

## **Dr. Mac: Rants and Raves**

### ***Audio Chatting Devices Compared & Contrasted***

by [Bob "Dr. Mac" LeVitus](#)

I recently realized that I'm doing a lot more "audio chatting" lately. By that I mean talking and listening to people talk using my Mac rather than a land-line or mobile phone. As some of you know, I am part of a podcast called "MacNotables," along with our fearless leader Bryan Chaffin and about a dozen other serious Mac heads like Jason Snell, Chris Breen, Adam & Tonya Engst, Andy Ihnatko, Dan Frakes, Ted Landau, Dennis Sellers, and Jim Dalrymple (I hope I didn't leave anyone out!), and hosted by the "Voice of MacVoices," Chuck Joiner.

The reason I mention MacNotables is that we use Skype, the cool, free, Internet telephone service, to record the podcasts. And because of that I've had the opportunity to use quite a few different devices to talk and listen. Furthermore, because Chuck is recording it, he's very critical of the sound quality and is an excellent sounding board (pun intended) for my research into such devices.

I also use Skype for most of my consulting telephone calls because you just can't beat free. So I've also had the opportunity to try these devices with real, live clients, and ask them how I sound. In other words, I have had quite a bit of real-world feedback as well.

Let's start with what not to use for your audio chats. The first thing you should avoid using are your computer speakers. It matters not if you have a laptop with built-in speakers or a desktop with speakers connected to it. When you use speakers for audio chatting, the person you're talking to will hear an echo when they speak, that's their voice coming out of your speakers. And the built-in microphones that come with some Mac models aren't very good, either. You can get by with using a built-in microphone and speakers in an emergency, but you'll sound better and hear better with any of the solutions I'm about to describe.

By the way, all of these solutions are USB devices.

#### **Skype Mac Starter Kit**

The Skype Mac Starter Kit couples a pair of stereo earbuds with a tiny integrated microphone. A small velour carrying bag is included making this the most portable solution by far. The whole device weighs an ounce or two, tops. While it's a bargain at less than \$20, the sound quality is average at best.

#### **Plantronics DSP-300 Headset**

This system consists of lightweight stereo headphones with a boom microphone. The headphones are "digitally enhanced" and sound better than most inexpensive headsets. The microphone uses noise-canceling technology and people I chat with say it sounds pretty good to them. I used this rig for MacNotables tapings for many months and nobody complained.

Alas, it's somewhat bulkier than the Skype setup so it's a little less desirable for using on the road.

(I'll explain why I don't use the DSP-300 for MacNotables tapings anymore in a momentâ€¦ )

### **Chat 50**

The ClearOne Chat 50 is a personal speakerphone -- a little box around 4 inches square and 2 inches deep. It contains both microphone and speaker but because it is a "full duplex" device, there's no speaker echo and your voice won't cut in and out when the other person speaks. Chuck didn't like the way it sounded for recording MacNotables but thought it sounded pretty good for regular conversation. I now use the Chat 50 most of the time, especially when I'm working with a client. I'm a lot happier when I don't have to be tethered to my Mac by a USB cord.

The Chat 50 works as promised and I recommend it if you prefer speakerphones over headsets, assuming you can afford it. That's my only complaint about the Chat 50 -- \$180 is pretty steep for a speakerphone. On the other hand, it works well and is more convenient to use (at least in my humble opinion) than a headset.

### **Blue Snowball Microphone**

If you want to sound as good as possible to people you chat with, or if you're using recording audio chat for a podcast like Chuck does for MacNotables, consider the Blue Snowball Microphone and the stereo headphones of your choice. After a lot of experimentation, Chuck says that my voice sounds the best when I use the Snowball. He said it sounded a LOT better than any of the other solutions I've described. The only downside is that the Blue Snowball is a fairly expensive solution at \$160 (and that's without stereo headphones â€" if you don't have a decent set laying around you'll need to add at least \$20 to the cost). On the other hand, if you use GarageBand, the Blue Snowball is a great mic for recording vocals and almost anything else.

So there you have it... the low-down on four different ways to audio chat. The Skype Mac Starter Kit is the cheapest way to chat if you don't mind mediocre sound quality. The Plantronics DSP-300 is a great middle of the road solution. Your chat buddies will sound better to you and you'll sound better to them if you choose this solution. The Chat 50 was the only speakerphone in the bunch and it works great for those who prefer a speakerphone and don't mind the relatively high price. Finally, the Blue Snowball microphone with the headphones or earphones of your choice are the best sounding solution. If sounding great is your most important criteria, the Blue Snowball is the way to go.

And that's all he wrote...

### **Resources**

[MacNotables podcast](#). Free.

[Skype for Mac Starter Kit](#). \$19.99

[Plantronics DSP-300 Headset](#). \$80.

[Blue Snowball Microphone](#). \$160.

[Chat 50 Plus Speakerphone](#). \$180.

*Bob "Dr. Mac" LeVitus has been a Macintosh user for a long, long time and has written 49 computer books including [Mac OS X Tiger For Dummies](#) and [GarageBand for Dummies](#). He also offers expert technical help and training to Mac users, in real time and at reasonable prices, via telephone, e-mail, and/or unique Internet-enabled remote control software. For more information on Bob and his services, visit [www.boblevitus.com](http://www.boblevitus.com).*