

Acting Lessons: Memorization

Level: 1-5

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This lesson is for anybody, thespians and non-thespians alike. There comes a time in everyone's life when he/she is required to memorize something. In the context of this lesson, we'll be focusing on memorizing monologues and dialogues, but these methods can be used in the memorization of any small or large chunk of text.

When I first started acting, I didn't really have much trouble memorizing my lines. I had no set method of doing so; I just did it. I guess what happened was that we went over the scenes so many times, script in hand, that I just automatically began memorizing. I know that that's bad form and that actors should put some work into memorizing the lines while at home (or any other place where you have the time to do it).

Although memorizing while rehearsing might get the job done, it doesn't help in the quality of the performance. Rehearsal is supposed to be the time where you really get down to the nitty-gritty of your character, finding the character's personality and its relationship to the other characters. If you're memorizing while you're rehearsing, you might be so focused on getting the lines right rather than the way they are delivered (volume, intensity, inflection, etc.).

Now, I understand that, during the first few rehearsals, you'll have a script on stage, but you'll notice that it's actually a hindrance because you can't very well put your focus on something or someone if you're reading lines from the script. You also won't be able to work with your properties (props) as well, having one less hand to work with. So, your responsibility is to memorize the lines as quickly as possible, and the methods I'm about to show you should help in that.

Memorizing Monologues

As I got larger roles, I noticed that the lines got a bit longer. I could no longer use my "memorize while rehearsing" method. I had to devise a method for memorizing these insanely long lines, some of which went from one-half to **two and a half** pages!

What I did was this. I memorized in small chunks, then put them together. I'll give you an example. Here is the Preamble for the Constitution of the United States of America:

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure these blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America.

Now, that is one LONG sentence! But, it won't be hard for you to memorize using my special method. Now, the trick to this method is "don't get ahead of yourself". You've got to take things slowly, or else the words will all start to bleed together.

Step one in memorizing something is to **read the passage all the way through** so that you can know the context in which everything is stated.

Step two is to **re-read a small portion, once to yourself, then three times out loud**. Now, choosing the size of that portion is where it gets a little iffy. I usually will take on an entire sentence...if it isn't too long, that is. In the case of our example, a single sentence is *definitely* too long. So, we'll take it in small chunks.

Our first section will be, "We, the people of the United States...". That's it. Don't try to go any further with it. Just take that small chunk. Once you've read it to yourself, then read it three times aloud, finding the proper inflection and tone. After that, **try saying it without looking at it**. If you can do it **perfectly three times in a row**, you're ready to move on to the next chunk.

Step three is basically a repetition of step two except you're **adding on**. This time, we'll tackle, "...in order to form a more perfect union...". Use step two to memorize that little chunk. Once you've said it perfectly three times without looking at it, say from memory the first part you memorized followed by the second part. Once you're able to say that entire piece (the first part and the second part) three times without looking, you're able to move on.

Step four is adding even more on in a similar but different way. Using step two, memorize, "...establish justice..." and, if you feel lucky, "...ensure domestic tranquility...". Once you've got that, **add the third part to the second**, and just **say from memory the second and third parts**. Once you can do that, **go back and add the first part**. When you've conquered that without looking at it, continue on with the memorization.

Step five is to repeat step four over and over again. Memorize a fourth chunk and add it to the third. Say the third and fourth from memory, then say the second, third, and fourth from memory, and finally, the first through the fourth.

When memorizing huge bodies of text, you'll get to a point so far down that it is really exhausting to go all the way back to the beginning and begin quoting; it might be so far back that you forget the new material that you just memorized. So, don't always go back to the beginning of something. Go far back enough that you're confident that you know what's going on, then move on. In other words, if you're memorizing a multi-paragraphed piece, don't always start back at the first sentence of the first paragraph. Treat each paragraph as you treated each chunk in steps three and four. Quote them two paragraphs at a time, then three, etc.

Using these monologue memorization steps will help you get large chunks of text memorized quickly. But, you can't stop there. The brain has a funny tendency to forget large chunks of new material very quickly. So, you've got to keep it fresh in your mind. Take breaks every half-hour or so. Then, see if you can get right back into the groove of things without looking at the script.

But, you can't stop there, either. Sure you might remember the stuff today, but let a few hours pass, and see if you can do it all from memory. Test yourself the next morning, while you're taking your shower, getting dressed, or whatever; see if you can still remember what you memorized the day before. You've got to keep this new material current in your mind for at least a few days before you can be sure that you've got it.

After a few days of perfect quotation have passed, you can slack off a bit and just do it every other day. But, don't slack off too much. The only time you can completely slack off is when the run of the show is over. By that time, you'll have some of these line indelibly burned into your brain to where you can quote them years from now.

Now, on to...

Memorizing Dialogue

You might think that memorizing dialogue should be no different. Though they might have a few similarities, there are still some major differences. The biggest difference is that, aside from memorizing your lines, you have the extra task of memorizing things other people say.

The key to memorizing dialogue is “go one line at a time”. It’s not helpful to just blaze through huge chunks of dialogue; doing that will get you familiar with the dialogue, but it will make your job of memorization a little harder later on.

The first thing you’ve got to do is find out where you come in. When I said that you had to memorize things other people say, I didn’t mean that you had to memorize the whole script. I meant that you had to memorize at least the first and last bit of the line that precedes yours. In doing so, you’ll have a good idea of when you come in.

It’s also pretty good to become familiar with the entirety of the subject matter of the preceding line. This will save you when someone blanks out or skips around the lines on stage, especially during a performance. It will give you the chance to cover up the mistake and save the show from going into a dead silence, humiliating everyone who is performing at that time.

The line preceding yours (or the last bit of that line) is called the “cue line” or the “cue”. Some plays, such as anything written by Pat Cook, can be wildly confusing and can have a bundle of stuff flying at you from left field. So, it’s not always good just to memorize the cue. You’ve got to be familiar enough with the preceding line (and the entire scene, for that matter) that you can step in with your line when the basic gist of the preceding line has been conveyed.

On a side note, it’s also good to read through the entire script at least once, even if you’re just in one scene. This will allow you to get a better sense of where your character fits into the whole scheme of things, but that’s for another lesson.

Anyway, back to memorization. Once you’ve found where you come in, read aloud the entire portion of the scene that you’re in, your lines and everyone else’s. This should give you a good idea of your purpose in the scene. Once you’ve done that, you can start with the memorization.

Start by memorizing your first line. A great way to do this is to use the methods explained in the previous section. Once you’ve memorized your first line, get something to cover up your line (i.e. a piece of paper, a book, your hand, etc.) and read aloud the line before yours. Then, see if you can come in with your own line. If you nail it, move on to your next line.

If your next line is close by, become familiar with all of the lines in between yours, becoming especially familiar with the line that directly precedes your next line. A good rule of thumb is to go ahead and memorize two lines preceding yours. That way, you’ll be sure to come in at the right time. [NOTE: if the lines preceding yours are huge, memorize at least the last sentence or two. That should get you by.]

Memorize your next line. Then, cover your line and read off your cue line. Once you’re able to say your line perfectly three times in a row right after reading the previous line, move on to your next line and repeat the process.

When you’ve gotten a page or two into the scene, try doing all of your lines thus far by memory, reading everyone else’s lines aloud and covering your lines when you say them. After saying your line, uncover it to check if you made any mistakes. If you did make a mistake, don’t flippantly blow it off; correct it. Go back a few lines and try it again, using the same method of cover and uncover. This is the best method of correction because you get a real sense that you have fixed your errors rather than saying, “Oh, I’ll just fix it next time around.”

Use the chunk method and run the scene a few pages at a time when you're first starting out, then run entire scenes. If you can get a helper, have them read everyone else's lines while you quote your own. If you can get some together, run lines often with the other cast members. Be sure to work out problem areas with the other cast members. You're all in this together; work as a team.

This running of lines can also help when memorizing monologues. Have someone follow along when you're delivering your monologue so they can catch mistakes that you might not know that you're making.

Well, I think I've said my piece on memorization. Be sure to at least try these techniques. You might be surprised on how well they work. If they aren't working for you, you might be trying to conquer too much at once. Take things slowly. The old saying "slow and steady wins the race" is very prevalent when it comes to memorization.

Then again, some people just learn things differently than others. Use whatever method best serves you. If you feel you've got an even better method than mine, email me at joshua@actortoactor.com.

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