

Rough Guide to Specs and Sides

by [Sarah Elmaleh](#)

So you'd like to cast your game.

You have wonderful, unique characters you can't wait to bring to life with performance, and words for them to say - now all you need are actors that will be a fantastic fit. Maybe you're working with a casting director (casting is definitely a specialized skill, as you're about to learn), or maybe you're casting your project yourself. Either way, you'll need a casting package to send to your casting director or directly to agents and talent - but *what* do you send? Specs and Sides!

♦ What are specs and sides? (See page 4 for examples!)

"Specs" is short for specifications. Specs cover character information such as: physical description, artwork, vocal references, backstory and other assets that outline who the character is and how the actor should approach and format the audition.

"Sides" are the specific words your actor will record as the character. Sides can be a list of stand-alone lines, with varying degrees of context, or whole scenes that include dialogue with other characters.

♦ What's most important to know about creating specs and sides?

There's plenty to consider, but here are two worthwhile goals:

- a) **select potent, psychologically rich character details**
- b) **find the sweet spot between too much information/dialogue and too little.**

In other words, you're aiming for *evocation* - you want to provide the character's essential facets and history, and inspire your actor in exploring how they think and sound, while not overwhelming the actor in excess backstory, specifications or scenes.

♦ What kinds of information does an actor find useful?

Actors draw on all kinds of character information - you may have already guessed that aesthetic and demeanor are key, and great character art can be worth a thousand words. But some of the most intriguing cues address how the character operates in the world: what are their cares, their fears? How do they navigate relationships? How do they cope with stress or difficulty - aggression, humor? Introversion or extroversion? Are they driven by righteous purpose, or greed?

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To risk a metaphor: for your characters to feel real rather than one-note, actors need to build their interpretation of them like a car. A Toyota can *visit* all kinds of places, without suddenly turning into a Ford. Likewise, you want character performances that can move through a variety of different circumstances or moods, showing depth and range, and still feel like the same person. When you help provide an actor with attractions, aversions, habits and such, these can serve as gears in the character engine (whereas more superficial touches might be more like a coat of paint). This is what is meant by “psychologically rich” character details.

♦ What’s too little or too much information?

Actors love to absorb whatever they can about the project and role, but at this stage you can actually muddy their search for helpful hooks into the character by hitting them with 10 paragraphs of world lore. There will be time for deeper immersion when you bring them onboard the project! Instead, focus on brief, but high-impact info for your specs. Example: a short paragraph about the world, plus a couple of paragraphs about the character and/or a handy list of bullet-pointed attributes should be enough. Casting is an art, not a science, and these aren’t rules, but guidelines - your mileage may vary!

The same principle also applies to sides: you want to cover signature phrases and essential characteristics, but if you give actors 8 pages of sides you may limit the quality and number of auditions you get back. Be thoughtful and strategic - most actors know you will have a feeling or make a call about their audition within 15 seconds or less of hearing them.

♦ Breaking it down - what to include in specs:

World/tone: put us in a place and mode/vibe. Focus on world features that deeply inform your characters and how they’ve adapted to or shaped their environment to survive and thrive.

Character art: include if you have! Art efficiently suggests where in the body the character’s voice might resonate and how they physically move, activates their overall attitude, and may spark other immediate instincts.

Character Age: how old they are (or sound like.) Have you given consideration to how old a character would be/sound given their life experience or profession? (The 25-year-old surgeon-admiral-president is quite the prodigy!) When listening to auditions, consider also whether you’re waiting to hear a stereotype of what a certain age sounds like. Where stereotypes are helpful, they avoid distraction from a performance due to how we expect a character to sound - but they can also be limiting, or even unrealistic.

Vocal quality/range: specifying vocal qualities can help ensure a spread of textures and pitch

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across your cast, so characters read as aurally distinct - but be aware that if you get too stuck on what the voice already *sounds* like in your head, you may miss out on inspired interpretations of who the character *is*.

Drives, beliefs, values, affect, background: how does the character see the world and relate to others; what attitudes/skills do they rely on to navigate their environment? The less superficial the description, the better. If the focus is more on what the character sounds like, you will hear actors' preoccupation with the sound of their voice in performance. If you want actors to focus on who the character *is*, show the parts that make up their engine (see above.)

References: be strategic with these or you'll get surface-level soundalikes. If you must reference celebrities or other characters as inspiration, focus on what *specific qualities* you want to borrow (and remix) from them.

Whether the role includes sensitive or vocally stressful content. Not everyone is comfortable or willing to perform scenes of extreme racism, for example, or simply prefer to know in advance of the session. The same goes for lots of intense yelling, which may hurt an actor's voice. (There's more to vocal stress - ask your actor friends about their experiences to learn more, and stay aware and communicative in session!)

Whether the role will record in a studio or the actor's home studio. Many indies take advantage of an actor's home studio to save costs, and more voice actors than ever have a quality home recording setup with strong connection options. Downsides may include: audible technical inconsistencies across the cast, extra time spent per actor troubleshooting/getting them set up with your settings, tools and workflow - as well as by the slight or serious draw on an actor's focus in-session, away from performance and onto technical concerns - but during a pandemic this is also the safest way to record. Many physical studios have also been cleared by the state and by SAG-AFTRA to work due to their robust sterilization protocols. No matter the choice, it's important that actors and agents know up-front whether you are intending to have the actor record from home, or in a studio.

♦ Breaking it down - what to include in sides:

Signature phrases and important story beats. Make each line count, by showing something essential. Include a couple scenes if there are major character turns or duality in their personality, all of which the actor must seamlessly and persuasively execute. Again, shoot for neither too much, nor too little. At max, a full page if you aren't including other characters' dialogue; a few pages if you are (for an actor, seeing both sides of the conversation can very be helpful.)

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Context. Where is the character? Are they safe, in danger, or in active combat? Do they have to speak over other noise; how far away is the person they're talking to, and how do they feel about each other? Was there a significant moment/event just before, or is one about to happen?

Genre/style/tone. Heightened, Shakespearean drama is different than subtle, contemporary drama, which is different than bold, comic book-style hijinks. This should come through in the art style and writing voice, but a few extra notes on tone may help ensure your actors sound like they fit into your world.

SAMPLE SPECS - "Emily"

World/tone - near-future zombie apocalypse with streaks of absurdism (keep characters fun but grounded and dimensional, rather than all-out zany)

Age - early/mid '20's

Vocal quality/range - youthful but tough and snarky, occasionally warm and affectionate, mid-range in pitch

Drives, demeanor, history - protective (but at arm's length), competitive, grieving a brother

Refs - Zoe in *Left 4 Dead* (scrappy; morbid humor), Emma Stone (slightly wild charm)

Sensitive/vocally stressful content? Some rough swearing, and projected callouts/efforts.

Recording location - actor's home studio, connecting via Source-Connect



SAMPLE COPY/SIDES - "Emily"

- *(on zombie head-smash execution)*
"Ah, mama's favorite sound!"
- *(giving her favorite weapon to an ally in combat/projected)*
"Not a scratch, you hear me?"
- *(confessing to a friend in the group, in a temporary moment of quiet)*
"After I lost Damian....Felt like I found myself in a front row seat at the nihilism circus. I mean like life has always just been about jumping through pointless hoops..so what if they're on fire now the world's gone sideways....Hey you gonna eat the rest of those beans or what?"

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Extra Tips on Listening to and Directing Auditions

♦ **Decide the vital touchstones of your character, the most important qualities that make them who they are.** Is it their unhinged sense of humor? The strength of their resolve? Think of how you want the player to relate to them, and what of their qualities inspire that feeling. Keep these to essentials – the rest could be a welcome surprise.

♦ **When these are clear in your mind, listen to an actor's audition.** Ask yourself:

- **Is their skill evident:** are they articulating clearly? Do you *believe* them? Do you feel a rooted sense of environment and relationships around them? Great voice actors won't sound like they're *reading*, but thinking and reacting spontaneously, and speaking with intention and connection to someone else.
- **Are they making strong, inhabited choices**, i.e. are they fully committed, and does it sound like a lived-in character? Do you feel this version of the character could experience more moods and situations and still sound like a single, real person? Is it a compelling take on the character?
- **Are those choices aligned with the character touchstones** you established (even if they *sound* different than you imagined? It's also possible this actor is meant for another role on the project, if not this one!)

♦ **Directing the actor live (either for initial audition or “callbacks”)** is an excellent opportunity to test out: 1) whether the actor can actually produce their performance consistently and on demand, and 2) how flexible and playful they are; what a session with them will actually be like. Seasoned voice actors can make technical and psychological adjustments in an instant. They can also create variety on their own, across multiple takes in a row (two or three are common, for short lines.) Pay attention to how they take direction - “For this next take, deliver it as though”:

- “The person they’re talking to is actually 50 feet further away.”
- “We need to hear this character’s pain, but they’re also trying to hide it from those around them.”

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Thank you for reading! Best of luck with your project!

If you have more questions, don't forget you can always enlist the services of an experienced casting director! [IMDb](#) is useful for searching the credits of games with your favorite performances. (Sarah also has a [games performance consultancy](#) with à la carte offerings including strategy and casting.)

Many thanks to [Courtenay Taylor](#) and [Dana Trebella](#) for their extensive feedback on this primer.