

Three Secrets To Writing Better Video and Audio Scripts

Hey everyone, I'm Robert Rose – Chief Strategy Advisor for The Content Marketing Institute – and I wanted to do a post on writing better video and audio scripts.... And I thought – yeah – why not actually do a video for this... Makes sense right?

So.....

I write scripts. I've written scripts. I wrote scripts. – I have all the tenses....

Anyway – way back in 1987 - when I walked out of college, steeped in English Literature, the first thing I did was to get a job editing market research reports. So... okay, **that's not entirely true**. The first thing I did was to get into my car, drive across the country to Los Angeles with \$500, a UHAUL full of music gear, and the dream of being the next Billy Joel.

Thaaaaat didn't work out so well.

What worked out slightly better was working on writing. So my first job in Los Angeles was actually writing and editing marketing research reports for local car dealerships. But while I did that I ALSO immersed myself in writing plays and screenplays. I read as many books as I could on the craft. I took classes. I read hundreds, thousands, of scripts. And I wrote. I wrote and wrote and wrote.

And thaaaaaat still didn't work out so well.

What I **DID** learn was how to recognize some of the patterns, structure, and language unique to scripts vs. other forms of writing. So, scripts are unique in the writing world because they are not generally considered the final art form (though I would certainly beg to differ for many of them).

They are inherently created to be interpreted through another medium like stage, or film, or television, or radio or the Web. They are considered to be the “instructions” for HOW to tell a particular story, capturing the movement, speech, and even technical directions for the performance.

So in reading classic scripts, I could see what was translated from the page to the stage, screen or (in those days) radio was quite often different. Sometimes that translation was better.....
aaaand sometimes the translation ruined the whole thing. I'm looking at you **Joe Versus The Volcano....**

The tension between screenwriters and directors, and the interpretation of scripts is legendary in Hollywood. The famous director Robert Altman said *“I don't think screenplay writing is the same as writing – I mean, I think it's blue printing.”*

The famous screenwriter and director Paul Schrader once said scripts are “*not an art form, because screenplays are not works of art. They are invitations to others to collaborate on a work of art.*”

Now... Whatever one may think about their value as an art form..... (*and yeah I really do still read screenplays and plays for enjoyment*).... the truth remains that scripts are not typically meant to be consumed in the same way as other written forms. And, so, we must treat their creation differently.

So – Cut To TODAY: in addition to my role as book author, consultant and advisor, I’m also a podcaster, webinar presenter, speaker, teacher, and occasional (and reluctant) video host. I write a lot of scripts for myself and others.

There are many content creators in presenter, podcaster, speaker, teacher and video host roles who simply choose to wing it. I do not. I have no enjoyment and quite frankly no confidence in myself in “*winging it*” when it comes to presentations, workshops, podcasting or webinars.

- For every keynote address – I write a script. Every time.
- For every podcast episode – I have a script, or at least a very robust show flow, every time.
- For every video I produce, or create – I write a script.

Now – once I **know** the script, backward and forward, I give myself permission to go off of it, and to improvise. But then, guess what? If my improvisation works – it goes in the new version of the script. If it doesn’t, I go back to the script.

Writing a script for your podcast, webinar, video, or presentation has a number of benefits:

1. You stay true to time. With a script you can practice and rehearse and you know EXACTLY how much time your presentation requires. With a script I can generally stay within about 3% of the allotted time. This means that I’ll be one or two minutes early or late for every 30 minutes of a presentation. If you want to make any event organizer unreasonably happy, being on time is the number one way to do that.
2. You know you’ll hit on all of your core points. Remember that third point that you spent two hours fine tuning? Remember when you didn’t write it into your script, and didn’t see the bullet point on your slide reminding you of it? You forgot it didn’t you? A script helps you make sure that you remember it....
3. Writing it down helps your material. If you have to write it word for word, you’ll simply start to know it better (and you’ll soon see why that’s important).

[SHIFT GEARS]

So, what’s the challenge then?

Well – here’s the thing - I’ve come to ask people why they wouldn’t script the things they do, and one of the most common responses I hear is that people are uncomfortable with the format. They are afraid that if they write out their speech, it will sound stale and unnatural (*it might – but we’ll address that*). And, they are uncomfortable about how they would use a script that isn’t memorized (you don’t have to memorize scripts).

There are some fun secrets to creating scripts that are actually useful as tools, as blueprints. And, I think they can be the source of other great forms as well.

Let’s explore together.

[SECOND SECTION]

So, first of all, let’s go OVER SOME OF THE RULES... I see about writing scripts for video and audio. And why I know be such a fan of them.... Some of them are:

- Use shorter words instead of longer ones... like **ameeliorAte**... I love the word **ameeliorAte**. Oh wait....
- Use contractions instead of full words (e.g. can’t instead of cannot, and don’t instead of do not).
- Always use teleprompters or always memorize your scripts
- Get rid of tongue twisters
- Never repeat yourself. Never. Never. Never.

If you didn’t notice, I kinda disagree with these five rules. If you like longer words, and they fit into your speech patterns..... I say this rule is MANIPULABLE.

If you are a more formal speaker, then the usage of cannot, do not, could not instead of can’t, don’t or couldn’t can help you make a more emphatic point. DO. NOT. WORRY.. about this rule.

And whether you choose to use teleprompters, or memorize your scripts should not be a rule. As we’ll see further below, there are ways to use scripts that go beyond teleprompters or memorization.

And of course, if you want to wax poetic, and speak to something where Mystic moonlight, moments meet... Softly, somewhere songbirds sweet... Simple, soothing, soulful sounds... Mem’ries murmur, mossy mound... Well then you absolutely should...

And of course, of course, of course, you can repeat yourself. It’s your lyric to sing.

So, with these rules out of the way, let’s look at the three secrets I’ve found to creating better scripts.

[SHIFT GEARS]

SECRET #1 THERE’S NO STYLE POINTS

Writing for speaking..... vs writing for reading..... are very different. Because of my background as a screenwriter, I am actually more comfortable at the former. Ask anyone who has the misfortune to have to edit my writing, and they will tell you that my sentence structure and my punctuation are, well let's say, "creative."

However, if you read my raw writing out loud it actually tends to sound okay.

This is why some audio books can be harder to listen to than others. The styles are different. When we hear sentences that are more formally structured, and meant to be read, rather than spoken it can sound overly formal and not like the way we actually speak.

This is where a many people have challenges in writing scripts. They believe that by writing them down, they'll lock themselves into a style that will end up sounding overly formal and stilted if they read them.

But – moving back and forth between styles can actually be a strength to writing scripts that have impact. Think about movies you really like. There are movies that are written by writers who purposely use what we perceive as very stylized dialogue.

Aaron Sorkin is just such a writer. Listen to the dialogue in this clip from The Social Network. Notice formal and just how carefully chosen the words are and how they sound to give the story just the right edge.

INSERT MOVIE CLIP FROM SOCIAL NETWORK

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKnNUYknsuQ>

Isn't that great... The words that the actors are speaking sound scripted. But as the audience we like that theatricality because there's a certain lyrical quality to the way the words are presented that helps tell the story better.

On the other side, there are movies that, at first, seem to have dialogue that is so naturalistic that you think the actors are literally making them up as they go. Think of a movie like Juno, or any Quentin Tarantino movie.

Listen to this clip from Juno and to how naturalistic the dialogue sounds.

INSERT MOVIE CLIP FROM JUNO

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_YPcOCi34s

You can hear the difference right? And you might think that it's just in the performance. But it's not. Here's the [actual script dialogue](#) from a part of this seen as written by screenwriter Diablo Cody.

INSET IMAGE

BLEEKER

Did you put like a hundred things of

Tic Tacs in my mailbox?

JUNO

Yeah. That was me.

BLEEKER

Why?

JUNO

(blushes)

Because they're your fave. And you can never have too much of your favorite one-calorie breath mint.

BLEEKER

Well... thanks. I think I'm pretty much set until college on the Tic Tac front.

Notice that the script is written as people really speak, in fragmented sentences, and the usage of “pretty much” as an adverb. When was the last time you wrote “pretty much”.... But it pretty much works in this case...

The key here is that neither the naturalistic or stylistic approach is wrong, or better than the other. Each simply uses a style to tell a different kind of story. No one speaks like either Aaron Sorkin, or Diablo Cody writes. It's a script. Both reflect NOT how we talk, but rather how we WANT to talk.

Good dialogue, or scripts, are just good scripts. They deliver the story in the way we want to tell it. A great script is one that helps you deliver the sound you want to make. A great script sounds like you. The style gives you the opportunity to improvise but also the very specific and structured poetry, or turn of phrase phrase that you want to express.

So – the key is to write like you want to speak. If you're going to write a script, then I highly encourage you to practice writing like you speak. Don't worry about punctuation, or sentence structure..... Until of course you do. And what I mean by that is if you want to hit a very particular turn of phrase because it makes you sound super scary smart,- OR YOU JUST LIKE ALLITERATION.... PAUSE Or you like the poetry – by all means do it. USE the style of your performer – and that might be you - to actually deliver the story you want to deliver.

Does that mean that you might write verbal pauses, and um's into your script? Yes, definitely. Consider this portion of the script from one of my introductions to the Weekly wrap.

So let's wrap it up shall we....

Our theme this week – Waaaiit... for it..... No uh... literally “wait for it”... that's the theme.

This is... The Weekly Wrap.

Hello everybody, and welcome to episode #70 of The Weekly Wrap, our weekly play on words at play in the world of quarantine this week....

To land the joke on the theme – I wanted to make sure I said it, just the way I wanted to say it. So – I wrote it out as dialogue as I heard it in my head. However, I also really like the phrase “*our weekly play on words at play in the world this week*” – and so I’m very specific about the way each word is put there.

Yes, this does mean that you’ll probably have two versions of some of your pieces – for example, if you use one of your webinars for a blog post.

And that brings us to the second secret.

SECRET NUMBER TWO – USE THE STORIES WITHIN THE STORY

We’ve written a lot in other posts on CMI about the importance of story structure. Every great story – or script - has a beginning, middle, and end. Writing the script you’ll use for your podcast, presentation, or video is no different.

Now, in dramatic script writing there are two basic types of monologues: active vs. narrative. In an ACTIVE monologue you (or the character you’re playing) is speaking as a way of taking action..... or achieving a goal. It might be to change someone’s mind, convince them of something, or communicate a specific point of view.

A great example of this is in A Few Good Men – the Movie... where Colonel Jessep played by Jack Nicholson...has his climactic speech....

INSERT YOUTUBE CLIP HERE.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FnO3igOkOk>

The second type of monologue is a narrative monologue where you are telling a story within the story – often referring to something that happened in the past. These monologues are used when you want to make some kind of analogy or to better explain a point you are making.

A great example of this is when Quint, IN THE MOVIE JAWS, tells the story of his experience on the U.S.S. Indianapolis and the resulting shark attack. It’s beautifully placed in the story, as it brings a horrific story to life, and illustrates just how much in danger the three heroes are actually in.

INSERT QUINT INDIANAPOLIS SPEECH

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9S41Kplsbs&t=67s>

In your work as a content marketer, you will no doubt use both, and mixing them up is key to writing a great script. The key is understanding the difference and being careful how you place and balance them in your script. If you put a Narrative Monologue in without a specific purpose, the audience will immediately pick up on it. Any time you’ve ever been listening to a podcast or

watching a video and you're asking – *“why is he telling me this story?”* then you'll know that there's a narrative monologue out of place.

Additionally, too much of one or the other and you may lose your audience.

[SHIFT GEARS]

So - Content Marketing World in 2019, my pal Joe Pulizzi illustrated this really well. His timeslot was exactly 20 minutes. And, we really needed to hit that mark. And so, Joe's keynote was extremely tightly scripted. If you take a moment to watch his keynote, I want you to note the length of his talk in the YouTube video. That's right, it's 18:02. He hit his mark beautifully.

But, more importantly, watch how Joe introduces his talk, and then I want you to pay special attention to he shifts gears 20 seconds in and places a Narrative monologue. He tells this story for almost exactly 4 minutes. Two things are important here. First, the “story within the story” is relevant on its own. Second, it feeds a purpose to the larger story. For Joe it served as a personal example of his first “law”.

INSERT

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8JO5sLe-4k>

Pay close attention to how your scripted story is unfolding, and how you are balancing your different types of monologues. Ensure that your Narrative monologues feed your larger monologues and that you have a balance of both.

That brings us to our third secret of great scripts.

KNOW IT – DON'T READ IT

NOW.... You MIGHT think after all that focus on writing like we speak, and focusing on structure that, that the advice for performing a great script is to simply read it as you wrote it.

Nope.

Once you write your script, you need to work your script until you know it. Do you have to memorize it? Well, if you're giving it as a keynote, or session then, yes, you probably need to at least memorize it until you feel like you have it down. Unless you're a celebrity, you're probably not going to get a teleprompter at your next sales kickoff event. But if you're going to be doing a podcast, or the voice over for a presentation, then no you don't. But in either case, the first step to a great performance of a great script is to find your cadence, your inflections, and which words make sense to emphasize.

As part of this post, and linked at the end of this video, you'll see that we've included the script for this video. Download it and you'll see how similar, and different, it is from the written post. You'll see which words I bolded for emphasis, and where I noted pauses, or capitalized words so that I would know exactly how I wanted to deliver them.

This doesn't have to take long. When I write the script to my weekly podcast, I spend about 20-30 minutes working through the script I write – and I script just about every word of every episode. But the more you know your script, the better your performance will be.

This is especially true if your audience is going to see you. If you know your material, then you can not only script your words, but the way that you deliver those words. Watch the absolute master of this, comedian Jerry Seinfeld. He's talked many times to how his performances are scripted word for word, down to the emphasis of the words. Watch this video and pay attention to just how each line is delivered in a very particular (and very Jerry) way.

INESRT VIDEO OF JERRY SEINFELD

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BKDt_R-tBI

STEAL LIKE AN ARTIST

To this day, I watch comedians, movies and even politicians for the effective ways that they use scripts. I have found that the best way to get better at scripts is to, well, copy great scripts. This is harder than it sounds, because it's NOT looking at transcripts of great performances.

Capturing the performance in written word isn't the same as seeing how the performance was translated from the written word.

For movies, you can actually get access to a surprising number of scripts. Do a little Google Fu for what you're looking for, and you'll see that many modern and classic movie scripts are simply online, waiting for you to read.

For speeches – especially for politicians, you can usually find their “prepared remarks” fairly easily as well. Without naming names it's worth looking at the good ones and the really bad ones so you can get a feel where the challenge was with the script, or the performance.

For others such as voice overs, videos or others, just pay attention to the performance. It's pretty easy to tell when someone is reading something that isn't written as a script from a teleprompter.

Watch this video and you can see where this guest turns, and is actually reading (something that was clearly not written as a script) from a teleprompter. And, you can see how much more natural she gets when she actually goes off script, or responds to a question.

INSERT VIDEO OF TELEPROMPTER

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmPC_5L81io

In the end, writing great scripts is about capturing your personality. The best scripts tell their story clearly, but allow for great performances to elevate the story to another level. As classic Hollywood film director Howard Hawks said, “you can't fix a bad script after you start shooting. The problems on the page only get bigger as they move to the big screen”.

Take the time, and write a great script, so you can focus on your performance.

And remember... It's Your Story. Tell It well