

Formatting Scripts for Voice Talent

How to write scripts for corporate presentations, demos, and tutorials so that voice actors give you a great performance and love you forever

Shelley McIntyre, voice talent
shelley@shelmac.com
www.shelmac.com

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Introduction

This is a simple guide for formatting scripts for voiceover sessions. While there are many styles of voice scripts, the bias in this document is toward corporate presentations, technical narration, promotional videos, and instructional / interactive tutorials. Radio / TV ads and video games have their own styles, which I'm ignoring here. Ready? Good!

Generally, we voice actors are polite people. This means that we won't give producers open feedback about the quality of their scripts when we get to a session. But here's what we are thinking to ourselves when we see a poorly formatted script:

"Eight point font? But I'm ALREADY half blind."

"Why am I flipping pages in the middle of words?"

"I will pass out if I have to read that sentence without a breath."

"Wait – where are we? I see no page numbers here."

Writing and formatting a script properly can make a voice actor love you and want to work with you whenever you call. Here's how you do it.

Writing Tips

You are already a marvelous writer, but there are a few things you can tweak to become a marvelous voice-over writer.

Please let us breathe

Voice actors love breathing. When we are faced with incredibly long sentences, even ones that have lots of commas, we can't breathe. Here is a sentence I had to record recently. Let's read it aloud together:

[Wonder Drug] is the only treatment for acutely decompensated congestive heart failure proven in large controlled studies to provide rapid relief of shortness of breath for patients at rest or with minimal activity, such as talking, eating or bathing.

I could hardly breathe by the end, and it was for a drug that treats shortness of breath!

If we do get these long sentences, sometimes we'll go ahead and insert punctuation where we need it, just so we can catch a breath. This means that your text might not end up sounding like you intended, which would be sad. The simple solution to this, of course, is to avoid really long sentences. Read your script aloud as you are writing it, and make sure you can breathe along the way. Short sentences are easier for a listener to understand and easier for us to deliver.

Formal vs. informal language

Making it conversational starts with you

These days, we frequently get the “make it conversational” direction. This is great and all, except when the script is written very formally. A lack of contractions (I'm, you're, etc.), a preponderance of multi-syllabic phrasing (like that right there), and an instructional tone make it harder for us to get the conversational vibe you want.

You may want a script to sound like I'm talking to someone in the same room with me – I get that a lot. As a test, first try reading your script aloud to someone and ask whether it sounds conversational to them. If so, fantastic. If not, consider easing back on the conversational requirement or loosening up the language to allow for that direction.

Write for the voice, not for the page

If your script is an upright technical narration or the recitation of policies or procedures, you can convey a formal tone without following every rule of written formal grammar. This sentence is grammatically correct:

You will have fourteen modules from which to choose.

But people don't talk like that. As long as you avoid a contraction at the beginning of the sentence, you can still maintain a formal tone:

You will have fourteen modules to choose from.

Watch out for the combination of formal and informal language within one script. Choose one tone and stick with it through the entire script so you don't end up with sentences like this:

To achieve better alignment within the organization, we'll throw a party and stuff.

Also, go easy on the wordy and complex sentences. Unless your audience consists solely of rocket surgeons, you don't want to cause people to do a lot of brain-crunching to figure out what they are hearing. Actually, even then. Give those rocket surgeons a break.

Tell us about no-contraction policies

Some of you may be saying, "But my piece is being distributed internationally. For the sake of clarity we can't use contractions at all, but still want a conversational tone. What do we do?"

This is hard, and we totally feel your pain. We will do what we can to make the script sound chummy. So that we don't get carried away and go inserting contractions where none should exist, please let us know that you have a "zero contractions" policy on the script so we understand the parameters.

Numbers and abbreviations

We know exactly what you mean when you include numbers, symbols, abbreviations, and acronyms in your script, but when we go to record them we get all tripped up. You may have a preference for "one hundred and twenty five" vs. "a hundred twenty five," which we won't know if the script shows "125." If there are several different ways of saying short numbers, write them out. Otherwise, include them in the script as numbers: 35, 42, 699.

Abbreviations

Please write out all normally-abbreviated words. We understand what "Sanford & Co., e.g." means, but we prefer to see "Sanford and Company, for example."

People don't generally say "etcetera" when they talk, so avoid "etc." in your scripts.

Acronyms

It's helpful for us to see acronyms with dashes between the letters, like N-T-S-C rather than NTSC (or worse, ntsc). Remember that we will read what we see. So if you want us to say "National Football League," write that out completely rather than typing "NFL."

Some acronyms are spoken as if they are actual words. If that's the case, please note it in the script so that we say "gooey" when you type GUI. Otherwise we'll say "G-U-I" and all the technical people will laugh at us.

Years and long numbers

If your script includes a reference to 1987 as a year, we'll say "nineteen eighty seven." But if it's referred to as a regular number, we'll probably say "one thousand nine hundred eighty seven" or maybe "one thousand nine hundred AND eighty seven." If you are fine with these standards, go ahead and include the number in your script, particularly super long numbers.

Prices

When we see \$23.99, we'll want to say "twenty three ninety nine" and leave off the dollar reference altogether. If you want us to say "twenty three dollars and ninety nine cents," indicate that in the script.

Dates

In the interest of avoiding long strings of numbers and symbols, write out exactly what you want us to say, but leave normal numbers in there. So that means not 3/14/2006 or 3/14/06 but "March 14th, 2006."

Your financial calendar

If you type Q207, we will say "Q Two Oh Seven." When we see 1H08 we'll probably say "One H Oh Eight" (which already sounds weird, doesn't it?). Of course, regular people don't abbreviate out loud like this in real life. Please type "Second quarter of 2007" or "First half of 2008" or another friendly-sounding variation in your script.

Website addresses

Now that most of the population understands what a web address is, we can drop the headers and get straight to the website name: “shelmac.com” (and you can type it like that – we’ll say “shelmac dot com”). If you type www.shelmac.com we’ll say “WWW dot shelmac dot com.”

However, some organizations and government agencies are still required to spell out the entire thing. You don’t need to write out “HTTP colon forward slash forward slash W W W dot shelmac dot com” in your script, but do indicate when symbols must be vocalized.

Titles and labels

Sometimes you’ll call out titles of documents, names of buttons, or labels in a script, particularly if it accompanies a visual presentation. Since some of these labels will be comprised of regular words, call them out with capital letters and quotation marks so we can emphasize them like titles.

So for example, this sentence:

Next, click on the instructions for adding content tab.

Would make more sense to us if it was typed:

Next, click on the “Instructions for Adding Content” tab.

Edits and revisions

Spellcheck-resistant typos

You already know this, but spell check (which you use diligently before printing out voice-over scripts) doesn’t catch typos that are actual words. We’ll probably notice these during the session, but it’s better if you read everything aloud and make sure that there aren’t any a/an/and or no/not/nor/now errors (among others).

Use Grammar Checker or an English major

I believe that some voice actors have *actually died* as a result of having to record incorrect grammar during a gig. Make use of a software grammar checker for everything you write. If you don't have access to one, ask that lady in your office who always corrects you to review the script.

Once in a while you'll walk in to your session with an insidious grammatical error embedded in your script. Sometimes the voice talent will bring it up, but more often they'll keep quiet (a skill I haven't learned yet). If someone makes a suggestion to correct a bit of grammar, consider their suggestion unless you know they are completely wrong. There's no harm in doing it right the first time.

Tell us about un-tweakable scripts

Once you get into the studio and start recording, you may spot some words that you'd like to flip around on the fly. That's completely fine, and we enjoy tweaking scripts to make them better wherever we can. However, sometimes you will be tied down to **exactly** what appears in the script. The script may have been approved by 18 people all the way up to your CEO, the text may scroll as written on a screen and changes would prompt massive redesigns of a video or animation, etc.

Just as we like to know about legal or illegal contractions, it is most helpful if we know whether your script is open for changes or not. If we understand that the final script can't budge one iota, we'll keep our yaps shut and record as written (with the exception of typos, hopefully).

Page Formatting Tips

In terms of reducing the blood pressure of a voice actor, page formatting comes in at a close second to writing. There are a few easy things you can do to help a voice actor feel all warm and happy and give you a great performance.

Font sizes

Most voice actors have shown up for a session to receive a script written in 9 point font. Working from a script like this hurts our eyes and makes it hard to read ahead. For your editing, of course you can use whatever size font you'd like. But the script you hand to a voice actor should feature at least a 12pt font in a normal-looking black typeface. Sarif fonts like Times New Roman are often easier to read than sans-sarif fonts like Arial. Receiving a script with text in a 14 point font feels like Christmas.

Please double-space your scripts. Even with a larger font, lines smushed together are hard to read. Many times we'll need to make notes on the script during a session, and we need that space between lines for our own marks.

Even though it may seem like a script in all caps is easier to read, it is not. Use regular sentence case throughout your script. So, in summary:

BAD:

Barcelona offers a unique opportunity for the tourist on foot. You can walk from Roman remains to the medieval city, and then to the modern city through its grid-iron street pattern. The historic city center is fairly flat, while the modern city fans out towards the surrounding hills. It is bordered by steep streets that are vaguely reminiscent of those found in San Francisco.

BAD:

BARCELONA OFFERS A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE TOURIST ON FOOT. YOU CAN WALK FROM ROMAN REMAINS TO THE MEDIEVAL CITY, AND THEN TO THE MODERN CITY THROUGH ITS GRID-IRON STREET PATTERN. THE HISTORIC CITY CENTER IS FAIRLY FLAT, WHILE THE MODERN CITY FANS OUT TOWARDS THE SURROUNDING HILLS.

GOOD:

Barcelona offers a unique opportunity for the tourist on foot. You can walk from Roman remains to the medieval city, and then to the modern city through its grid-iron street pattern. The historic city center is fairly flat, while the modern city fans out towards the surrounding hills.

Final, no markup text

We ~~know~~ understand that your ~~text~~ script goes through many ^(several?) changes during the editing ~~revision~~ process. When you print ~~out~~ the really-truly-honestly FINAL copy, be sure ~~ensure?~~ that these changes are hidden from view. In Word ^(ask Ted if we include ref to other programs), this means that you are looking at “Final” and not “Final Showing Markup” which will confuse us ~~greatly~~ *immensely* greatly.

Remove comments and internal questions from the script. If you’ve been using Track Changes, accept all changes in the document and re-save to be sure that previous iterations don’t pop up in the final script.

Page or section numbers

If your project is a video, Flash piece, online tutorial, or other combination audio/visual presentation, you’ll probably have voice segments broken down by screen or slide. You may even want a separate file name for each slide. That’s cool. Just be sure to include some kind of indicator, like a page or section number, on each page.

Rather than having to give a direction like, “can you re-do that sentence on the, uh, wait – fourth page sort of in the middle, right after the sentence that starts with The?” you could breezily ask your voice actor, “can you re-do the 3rd sentence on page 4, filename TR3?” Specific direction like that makes every retake go faster.

Number your pages x of x.

If you are printing off a script with a nice big font for the voice talent, and separate scripts for the engineer and yourself in a smaller font size, then the pagination will

get all messed up and we still won't know what page you're on. It's better to have a reference by slide or line so we can find where you are even if we have different page numbering on our scripts.

Widow and orphan control

When sentences break across pages, we have to get a pen, scribble in the end of the sentence that appears on the next page, and then record. This takes up time, and now we have to read our own horrible writing rather than your neat type. Be sure that sentences begin and end within the same page so we don't have to do this. If your script is arranged by tables, you'll have to do this manually. Sorry!

Bonus points for slides, sections, and paragraphs that fit within one page. Anything you can do to reduce page turns within a thought or topic is great. If that is not possible, the engineer can always edit out the sound of the page turn.

Also, do not allow hyphenations across lines. That makes our brains hurt.

Tell us what your audience will see

For audio that accompanies a visual presentation, it's helpful for us to know what the audience will see when they listen to us talk. You're probably working from a storyboard script anyway, so go ahead and include the visual synopsis. That way when we have a script that says:

Click here, [pause] then highlight this box, [pause] and select OK.

We'll have a better context for what's going on. That becomes even more important when there is emotional content on screen. This sentence without context:

Jim didn't know the best way to support her.

will get a MUCH better performance from your voice actor if you include "image of child hooked up to IV" next to the text.

Bulleted lists

Everybody loves a good bulleted list, but this is more often a tool for print. When you write a script, consider whether this is really a bulleted list or mostly a way to

organize your thoughts. We use lists to absorb information visually, but sometimes it doesn't quite translate to the spoken word. For example, you may include a list like this in a script:

This exercise is helpful in order to:

- 1. learn about the corporate Intranet*
- 2. meet your new co-workers*
- 3. establish work groups.*

However, you may want it to sound like this:

This exercise is helpful in order to learn about the corporate Intranet, meet your new co-workers, and establish work groups.

If that's the case, write it out in prose like the sample above, rather than complicate it with numbers and line breaks. Commas can do wonders for separating ideas.

On the other hand, you may have a list that you want to have sound like a list. Like this:

Use these variables to target your ads:

- Geographical location*
- Day of the week*
- Time of day*
- Age and gender*

When I get these lists, I typically count them off with my fingers as I'm recording so they really do sound like a list. If there are more than three bullets, include the word "and" before the last bullet in the list so it feels like the list is ending. Also, avoid numbering your list, because saying numbers out loud sounds weird.

Printing and sorting

Please give us single-sided scripts, with at least a 1" margin all over. We promise to recycle.

No staples, please. We'll just go through and remove them all anyway. Collate pages and paperclip each script.

Now You Know Everything

Ok, that's it! You now have many of the tools you need to write a brilliant voiceover script. With your script in hand, use the checklist on the next page to verify writing tips and formatting advice. Do this and you will be worshipped by voice actors the world over. Good luck!

Credits

Thank you one million times to the following voice talent and all-around good people who provided input into this document:

Dave Courvoisier

<http://www.miicrophone.com/>

Dave Elvin

<http://www.daveelvin.com>

Lee Gordon

<http://www.leegordonproductions.com>

Bill Smith

<http://gvtg.com/theactingstudio/>

Voice Script Checklist

Use this handy checklist to make sure you have covered all your bases before you go into your voiceover session.

- Sentences checked for breathe-ability
- Consistent tone, either formal or informal
- Abbreviations, symbols, and weird numbers are spelled out
- Titles and labels are capitalized and in quotation marks
- Visual descriptions included next to voiceover text (if applicable)
- Bulleted lists make sense and sound normal
- Spell check complete
- Grammar check complete
- Script is in 12 or 14 point font
- Script is double-spaced
- Script is single-sided
- Page numbers and/or filenames for each section are included
- Margins are set at 1” or greater all over
- Widow and orphan control are on: no sentence breaks across pages
- Hyphenation is OFF
- Script is collated and paper-clipped, not stapled
- I have read the entire script aloud to someone else, and it sounds great.

Shelley McIntyre, voice talent
shelley@shelmac.com
www.shelmac.com