair. "The girls are walking out Monday. All of them. I said I would too."

Dora put down the mending. "And eat what?"

"I don't know."

"And pay Mrs. Gant with what?"

"I don't know, Dora!" It came out louder than the room could hold. Next door, someone thumped the wall.

They sat in the quiet after. Dora was sixteen and had been the mother since she was eleven. She looked at her sister's raw red fingers, and did the sum she always did, and for once let the answer come out wrong.

"I've four shillings in the tea tin," she said. "Walk out Monday. But you walk at the front, where they can see your face."

The Signalman's Wife

Victorian, railway · Adult (40-55) · Scottish · 45 seconds

For eleven years I have set my clock by a train I have never ridden.

The night mail comes through the glen at ten past two. First the whistle, then Rab's lamp swinging green to say all is well. Then I sleep. That is the whole of my marriage, some weeks. A green light at two in the morning.

Last night the mail came through and there was no lamp.

I had my boots on before I knew I was out of bed. Half a mile of track in the dark, saying his name like a psalm. And there he was at the foot of the steps, with the lamp in pieces. He had only dropped it. I could have killed him.

Nine Miles From Water

Frontier, wagon trail · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

We left the piano at the foot of the pass, and my wife did not speak to me for nine miles.

I counted them. The oxen were down to bone and the water barrel knocked hollow every time the wheel dropped.

At the ninth mile she said, "You could have left the plow."

"We can't eat a piano, Ruth."

"We can't eat a plow either. Not till spring." She was looking straight ahead. "My mother carried that piano from Ohio."

"I know it."

"I was going to teach the girls."

"I know that too."

The wagon creaked on. Behind us, somewhere in the sage, a walnut upright was standing alone in the sun with its lid open. I had not had the heart to close it.

"Tom," she said at last. "When we get there. When there's a floor."

"I'll send back east for one. First money we see."

"You will," said my wife. It was not agreement. It was a contract, and I have been paying on it ever since.

The Schoolhouse at Dry Creek

Frontier, schoolhouse · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

On my first morning as a teacher, the biggest boy in the room was two years older than I was and a foot taller.

"You the new schoolmarm?" he said. He had his boots on the desk.

"I am Miss Hale."

"Last one cried by Wednesday."

"Then you have until Wednesday to learn something." I set a slate in front of him. "Write your name."

The boots came down slowly. The room had gone very still. He looked at the slate, and then at the door, and then his ears turned red, and I understood all at once.

I bent and said it low, so no one else would hear. "Stay after. We will start with the J."

The Porch at Willow Bend

Civil War, home front · Mature (55+) · Southern US · 1 minute

My boy came home in the fall of the third year, at night, and I hid him in the corn crib like a stolen ham.

Next morning Mrs. Pruitt came up the road in her good bonnet. She had two sons with the army and a way of counting everybody else's.

"Lida," she said from the gate. "I hear your Jesse's regiment is up in Virginia."

"That's what his letters say."

"Mine wrote there's men slipping off home."

"I expect there are."

"I expect there's a word for it." She looked past me at the yard, the crib. "You'd tell me. If you heard of any."

"Ada Pruitt, I have known you forty years." I kept on shelling peas. My hands did not shake. "If I hear of a mother who'd turn in her own child, I will surely tell you first."

She stood a while. Then she fixed her bonnet and went back down the road, and I shelled that whole bushel before I let myself breathe.

A Letter Read Aloud

Civil War, home front · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

I was the only one on Cobb Hill who could read handwriting, so at fourteen I knew every family's business before they did.

Mrs. Doyle brought me two letters. She set them on our kitchen table and sat with her hands in her lap like she was in church.

"The one from Danny first," she said.

I read it out. "Dear Ma. I am well and hope this finds you the same. The food is bad but there is plenty of it."

She laughed. "That is him exactly."

"He says the grey mare is not to be sold, whatever Uncle Pat offers. He says he has new socks from a lady in Pennsylvania and they are not as good as yours."

"I should think not."

I read her all of it, twice. Then there was the second letter. The hand was neat and strange, an officer's hand, and it was dated nine days after Danny's.

I read the first line to myself. Then the second.

"Well?" said Mrs. Doyle. "Go on, child."

I had read wills on that hill, and debts, and one proposal of marriage. Nobody had told me what to do with this. I looked at her face, still warm from the socks, and I understood that I was holding the last minute of her old life in my two hands.

"Mrs. Doyle," I said, "would you like me to fetch my mother first?"

She looked at the paper. She looked at me. She was not a foolish woman.

"No," she said quietly. "Read it plain."

The Fourth Fork

Gilded Age, high society · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

There were four forks at my place and eleven women watching to see which one I would pick up.

I was three months out of a mining camp in Colorado. My husband had struck silver, bought a house on the avenue, and assured me that money was the same as manners. He was at the far end of the table, laughing, with the wrong fork already in his fist.

"Mrs. Tully," said our hostess sweetly. "Do tell us about the West. Is it true one eats with a knife?"

A footman leaned in with the fish. As he did, his sleeve brushed the outermost fork, turning it a quarter inch toward my hand. He did not look at me. He had a County Mayo face, like my father's.

I picked it up.

"Oh, we ate with whatever we had, Mrs. Van Alder," I said. "Mostly we were too busy digging up the money."

Somebody's glass stopped halfway. I ate my fish. It was the best thing I tasted all year.

Piecework

Gilded Age, immigrant story · Young adult (18-25) · Irish · 45 seconds

They paid us by the piece, so I learned to count in sleeves.

Forty sleeves made a dollar. A dollar made the rent on a room I shared with my cousin and two girls from Cork. Twelve dollars made a ticket for my mother, steerage, Queenstown to New York.

"You're slow today, Bridie," said the foreman.

"I'm careful today."

"Careful doesn't pay."

He was right about that. But my mother would be wearing a coat when she came down that gangway, and some girl like me would have sewn it. So I set every sleeve as if it were hers. Four hundred and eighty to go.

The Telegram Boy

World War I, home front · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 1 minute

In 1916 I was fourteen years old and the most frightening person in Mill Lane.

It was the uniform. The red bicycle. When I turned into a street, the curtains moved, and every woman on it stood quite still until I had passed her gate.

That morning the envelope was for number twelve. Mrs. Ashby was on her knees, scrubbing the step.

"Not here," she said. She did not get up. "You've the wrong house."

"Mrs. Ashby, number twelve."

"There's an Ashby in Canal Street. Try there."

"It says Mill Lane, missus."

"Then it says wrong." The brush went round and round on the same clean stone. "I've the dinner on. I've his room aired. You take that back to the office and tell them."

I was supposed to hand it over, touch my cap and go. That was the rule. Instead I leaned the bicycle on her wall and sat down on the wet step beside her, and we stayed like that, not opening it, until her neighbour came.

The Night Sister

World War I, field hospital · Adult (25-40) · Australian · 1 minute

The boy in bed fourteen asked me to marry him every night at two o'clock, and every night I told him I would think about it.

He was from Ballarat. So was I, near enough, and in a tent in France that made us family.

"Sister," he said. "Have you thought about it?"

"I have, Private Dunne. I'm still thinking."

"I've a hundred acres. Well. Dad has."

"Sheep or wheat?"

"Sheep."

"Then it's a no. I can't abide sheep."

He laughed, and it caught in his chest, and I held the cup while he got his breath back. He was nineteen. The surgeon had told me at six that there was nothing more to be done.

"I could sell the sheep," he said, when he could.

"Could you now."

"Go into wheat."

I tucked the blanket in at his shoulder. Outside the guns had gone quiet, which they did

sometimes, just before dawn.

"Well, that changes things," I said. "Ask me again tomorrow."

Dust on the Supper Plates

Depression era, Dust Bowl · Mature (55+) · Midwestern US · 1 minute

My mother set the table with the plates upside down, so the dust would not get in before the food did.

That was 1935. I was ten. I thought everybody's mother did it.

That night Pa came in from the field with his hat in his hands and stood there like company.

"Wheat's gone," he said.

Ma turned her plate over. "All of it?"

"There's a patch by the creek."

"Then we have a patch by the creek." She put a biscuit on his plate. "Sit down, Walter."

"Ellen. The bank."

"The bank can wait till after grace."

He sat. Outside the wind was picking up again, that dry hiss I can still hear if I am not careful.

"Lord," said my mother, with her eyes open, looking straight at him, "we thank you for what is on this table and for who is at it. We will discuss the rest with you directly. Amen."

Pa laughed. First time in a month. Then he ate his biscuit.

The Bank on Main

Depression era, bank failure · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

The morning the bank closed, my father put on his Sunday suit and went down to stand in line with everyone else.

He was the manager. He had the keys in his pocket. He could have stayed home behind a locked door, and a wiser man would have.

"They trusted me with it," he said. "They can look at me while it's gone."

He stood there until dark. Nobody hit him. I think that was worse.

Blackout Curtains

World War II, home front · Adult (25-40) · Neutral British · 1 minute

Mrs. Pym would not go to the shelter, and she had told three air raid wardens so before they sent me.

"I am seventy-nine," she said through the letterbox. "I have a bad hip and a good cellar."

"You haven't got a cellar, Mrs. Pym. I've seen the plans."

"I have a cupboard under the stairs."

"With respect, that's a cupboard."

"With respect, young woman, it has gin in it."

The siren was already going. Somewhere over the docks the searchlights were up, crossing and uncrossing like knitting needles. I was twenty-two and I had a tin hat, a whistle and no authority whatsoever.

"Mrs. Pym. I'm not allowed to leave you."

"Then you had better come in."

The door opened. She was in her dressing gown, with her hat on, and she looked me up and down.

"You're very thin," she said. "Do you play cribbage?"

"No."

"You will by morning."

I did, too. I lost four shillings, and she never once looked at the ceiling.

The Bicycle Courier

World War II, resistance · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

Colette was sixteen, and the papers that could hang nine people were rolled inside the handlebar of her bicycle.

She had made the ride eleven times. Bread in the basket, schoolbooks on top, a ribbon in her hair because her mother said soldiers did not look hard at ribbons. The checkpoint at the bridge was always the same two bored men.

Today there was a third. He was older, with spectacles, and he was reading every card.

"Papers."

She gave them. Her hands were steady.

"Where do you go?"

"To school, monsieur."

"It is Thursday. There is no school on Thursday afternoon."

Her stomach dropped through the road. He was right. Nobody had asked before.

"To my teacher's house," she said. "I am behind in Latin."

"Latin." He picked up the top book and opened it, and she watched him read her name on the flyleaf, and the little cat she had drawn there when she was twelve.

"Amo, amas," he said.

"Amat," said Colette. It came out a whisper.

"Louder. Your teacher will not hear you."

"Amat. Amamus. Amatis. Amant."

He closed the book. For one second his hand rested on the handlebar, right over the cork, and she thought: he knows. He knows and he is deciding.

"I have a daughter who draws cats," he said. He put the book back in the basket. "Go and learn your Latin, mademoiselle. Quickly."

She did not remember crossing the bridge. She was a mile past it before she could feel her legs.

Carrots on the Pitcher's Mound

World War II, home front · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

We dug up my brother's pitcher's mound to plant carrots, and I cried harder over that than I did the day he shipped out.

Frankie had built it himself. Hauled the dirt in a wagon and thrown four thousand fastballs off it into a mattress nailed to the garage.

"He won't mind," my mother said.

"He'll mind."

"Then write and ask him."

So I did. His answer took six weeks and came with half the words cut out by a censor. What was left said: plant the carrots, squirt. But you leave the rubber where it is. I'm going to need it.

We planted around it. It looked ridiculous. It was the best garden on the block.

The Radio in the Flour Bin

World War II, resistance · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

We kept the radio in the flour bin, which is why, for three years, the news from London always arrived a little dusty.

My husband listened at night with a blanket over his head. I kept watch at the shop window. That was our marriage during the occupation: one of us under a blanket, one of us at the glass.

"Anything?" I would whisper.

"Shh. Yes. Wait."

"Is it good?"

"It's far away. But it's good."

One evening the knock came while he was still under. Three soldiers, wanting bread. I served them slowly, talking about the weather, the price of rye, anything at all. Behind me the bin stood with its lid not quite shut.

The youngest pointed. "What is in there?"

"Flour," I said. "Would you like to see?"

I threw the lid up and plunged both arms in to the elbow. White went everywhere. He stepped back, brushing at his sleeve.

They left with four loaves. My husband came out an hour later, white as a ghost, still grinning.

Party Line

1950s, small town · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

In 1956, eight families on Route Four shared one telephone line, and Mrs. Odell listened to all of them.

Everybody knew. You could hear her breathing. You could hear her canary.

So when Bobby Kessler finally called to ask me to the spring dance, there were three of us on the line.

"Hi, Peg. It's Bobby."

"Hi, Bobby."

"I was wondering. If you weren't doing anything Saturday."

I opened my mouth. I had waited since October. And what came out was nothing, because suddenly I could not remember one word of English.

The line hummed. The canary sang. Bobby cleared his throat.

"Well, for heaven's sake," said Mrs. Odell. "She'd love to. Pick her up at seven and bring her mother's pie plate back."

Nobody said anything.

"Seven's fine," Bobby said faintly.

"Good boy. Now get off, I'm expecting a call."

We have been married thirty-one years. Mrs. Odell sat in the front pew. I felt it was only fair.

The First Set on Maple Street

1950s, suburbia · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 30 seconds

The first television on Maple Street arrived on a Thursday, and by Friday my father had nineteen new best friends.

They came with folding chairs. They came with casseroles. Mr. Brandt from the corner, who had not spoken to us since the fence, came with a cake.

My mother counted heads in the living room and sighed. "Well," she said. "Now I know what it costs to be popular. Two hundred dollars and no place to sit."

Moon Night

1960s, moon landing · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The night men walked on the moon, my grandmother would not come in from the porch.

Everybody else on earth was in front of a television. I could hear ours through the screen door, and my father shushing my brothers. Grandma sat in her rocker with her face tipped up.

"You're missing it," I said.

"I am looking right at it."

"You can't see anything from here."

"Neither can they, on that fuzzy little box." She patted the step. I sat. "I was born in a sod house, Annie. I rode to my own wedding behind a mule."

"I know, Grandma."

"You don't. You can't. That's all right." She pointed with her chin. "There are two boys standing up there tonight. Somebody's sons. I want to look at the real thing while they're on it."

So we looked. It was just the moon, the same as always. That was the part I could not get over.

Inside, my father shouted. Grandma did not turn her head. "There," she said softly. "Good for them."

The Envelope on the Icebox

1960s, draft notice · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

The letter came on a Tuesday, and my mother put it on top of the icebox, where she put everything she did not want to be true.

It sat there through supper. Nobody mentioned it. My sister talked about a boy in her typing class until even she ran out.

After, my father said, "Help me with the car."

There was nothing wrong with the car. He lifted the hood anyway, and we stood on either side of the engine in the garage light, looking at it.

"You open it?" he said.

"I know what it says."

"When?"

"The nineteenth."

He nodded. He checked the oil, which he had checked on Sunday. My father had been in Italy at twenty. I knew that from a photograph, and from the fact that he could not watch fireworks. He had never said one word to me about it.

"Sal Russo's gone to Canada," I said.

"I heard."

"What would you say? If I did."

He wiped the dipstick for a long time. I could hear my mother running water in the kitchen, running it and running it.

"I'd say I'd drive you to the border myself," he said. "And I'd say I'd be ashamed. Both. Same breath." He put the dipstick back and still did not look at me. "I don't know which is right, son. I've had twenty-five years to figure it out and I don't know. But you're not going to decide it up on that icebox. Go get the letter. We'll read it out here."

Practice with these, record them, post them as demos or reels, use them in auditions. Please do not resell them as scripts. © VO Journey Academy · avosjourney.com