

Appendix III

Prompting Yourself: Script or Bullets?

In Chapter 5, we established that it is unwise to try to deliver a presentation entirely from memory and that it's almost entirely advisable to have prompts for your remarks.

You have three options for self-prompting. Ironically, the first is the most frequently used, but it's also so awful that it's the one I hope, pray, and plead that you will never use again.

Option #1—The Unacceptable Option:

Take Your Cue by Glancing at the Bullets on Your Slides

Hopefully, this option is already ruled out, because the whole notion of text slides on screen is the tired model I'm trying to get you to break away from. If you're using a screen, it should be for the higher purpose of projecting authentic visuals that teach or illustrate your big ideas. When you put text points on a slide, not only are you using visuals incorrectly, but you're creating disconnection. Your audience is typically going to read ahead, finish the slide before you do, and disengage until you get to the next one. Even if this approach helps prompt you through your material, it's a horrible communication model in all other ways.

Options #2 and #3—The Bigger Debate:

Full Script or Abbreviated Notes?

If "script on screen" is ruled out, you're left with a choice between two legitimate options: full script or abbreviated notes/note cards. Here it gets interesting because conventional wisdom will generally tell you not to fully script on the grounds that a) it will make you seem wooden and unnatural, b) it will disconnect you from your audience, and c) you will freeze when you inevitably lose your place. These are real issues, which is why most people tend toward notes: it seems like whatever benefits scripting provides, it isn't worth the risks.

However, to jump from the difficulties of script to the conclusion that you should never use it is a mistake, because, as is so often the case, conventional wisdom is wrong. The argument is more nuanced than simply "notes are good, script is bad." As it turns out, there are clear advantages and disadvantages to each approach, depending on the setting—and furthermore, all the challenges of scripting can be easily overcome. Consider the table on the following page, which sets out the relative merits and disadvantages of the two approaches.

As you study the upper left of the table, the advantages of summarized notes are clear, which is why most people use them. They're quick and easy, you can connect with the audience by simply being "you," and you don't lose your place as readily. Likewise, the disadvantages of a script in the lower right push us in the same direction. A script is hard to create, hard to use, and can disconnect you from your audience. But take a moment to consider the other side of the argument. If you ponder the disadvantages of using notes in the lower left, you can see some serious problems.

A Balanced Analysis

	Notes/Bullets	Full Script
A D V A N T A G E S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick and easy to create • Forces you to be spontaneous • Can easily be tied to visuals • Mobility • Can include some mission-critical language • Keeps you well connected with the audience • Hard to lose your place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Precision in language, without relying on the mind in the moment • Allows total replicability of rehearsal • Holds perfectly to designed sequence • Perfectly protects planned timing • Makes inhibition easy • A presentation to be made multiple times can be repeated or transferred with no loss of quality
D I S A D V A N T A G E S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No guarantee you can replicate rehearsal • BIG potential to muff key points when it matters • Forces you to create great language on the fly • Unpredictable timing – can vary widely, depending on where your head is • Huge potential for embellishment – strong tendency to repeat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard to do right • Time consuming, especially given multiple edit rounds • Somewhat of a learned art • Requires writing of spoken English • Needs serious rehearsal to avoid being wooden • Easy to lose your place – that’s trouble

THE PROBLEM WITH NOTES

With notes, there’s no guarantee you can flawlessly replicate your best rehearsal. Many times, we nail a presentation in rehearsal, but the notes method forces us to recreate that same great language on the fly, and that’s risky. It simply might not be there. As we discussed in rehearsal, for your lesser points, exact linguistic precision may not matter; but in those critical moments, you definitely don’t want inferior or unclear phrasing. This will especially show up at the opening, when the pressures

of the moment can take that cool and elegant introduction you had planned and turn it into something faltering and clunky.

The other big issue is time management and embellishment. Using notes will definitely give you a sense of freedom, which is one of the main reasons people choose it over scripting, but it's easy to abuse that freedom with unplanned trips to the briar patch of embellishment. That perfectly timed twenty-nine minutes you hit in rehearsal can become a perfectly irritating thirty-nine minutes on the big day, precisely because of the dubious "freedom" afforded by those note cards.

As liberating as notes are, and as much as they allow you to be yourself on the day, this may not always be what you want. The rambling "yourself," whose points don't come out clearly enough, and who runs twenty minutes long thanks to various unplanned detours, isn't going to win any awards for great communication.

THE BENEFITS OF SCRIPTING

In contrast, look at the benefits of scripting in the table's upper right, which are the exact converse of what you've just read. The precision you lose with notes you gain back with scripting. We'll talk about being "wooden" in a moment, but great speakers have always known that if there's one truly great way to say something, scripting is the way to make sure you say it. And by extension, scripting allows you to recreate your rehearsal perfectly. When I'm rehearsing new material, I'll toy around with multiple possible turns of phrase, and when I eventually find one I love, I call that the "ooh baby" moment, which is my code for a really lovely phrase. That then gets captured in the script and is thus secured; I don't have to trust my mind to re-find it on game day. The other great benefit is that scripting restrains all forms of embellishment, thereby holding you to time, protecting your flow, and preventing a career-ending Freudian "Nazi" remark. For this reason, many companies today require scripting for presentations with any possible legal consequences.

So, based on this analysis of notes and scripts, what's the conclusion? One big idea:

Both are valuable, so use them in combination.

We tend to think of script versus notes as a binary choice: you can use either one or the other. That is entirely untrue; in fact, the right answer is the reverse. **In most presentations, you should use a blend of both.** The precision of scripting suggests it should be used for the more critical moments you absolutely want to get right, and as we've already learned, that would be your opening, closing, transitions, and big ideas. But for the rest of the presentation, where you have a little more freedom, it's fine to use notes, as long as you're disciplined enough to stay roughly on track while using them. And if you're a serial embellisher, as many people are, you should lean more on a script to keep you within the guardrails. Either way, this advice raises a new question: do you now have to learn how to deliver material from a script?

"SCRIPT" VERSUS "SCRIPTING"

The answer to that question is no, because of the way things eventually work out. When you've developed some scripting, even if only for those critical moments thanks to the process of rehearsal, that critical language will begin to imprint itself on your brain. You will often reach that wonderful moment when you know you've truly "learned" your material, at which point the script, like a booster rocket, has served its purpose and can be jettisoned. You can now go back to abbreviated

notes, even for your critical content, safe in the knowledge that the script is now safely locked inside your head. But there's a critical distinction. **By working through the exercise of scripting first, the resulting notes are no longer simply prompting a general idea, but rather prompting the recall of some specific and powerful language. In other words, when they emerge from the exercise of scripting, your notes are working in a completely different way.** And if you truly have that one killer phrase that's non-negotiable? Write it down longhand in your otherwise abbreviated notes. It's too precious to risk.

Where to Write Your Notes

While note cards are fine, the best place to physically write your notes is on your copy of the audience handout or "leave-behind," if you're using one, because it's the most natural place for them. The handout already contains all your main points and ideas, and you'll be referencing it constantly, so the notes you put there will simply be the supplementary points you're going to make beyond the printed content, along with some key phrasing you want to get right. "Teaching from the handout" makes several things easier for the presenter, as well as creating a natural and vital connection to the audience. I unpacked this particular skill in Chapter 8.

THE FINE ART OF SCRIPTING

All this leaves us with one final question: If you do choose to go with a script, perhaps where the setting requires no deviation from planned remarks, how do you do it? Can you use script without it being wooden and stilted? Absolutely, and it's much easier than you think. It's merely a matter of how you write it.

Writing Spoken English

The reason scripting can sound wooden and odd is that most people are only ever trained to write written English, and written English doesn't sound natural when you try to speak it. Written and spoken English aren't quite two different languages, but they *are* governed by completely different rules. Curiously, spoken English works perfectly well when written on the page: if you read the text of any great speech, it's pleasant and easy to comprehend. But the reverse isn't true; written English uses much longer sentences and more complex grammar to develop more elaborate ideas, and that's difficult to take in aurally. This is why many people, myself included, don't enjoy audiobooks. In a presentation setting, when a speaker is working from a written-English script (the worst case being an engineer reading a technical paper at a conference), it's almost physically painful. Fortunately, the problem is easy to solve, as every playwright and screenwriter in history knows. Spoken English differs from the written language in three ways.

1. **IT'S HIGHLY COLLOQUIAL AND MUCH LESS BOUND BY STRICT RULES OF GRAMMAR.** When a script contains the lines "So, if you look at this chart—upper left in blue—that pie chart—see what's going on there . . ." that casual language works perfectly well in an oral setting. Please say it out loud; it's great scripting. But I'll resist pointing out the grammatical errors. You would never write anything close to that in any formal setting.
2. **IT'S BUILT FROM SHORT, CHOPPY SENTENCES.** Spoken English has to accommodate that pesky "breathing" thing, which is totally irrelevant to written English. Long, complex, multi-part sentences are the hallmarks of written language, but when spoken aloud, not only are those sentence structures impossibly hard for an audience to follow, because

they require them to hold too many competing thoughts in their minds, but also, and comically, they can almost turn a speaker blue as they pray for a moment to come up for oxygen. And to prove that, try reading that last sentence aloud, from “Long, complex . . .” As you just discovered, multi-clause ideas. It works on paper, but it just doesn’t work verbally. Now breathe.

3. IT USES SHORTER WORDS AND SIMPLER LANGUAGE. Remember that the reader of the written word has the luxury of rereading a paragraph as often as they wish until they’ve absorbed the idea. The listener has no such luxury. They have to get it the first time—and instantly—because the speaker is already moving on. Hence, spoken English will typically use somewhat simpler language than the written equivalent to accommodate the higher cognitive strain you’re putting on your audience.

WRITING SPOKEN ENGLISH

If spoken and written English are different, but most people are only experienced in writing written English, how do you solve for that? Actually, it’s not hard, though it takes some practice. Writing spoken English begins with a governing principle: you have to write it EXACTLY the way you would say it, and the way to do that is as simple as it is obvious.

Rule #1. Speak, Then Write.

You speak it out loud, as often as you need to, and when you’re happy with it, you write it down. This is the key to not sounding “wooden” because, by definition, you’re creating true spoken language. Don’t try to write it on your computer, because only professional screenwriters can do that. You need to speak it first. Don’t worry if it looks ugly and colloquial on the page. It should. Remember our earlier example: “So, if you look at this chart—upper left in blue . . .” It’s ugly on the page, but if that’s how you’re going to say it, that’s how you should write it. It worked for Shakespeare. It will work for you.

Rule #2. Allow for Edit Rounds.

It’s a curious fact of scripting that the first round of “speak, then write” will feel great, but when you stand up and say it again, it suddenly sounds wrong, which you immediately notice. This isn’t a problem—it’s a wonderful journey to refinement. As you say it again, write down the new, better version that comes to you. A few edit rounds later, you’ll have it.

Rule #3. To Avoid Losing Your Place, Write in Short Blocks of Text.

When the script is right, we’ve solved for all problems except for one. We haven’t solved for the paralyzing problem of losing your place. This is an easy fix: don’t write in long blocks of text. Create paragraphs of no more than three to four lines, which is consistent with the more abbreviated patterns of spoken language anyway. As you glance down, your brain takes in the full clause, which

you then deliver (probably looking back up), and as you conclude and glance back down, the next one is waiting for you. You can't lose yourself in a short paragraph, but take your eyes off a long paragraph at your peril.

DELIVERING FROM A SCRIPT

When you've built a script using "speak, then write," coupled with short paragraphs, you'll sound natural as you deliver it. Rather than head-down reading, you can now stay fully engaged with the audience as you bounce your eyes off those short paragraphs on the page. In a former life, I delivered all-day presentations entirely from script, and countless times, when people came up to me at the end and realized that the entire day had been fully scripted, they genuinely couldn't believe it.

LAST THOUGHTS ON PROMPTING YOURSELF, WHETHER SCRIPT OR BULLETS

First: As you give the presentation, if this is a talk you may give again, capture great discussion/anecdotes/questions for future use. Don't be afraid to pause and take notes. Presentations evolve, so it's crucial to integrate improvements. When you take a moment to do so, audiences actually like that.

Second: Always keep a backup set of notes. The rule is to have two physical copies, not in the same place, but at least keep a flash drive or some second virtual copy. One day you WILL leave your notes on the plane.

