

2026 Audio Codec Cheat Sheet

Every codec a video product meets in 2026 - and the one question that picks it.

The one rule

Choose by where the audio must play, not by which sounds best at one bitrate.

Decodability beats fidelity - and read the licensing column before you commit.

The codecs at a glance

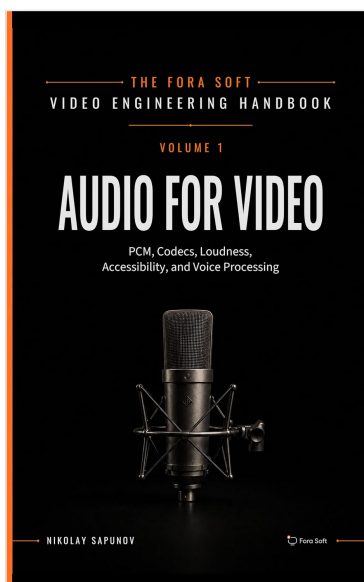
Codec	Year	Bitrate	Latency	What it's for
Opus	2012	16-128 kbit/s	as low as 5 ms	Real-time (WebRTC), open web
AAC-LC	1997	128-256 kbit/s	~20-40 ms	Default for video-on-demand
xHE-AAC	2012	12-96 kbit/s adapt	~40 ms+	Adaptive mobile streaming
E-AC-3 (DD+)	2004	192-384 kbit/s	~32 ms	Streaming surround + Atmos
AC-4	2015	~96-256 kbit/s	broadcast-tuned	ATSC 3.0, Atmos streaming
MPEG-H 3D	2015	~256 kbit/s	low	Immersive broadcast, 360 RA
LC3 / LC3plus	2020	64-160 kbit/s	7.5 / 10 ms frames	Bluetooth LE Audio, Auracast
G.711 / G.722	1972/88	48-64 kbit/s	very low	Telephony / SIP fallback
EVS	2014	5.9-128 kbit/s	~32 ms	4G/5G VoLTE & VoNR
FLAC / ALAC	2001/04	~50-60% (exact)	n/a	Lossless masters / music tier

Pick by use case

Video call / conferencing	Opus (fallback G.711 / EVS on the network).
Video-on-demand	AAC-LC baseline + xHE-AAC for adaptive mobile.
Surround / Dolby Atmos	E-AC-3 for streaming; AC-4 / MPEG-H for broadcast.
Bluetooth playback	LC3 - better quality at half SBC's bitrate.
Perfect master / music	FLAC (open) or ALAC (Apple).

Licensing in one line

Royalty-free: Opus, FLAC, LC3 core, MP3 (since 2017). Patent pool (Via LA): AAC family, MPEG-H. Licensed: AC-3, E-AC-3, AC-4 (Dolby). At ten million units this column can change your choice.



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Audio for Video: A Complete Guide to Sound in Video Products

From PCM and Codecs to Loudness, Accessibility, and Real-Time Voice Processing

By Nikolay Sapunov, CEO at Fora Soft · 1,229 pages · Kindle & paperback on Amazon

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This cheat sheet lines up every codec a video product meets in 2026 by bitrate, latency, use case and licensing. Volume 4 explains why they differ: sampling, bit depth and channel layouts, Opus, AAC and speech codecs in depth, loudness and LUFS, and how each choice reaches the listener.

WHAT YOU WILL FIND INSIDE

- Opus, AAC and speech codecs in depth
- Channel layouts from mono to surround
- Sampling, bit depth and dynamic range
- Loudness targets and LUFS

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