

# How to Set Your Prices

## *A Guide for Freelance Voice Teachers*

*by Meredith Colby*

Voice teachers are singers, and it's the rare singer who is business-minded by nature. We're artists who have eschewed the straight and narrow to dance with our muse.

Most of us started teaching voice because we knew how to sing, and teaching seemed like a better idea than waiting tables. Turned out there's a lot about teaching that we liked. We like the relationships, and helping others, and sharing in the process of growth and learning.

All the business-y stuff, though? Not so much.

### **Seeing What You Are**

Being a freelance voice teacher means you have your own studio, work for a multi-teacher studio or college, or both. In either event, you have to do more than simply teach voice. You have to market yourself, manage your schedule, keep track of each student's progress and payments, set up recitals, or any combination of those tasks either alone or on a team.

You also have to set your price and policies; two elements of teaching that can be hard to decide and even harder to enforce.

If you teach through an institution the price for your lessons is set by someone else. You may get a little less dough than you'd like on a per-student basis, but then again, you never have to be the bad guy. Someone else sets and enforces the policies, collects the tuition fees, and pays you. If you're teaching on your own, it's all up to you.

### So how do you set your price?

You'll need to weigh a number of factors, such as:

- The type of client you're targeting
- Where you live (if you teach in-person lessons)
- How much teaching experience you have
- Whether you have expertise in a certain genre
- Your bragging rights; both in performing and in teaching.

Then, you need to (in order):

1. Realistically asses how much you need to live on.
  - For this, you'll need to know how much you spend, and on what. How much for shelter, food, clothing, utilities, and consumables? This step in itself is a project for some people. You may have to keep track for a month or two to answer this question.
2. Now double that.
  - Sorry to bring bad news, but you have to weigh in basic and necessary life stuff, and it's *always* more than you think. You'll need to put aside money for taxes, saving (as a self-employed person you should save 20% of what you) and time off.

3. Realistically asses how many students you can see in a normal week.
  - This is a “know thyself” thing. Some people can do 40 half-hour sessions in a week, some like longer sessions and so have fewer students. You may have to play with this number over time.
4. Reduce that number by 10-20%.
  - Over the course of a month, your cancellation rate will be predictable. If you figure it in you won’t have to take it personally when people cancel. Just apply the appropriate cancellation policy and stick to your guns.
5. Do that math
  - How much you need to live on times two.
  - Then, how many students you can see minus 10-20%.
  - Number of dollars divided by number of students.

### **This is NOT What I Expected!**

This probably makes you nervous. You probably came up with a number that makes you uncomfortable. You may compare yourself to the other teachers in your area and decide that the number you came up with is “too much.”

It’s not.

It will require some studio management, some marketing, and some continuing education in both of those categories. But the more we all fear “charging too much,” the more we will, collectively, keep our prices low.

## What Kind of Studio Do You Have?

You may decide to offer

- Packages: a certain number of lessons are purchased to be used over a certain number of weeks. You decide the policies, and you're prepared to enforce them.
- Boutique: a small number of students who get A+ service from you.
- A la carte: you have a certain number of available times, and first-come-first-served.
- A combination of these

Does all this make you nervous? Does it make you want to retreat to “just giving lessons?” You're welcome to if you want to, of course, but you could decide that teaching voice is actual, real, professional work that deserves to be approached as a business.

I get it, though. Emotionally, it can be a hard bridge to cross. I'd like to offer you a few things you can keep in mind:

***Students will come and go, you have to live with you.***

You may love your students, and have a lot of empathy for their financial plights, but in the end, it's you who has to pay the rent. Put your needs ahead of your students when setting your fees.

### *Your policies should figure into your pricing.*

The more your policies favor your client the more you can charge.

For instance,

- if you sell an 8-week lesson package that must be used in 8 (or 9) weeks and allows for no cancellations and one rescheduled lesson per 8 weeks, you'll charge a bit less on a per-lesson basis.
- If you charge on a per-lesson basis and allow any and all cancellations as long as you have a reasonable (24 hours, 48 hours) cancellation time, you'll charge more.
- If you run a boutique studio, where you work closely with a small number of people and offer them lots of perks (recorded lessons, email follow-ups, marco polo practice support, etc.) you can charge a premium rate.

### *If you want to offer scholarship or sliding scale lessons, do it!*

I recognize the artist's journey, and have always kept room for a student or three who were on a sliding scale. I offer it to students who have shown that they care, and that ask for it. Or, the ones who are good clients and tell me they have to quit for financial reasons. I never start with the discount. I used to. I've learned my lesson.

### **Charge based on YOU rather than on The-Client-In-Your-Mind:**

I KNOW this makes you uncomfortable! But darlings...

- You are notorious for undervaluing your work. All y'all.

- Regular people get raises every year; you'll give yourself a raise once every five years. Maybe.
- A rising tide raises all ships, and likewise, if it's always low tide we all sit in the mud.
- You can always offer a sliding scale to a certain percentage of your students who both need and deserve it.
- You DO NOT want bargain-hunters for students.
- No. Really. You don't. You do not want the student who's looking for the least expensive teacher.
- You'll be a little uncomfortable with your price at first, but as you see that other people don't freak out about it, you'll get used to it.

Setting a price for your work can be really uncomfortable. But as you do so, please remember how important your voice teachers have been to you. You deserve to charge what you're worth.

Remember, if you want shoes, there are stores for bargain hunters, value-conscious consumers, and top-of-the-line shoppers. The same can apply to those seeking service providers, like voice teachers. You want to appeal to that last group.

### **You First**

You've been thinking about your prices from the point of view of your student. Or, perhaps, the Student-In-Your-Mind. You imagine what they're willing to pay

and what other voice teachers charge. When you imagine charging much more than the range you've come up with, based on those two criteria, you might feel really uncomfortable.

**But...consider a couple of things.**

**The first** is that the thing *really* making you uncomfortable is almost certainly emotional. You're worried about someone getting angry with you, or thinking mean thoughts about you, or gossiping about you. Or you're worried about someone whom you *know* you can help, but whom you will not be able to help because they can't afford you. So you feel sad for them.

**The second** thing that's making you uncomfortable is that you imagine you know other people's money situations. Their income, wealth, or relationship with money. We all do it. We attach *our* values and experiences around money to other people. Most of us have no idea we're doing it. So let me just take this opportunity to point out to you that you are, almost certainly, doing that. Let me also point out that *those people's money situations are none of your business*.

People spend money on things they value. If someone needs to sing, and you can help them meet that need, you're providing something valuable to that person. They will pay you for the value you bring. Just because it's YOU delivering the valuable service does not make it any less valuable!

Go forth and charge like someone who is delivering goods that are precious beyond measure. Because you are.