

MS TECHNOLOGY

Audio alternatives work for people who have low vision

by Ellen Kampel & John M. Williams

An audio file is a kind of container for storing data that you can **listen to** on a computer or a mobile device. They enable visually impaired people to hear newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and even books instead of struggling to read them. Zunes, iPods and other handheld MP3 players, personal digital assistants, and cellular phones are also favorite sources of audio information and entertainment.

How important are audio files to visually impaired people?

“With audio files and other speech products, I stay connected to the world,” Jonathan Watts said. Watts is legally blind (defined as having 20/200 vision or worse in the better eye with corrective lenses). He works as a statistical analyst for a Washington, DC, health insurance company and says all of his blind associates also use audio files.

Sarah Thomas, a secretary who is also legally blind, added, “When I started losing my sight, I was devastated. I thought I would lose my job. I thought I would no longer see movies. I thought I would never enjoy a great book again. Or read a newspaper. How wrong I was!”

Both people swear by their headphones which allow them to

stay focused on the content of an audio file by eliminating noise around them.

The Internet offers a plethora of audio files including news, sports, entertainment, and financial data. Audio books are a popular download. Today, many titles are available in unabridged form for commercial purchase in talking-book style with minimal music or sound effects.

Increasing numbers of audio books are released when their print editions are. People with no visual impairments want to listen while they commute, so the market is substantial.

The National Library Service for the Blind and Handicapped of the Library of Congress spearheads the provision of services to people with disabilities. Users can borrow audio books free. Go to loc.gov/nls or call 888-NLS-READ.

Talking Book Productions, a division of the American Foundation for the Blind, is producing **Momentum Audio**. Go to nationalmssociety.org/Momentum to hear all about it.

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