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Takeaway

Windows XP has many little-used features that can make it easy for people with disabilities. One of those features, Text-to-Speech, can also be useful when you want to have your computer read information to you while you do something else. Here's how it works.

Text-to-Speech

Windows XP includes many different features that make it accessible to all different types of users. One such feature is the Narrator which uses Text-to-Speech (TTS) technology to enable Windows XP to play back printed text in a pre-recorded spoken voice. This can be very useful if there are users on the network who have vision impairments and difficulty reading the text that is displayed on the screen. In this article I will outline how you can configure Text-to-Speech in Windows XP and then use the Narrator to read the text that is displayed on the screen.

Text-to-Speech in Windows XP

A sound card and speakers is all you need to make Windows XP talk to you. This is because Windows XP is capable of playing back text in a spoken voice. This technology is referred to as Text-to-Speech (TTS). Not only is this technology useful for a person with visual impairments, but it is also useful for someone who is working on multiple tasks at one time.

Windows XP makes this possible through a built-in driver called a TTS engine that is able to recognize text. It can play displayed text back using a pre-generated voice. Although it is a very useful technology, the engine included with Windows XP provides limited text-to-speech functionality but you can obtain third-party engines from other manufacturers. In any case, let's take a look at how you can configure the TTS engine included with Windows XP.

Configuring speech properties

Configuring TTS is very straightforward. Open the Speech folder within the Control Panel. The Speech Properties dialog box will appear as shown in **Figure A**. It allows you to control various TTS settings.

Under Voice Selection, you can select the voice you want to use. By default, there is only one voice available in Windows XP called Microsoft Sam. Additional voices can be downloaded from various Web sites.

Once you have selected a voice using the drop-down arrow, you can preview the voice by clicking the Preview Voice button. Assuming that the speakers are already connected to your computer, the voice will read the default text displayed in the Use the following text to preview the voice field. Alternatively, you can type in specific text to preview by highlighting the existing default text and typing in the text you want read.

Along with selecting a specific voice, you can also control the speed it which the voice reads text. By dragging the slider you can increase or decrease the voice speed, although the default value of "Normal" tends to be fine for most people.

By clicking the Audio Output button you can select the audio output device. From the Text To Speech Sound Output Settings dialog box, select from one of the two options: User preferred audio output device or Use this audio output device. By leaving the default Use preferred audio output device option selected, the audio device used for all other sound is also used for TTS. Conversely, if there is more than one audio device installed on the computer, you can specify a separate audio output device for use with your speech programs.

Selecting the Text To Speech output device

The Text To Speech Sound Output Settings dialog box also includes a Volume button. This allows you to control the TTS volume. By selecting this button, the Master Volume dialog box will appear allowing you to adjust the volume output levels.

Configuring the text-to-speech volume

As you will now see in the next section, once you have configured all the text-to-speech options, you can have Windows XP read the text on your screen using the Narrator.

Configuring the narrator

Windows XP includes its own TTS utility called the Narrator. If you require a TTS utility, keep in mind that it is limited in functionality. First of all, it is designed to work with a specific set of programs that includes Control Panel programs, Notepad, WordPad, Internet Explorer, Windows Setup, and the Windows desktop. This means it may not work for other programs. Second, the Narrator is only supported on the English version of Windows XP.

To start the utility press [Ctrl][Esc], press [R], type narrator, and press [Enter]. You can also configure the Narrator to start automatically each time you log onto the computer. Open the Utility Manager by pressing the [Windows Key][U]. Select Narrator and place a check beside the Start automatically when I log in option. As you can see, the Narrator is configured to start automatically when you launch the Utility Manager.

Once you open the Narrator, a dialog box will appear. It can be configured to perform several different TTS functions that include:

- Announce events on screen - The Narrator will read aloud new windows, menus, or shortcuts when they are displayed.
- Read typed characters - The Narrator will read typed characters aloud.
- Move mouse pointer to the active item - The mouse pointer will follow the active item that is on the screen.
- Start Narrator minimized - This allows you to start the Narrator without seeing the dialog box. The utility is minimized.

Configuring the Narrator to perform text-to-speech functions

The Narrator dialog box includes a Voice button that can be used to control voice settings. As shown in **Figure E**, voice settings for the Narrator include: Speed, Volume, and Pitch. Once you have configured the appropriate values, click OK to return to the Narrator dialog box.

Configuring Narrator voice settings

With the Narrator settings configured, your speakers turned on, and the volume turned up, you can minimize the Narrator dialog box, and Windows XP will be ready to talk to you. Depending on how you have the Narrator configure, you should hear the pre-configured voice read the text that appears on your screen. For example, if you are working in Microsoft Word, the Narrator will repeat the text as you type. You can turn off the Narrator at any time by clicking Exit from the Narrator dialog box and clicking Yes when prompted.

Troubleshooting Text-to-Speech in Windows XP

Troubleshooting can be a difficult task, especially if you have not worked with a specific technology before. When it comes to troubleshooting text-to-speech problems, there are a few points that you should keep in mind.

- Use the Preview Text button from the Speech Properties dialog box to verify that the TTS engine.
- Open the Utility Manager to check the status of the Narrator program.
- If you do not hear any sound and you are using external speakers, make sure they are turned on.
- Check the Master Volume dialog box to make sure that muting is not enabled.
- Verify that the speakers are properly connected to the computer. You may need to check the documentation that came with the speakers for the proper procedure.
- Use Device Manager to check the status of the computer's sound card. If necessary, reinstall or update the drivers for the device.

Now your computer can talk back to you too

Windows XP includes built-in technology to make it more accessible for users that are blind or who have vision impairments. The Text-to-Speech engine can read text on the screen using a pre-generated voice. Windows XP includes a default voice called Microsoft Sam. Other voices are available through third-party manufacturers.

You can hear your computer talk using the Narrator. This is the built-in text-to-speech utility that is included with Windows XP. It is designed to work with common programs that come with Windows XP such as Internet Explorer and WordPad. You can launch the utility by typing narrator using the Run command. The Narrator provides limited text-to-speech functionality, but third-party programs are available from various manufacturers.

Additional resources

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- Sign up for TechRepublic's Downloads Weekly Update newsletter
- Sign up for TechRepublic's Windows XP newsletter
- Check out all of TechRepublic's free newsletters
- Catch up with all the How do I articles on TechRepublic.

Version history

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