Voice Banking

My experience: what you need and tips to "*get it done*"

A Practical Guide
Using ModelTalker

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Read my living with MND/ALS blog
www.onein300.com

After being diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease (MND) in June 2014, it's only natural that my world was sent into a spin. However, knowing that my voice was probably going to be lost, spurred me on to look at this "thing" known as Voice Banking.

I had heard of it, was told it was difficult, and that there was no real recommended way of doing it!

However, in just 2 weeks in October 2014 I achieved the task. Voice Banking is easy and I hope you find this short guide a no nonsense, simple, and uncomplicated record of how I achieved the final result and how you can do the same.

There are a number of ways to bank your voice, and you will find lots of discussion on the internet regarding professional products, recording studios etc. This article is not an in-depth analysis of methods and tools. I'll just show you how to get Voice Banking completed at home with one of the products on the market.

WHAT IS VOICE BANKING?

But first let's clarify what we mean by Voice Banking.

Voice Banking is the ability to save your unique voice elements in an electronic medium. Once stored, your voice can then be used in any voice assistive technology that accepts a custom synthesised voice both now and in the future. This may be an iPad, a PC, eyegaze tracking based devices and perhaps, in the not too distant future, Brain Controlled Interfaces (BCI)!

Obviously, it has always been possible to capture specific sentences such as "I would like a cup of tea" or "I would like to go to the shops" using basic recording techniques and devices. However, this article is all about creating your personal synthetic voice. Such technology enables anything to be played. Importantly, your voice is yours to download.

OK WHAT DO

I NEED TO DO TO GET IT DONE?

Good question. 4 things – no more, no less:

- *a laptop (either windows or Mac. YOU CANNOT use an iPad to create your voice currently)*
- *a Headset Microphone (USB type) - please see Hints and tips*
- *a good internet connection*
- *a nice quiet room or area you can use for a week or so to do the recordings and have coffee!*

"***Hold on, don't I need specialised software installed?***"

Not at all, read on.

The tool I used to bank my voice and create a synthesised version is an online service known as **ModelTalker.** If you can use the Internet to do your online shopping, you can use **ModelTalker***.*

There are other products available, some of which I describe at the end of this guide. However, I am a "get it done" sort of guy. So when I found **ModelTalker,** I jumped at the chance of banking my voice.

Since I completed my Voice Banking, ModelTalker now charge to download your final voice, but it is only $100. Most importantly, you can create your voice and review it before you have to pay anything!

# SO THIS IS JUST LIKE USING ANY WEBSITE?

Yes, it really is.

So let's just get started. Like using a typical shopping website you will need to register a username. If you are reading this article online, just click on the following link, else type in the address on your **Chrome** browser (note only the chrome browser is supported).

www.modeltalker.org

You will see the following page displayed.
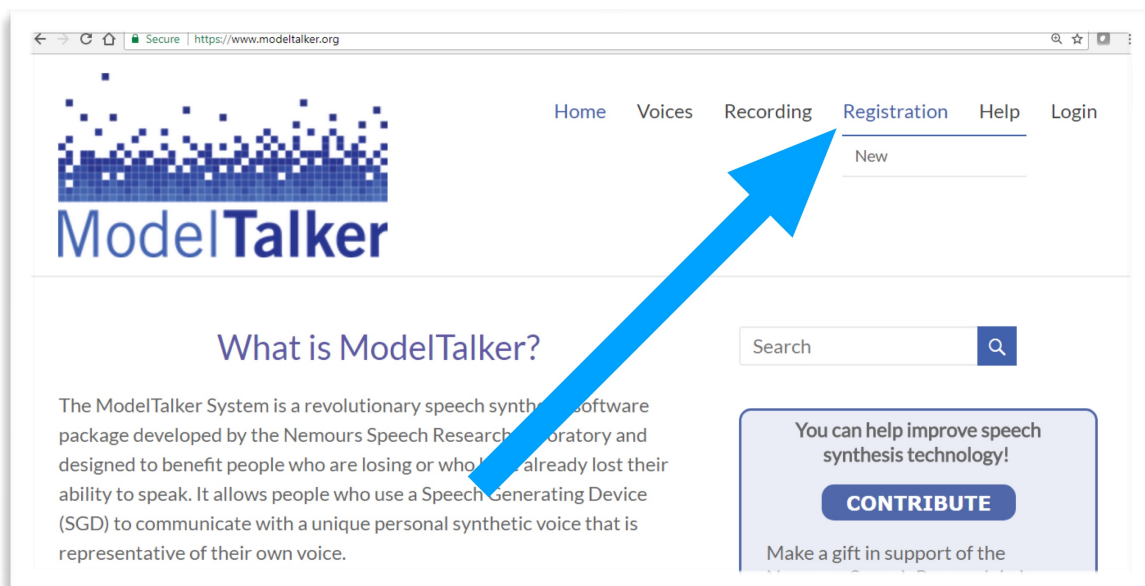
Simply click on **Registration, New** and up will pop the service selection page below:
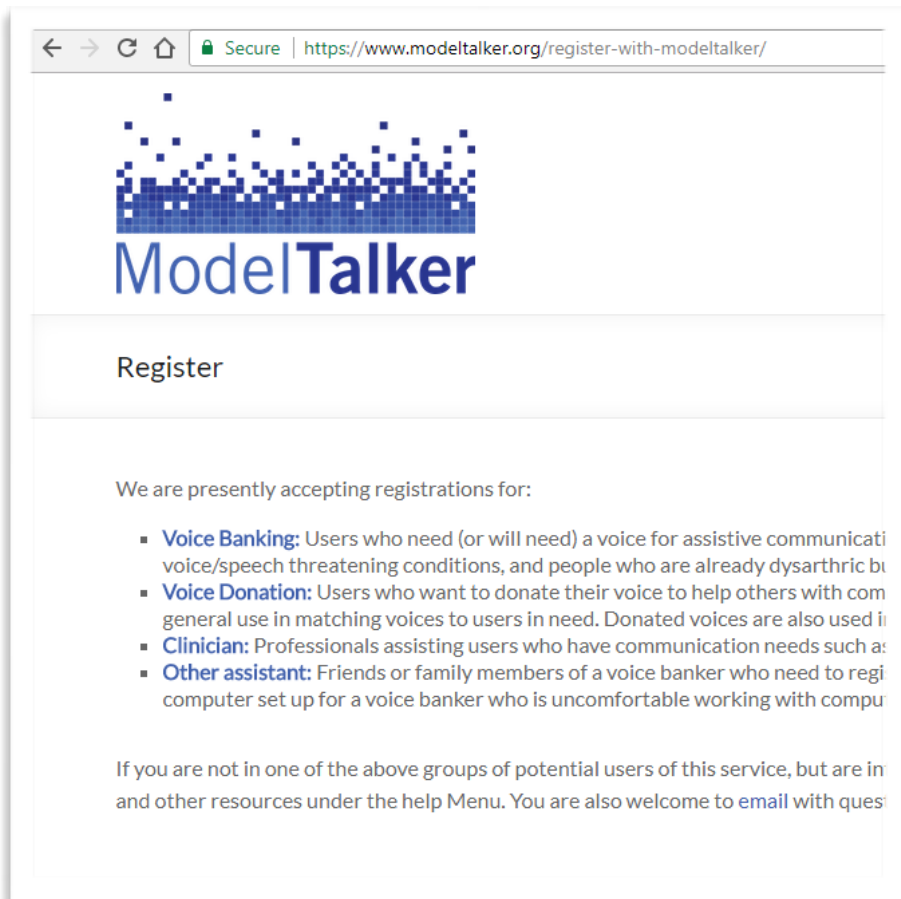
Click the **Voice Banking** link (above), and you will now be presented with the detail registration page:

Registration is free and no financial or payment details are taken.

You are asked for some typical registration details. None of the questions should cause you any problem. You will create a username and you will also need to set a password.

One question asks you to give permission for **ModelTalker** to keep your voice recordings so as to improve their service in the future. This was a no brainer for me, I clicked yes. But you can opt out. One advantage of **ModelTalker** keeping the recordings is that they may be able to offer/build a better voice in the future for you from these very same recordings!

Once registered, you will be able to start recording.

After completing the registration, ensure you are logged in, and then click on **Recording** and select the **Online Recorder. ModelTalker** gives you an option to download software or to simply use the web version. You should ideally use the web version (online recorder).

Keep it simple, there is no difference in quality and the web version is always up to date.
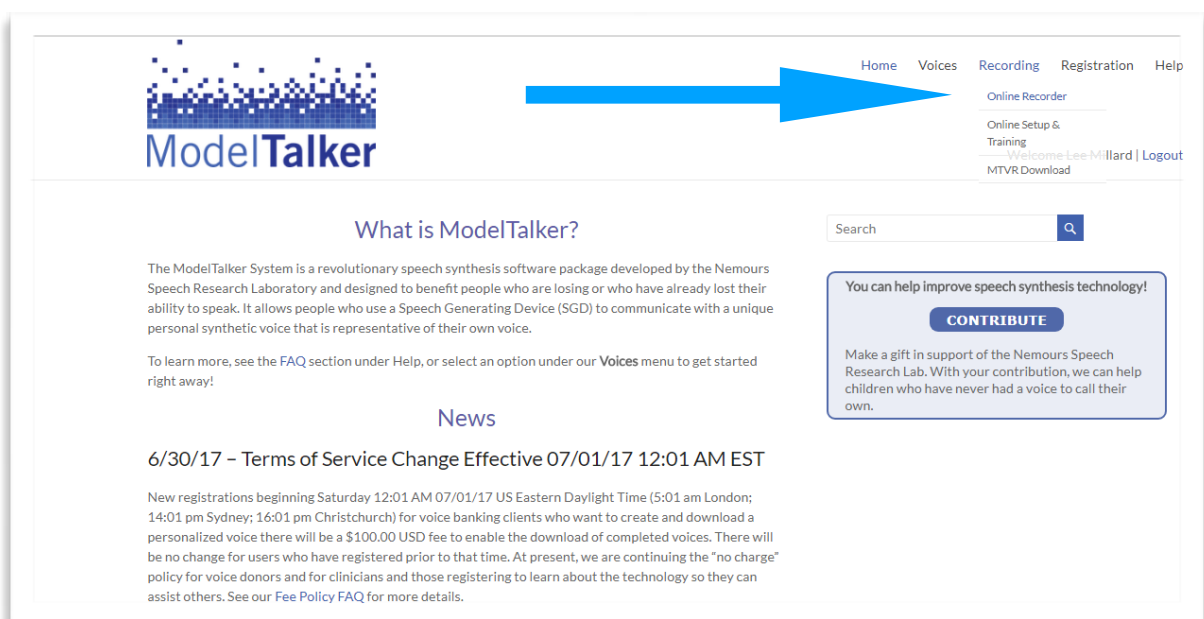
Before you start, the system will prompt you for a quick test recording (knowing as **screen**ing).

The system will ask you to record 10 sentences after which the *ModelTalker* team will review your recordings. This is good as they will tell you whether there is an issue with volume, microphone use or anything else.

Before you start the 10 sentences you must click on the settings button to measure the background noise.

There are two inventories of sentences, "screen" and "full". Enter the word *screen* for the 10 sentence list and make sure your "headset" is selected in microphone. Click the *Measure* button and be quiet! After 5 seconds a decibel reading will be shown. This needs to be about -60 dB or lower. Ideally it should be -65 dB or lower. Press the listen button to make sure it is actually quite quiet.

When satisfied with the background noise, click *Start* to start recording the sentences.

When ready, simply click on REC and speak the sentence. Complete all 10.

After finishing the 10 sentences you will receive an email back within 1 or 2 business days indicating whether or not your voice recordings so far are good enough to allow you to proceed. The *ModelTalker* team is quick to reply.

Once they confirm all is good, you are then ready to start the process of recording the 1600 key sentences, i.e. the "*full*" inventory.

TIP: you will need to set the settings every time you start a recording session. Don't forget to type _full_ in the inventory. Unless you do this, the measure button will not activate. I was tricked by this several times.

I found that recording the 1600 sentences took 2 weeks. I completed about 100 a day.

As you record you will see 3 dials on the screen, indicating volume, rate and pronunciation. Try to keep the dials in the green. Remember you can always re-record each sentence at any time. The system will automatically save where you are if you need to go for lunch etc. You can safely turn off your computer at any time.
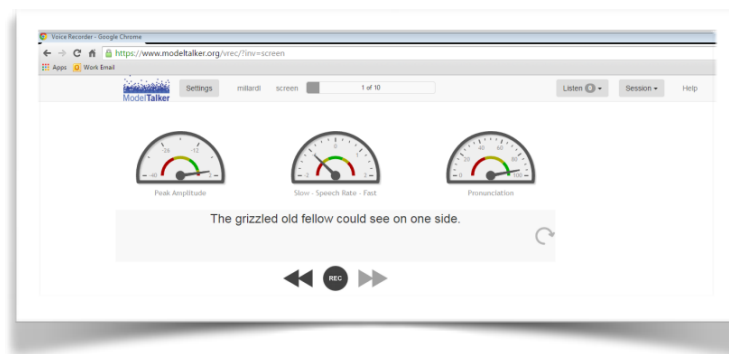
Hey Lee, what hints and tips have you got for using the online recorder?

I am glad you asked. Here are my top tips:

- ✓ You MUST use a Headset Microphone. It MUST be a USB type, and MUST NOT have automatic gain control (AGC) enabled. I used a Logitech H390, costing about £30 from any good online retailer, but the ModelTalker team now STRONGLY encourages people to use one of the similarly inexpensive mics recommended on the site instead, which can change from time to time (Logitech is not recommended now). You will know if you are ok as you do the test recordings.

- ✓ Set aside the same time every day, preferably in the morning when your voice is stronger.

- ✓ Setting up your microphone could be the most problematic part of your Voice Banking experience. With the various versions of Windows and Mac OS it may just appear. However, you might need some help from a computer savvy friend.

- ✓ Have a glass of water available.

- ✓ Do about 100 sentences in a session, no more.

- ✓ Don't rush and try and ensure the room remains quiet without a change in background noise.

- ✓ When looking at the 3 dials, the most important one is the peak amplitude. Don't get bogged down if you can't get it green all the time. I tended to redo any red ones, but kept yellow/amber or green. Listen to what you have recorded if you are concerned. You definitely don't want to be going into the high red. You might be shouting!

- ✓ The help pages and the FAQ section on the website are very good. READ them all before starting.

- ✓ Wear the headset mic just below the side of your mouth.

- ✓ You can test your Voice Banking as you progress. A sample voice is created after 25, 50, 100, 200, 400 and 800 sentences. The **Listen** button will flash each time a new sample voice is available. To test, click on the **Voices** drop down and select the voice generated after **_n_** sentences: This is a great thing to do and will encourage you to complete the recordings as your synthesised voice only gets better and better!
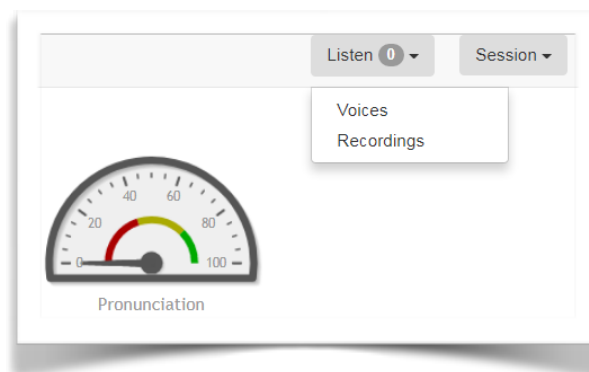
OK. SO I HAVE COMPLETED THE 1600 SENTENCES, WHAT NEXT?

Well, it's simple. An email is automatically sent to **_ModelTalker_**, and within a few days your voice is processed. When I created my voice I was then sent the file.

However, along with the new chargeable terms and conditions, Modeltalker have introduced a nifty little *audition* step to help with the voice fine tuning!

This process is easy and takes about 30 minutes. At the end you choose between two different voices selected for you.

You can use this on Window PCs, laptops, iPads etc.

I have Apple products, so I have installed a text to speech application called **Predictable** from the apple store on my iPad. To install my voice, all I had to do was enter my **ModelTalker** username and password and my voice was automatically downloaded!

Predictable is a paid for application and is currently the only app for iOS with **ModelTalker** integration. However, you can use your voice on some android applications and windows for free. For me, it was £100 and it is a great partner application to include.

I hope this short article has been useful in helping you understand how easy recording your voice for posterity really is. With hindsight, perhaps we should all record our voices this way. I only recorded mine when some damage was already present. However, it is still very good. A friend completed his when his voice was perfect and the results were superb, eerily superb!

I would just like to note that this document is a personal account of Voice Banking and how I achieved the desired results. There are other products/services available, but at the time of writing (October 2017), and being highly pragmatic, **ModelTalker** appeared to me as the only choice.

My motto is "Just get on with it!"

Other products/services to keep an eye on include

<u>Cereproc</u>

https://www.cereproc.com/

A commercial product with high quality voices. A personal online voice service is available but costs £500. Currently you have to pay before you start! **Not sure how this promotes usage?!**

<u>Euan Macdonald Research</u>

http://www.euanmacdonaldcentre.com/voicebank-research-project-2/

This is an interesting project but currently requires personal attendance in Edinburgh, Scotland and at this time no personal voice service is available. This may change in the future.

Me looking silly in my cheap headset

Please feel free to drop me an email if you have any questions about my experience with Voice Banking.