

SCRIPT WRITING TIPS

Scripts should be written “for the ear” rather than for the eye. Most writers are accustomed to writing for print, rather than audio production. They don’t write the way they talk.

To that end, CTS would like to provide this list of tips that will help you prepare better scripts. By following these basic guidelines, you will ensure that your material will sound smoother and more professional during the recording process, and will help eliminate any confusion for the voice talent and director.

Write “conversationally” as if you are speaking directly to a person standing in front of you, or speaking to them by telephone.

Remember your ABC’s - Accuracy, Brevity, and Clarity. Memory researcher Tony Buzan says listeners remember less than 10% of what they hear. A reader may reread a paragraph, but a listener can't. A listener has no way to go back over the material unless they take notes or listen to the material again.

Spoken language is comprised of short sentences. Using long sentences in a script results in an un-natural speaking method. Shorter sentences makes delivery smoother as the voice talent will be able to better anticipate what comes next. It's difficult for the talent to anticipate the direction a long, run-on sentence is taking.

When writing copy that must be carefully timed to fit your video or other application, remember that most languages expand either when written or spoken. Example: Spanish expands 30% during translation, and Mandarin expands 25% during voiceover. This means that it takes 25%-30% more audio to convey the original text. If the English audio is already tight, there is a good chance your foreign-language audio is not going to fit without extensive editing. Leave “white space” in your original audio to accommodate the expansion.

Economize on words – if the same thought can be conveyed in 5 words instead of 10, use fewer words. This results in a cleaner-sounding sentence, and better accommodates text expansion in translated text.

Provide a pronunciation guide for the names of persons, cities or hard to pronounce words. Remember that many names can be pronounced more than one way. Example: Bier –is it pronounced like beer or buyer?

Spell out numbers if you prefer them read a certain way. For example: 503 – is this “five hundred and three” or is it “five-o-three” or “five-zero-three”?

Know your language type. Languages have distinct differences. Examples include:

- Neutral Latin American, Mexican, Puerto Rican or European Spanish,
- Canadian, Haitian, African or European French,
- Cantonese or Mandarin Chinese,
- Brazilian or European Portuguese,
- White or Green Hmong

Avoid he/she, student(s) and other slashed or multiple terms. This is confusing to the talent during a read and causes unnatural pauses in the audio. Replace the slashed words with “he or she”, “student or students” - Remember you need to write as a listener instead of a reader.

Avoid parenthetical statements. These are difficult to voice and for the ear to handle. People can't hear the parentheses as easily as they can hear periods or commas. Break parentheses into separate sentences if the material is important enough to have in the script. If not, consider deleting them altogether.

Use acronyms sparingly and think carefully about how you want them used. Indicate acronyms that are voiced as a word by using all capitals with no dashes, and add dashes to acronyms that are voiced using individual letters. Example is “AIDS” can be pronounced as a word, or individually as “A-I-D-S”.

Explain an acronym during its first use. Example: “CTS, also known as Corporate Translation Services...”

Remember that the translated version of an acronym may have words in different positions. Example: WHO (World Health Organization) becomes Organisation Mondiale de la Santé in French.

If an acronym is to be voiced in another way, indicate how to use it. For example “the American Automobile Association” is referred to regularly as the “Triple A”. Be aware that some of these irregularities won’t translate well, and the spelled out version (A-A-A) may need to be used in the foreign language script.

Remember that words can often have more than one meaning and can function as both a noun and a verb. To illustrate this point, we’ll use the word “weather,” which can be a noun (“the weather_”), a transitive verb (“the sun caused the paint to weather.”), an intransitive verb (“the paint will weather well.”), or as part of an idiomatic expression (“I am feeling under the weather..”).

Slang terms may not make any sense at all after translation. Examples of slang terms that fit this genre include “feeling under the weather,” “jerry-rigged” and “kicked the bucket.”

If you are including a web site address, how do you want it voiced? If your domain name has a hyphen in it please indicate in full sentences how you would like it said.
Example: "h-t-t-p-colon-slash-slash-W-W-W DOT "domain name" or "h-t-t-p-colon-slash-slash-W-W-W DOT d-o-m-a-i-n-n-a-m-e DOT com".

Avoid ambiguity by referencing a person appropriately. Instead of “he”, “she”, or “they”, reference the person’s name, or the name of the group or entity. This is especially important when there are multiple speakers or characters within a scripted piece or for languages where gender is assigned to verbs, nouns and pronouns.

If there are areas of a script you would like us to emphasize, bold and italicize your instructions. The example indicates how the placement of the bold, italicized text can change the emphasis within a sentence:

This is my dog This is ***my*** dog
This ***is*** my dog This is my ***dog***

Additional script instructions should be italicized and placed in parenthesis.
Example: This is my dog. (Exaggerate “my” indicating pride of ownership, as if the animal just won best of show).

Provide the scripts in Arial using a 14pt font or larger. Arial is a clean font, free from any decorative elements that can play tricks on the eye during a read. Smaller fonts are difficult for the talent to see, especially the lower lighting conditions found in many studios.

On legal forms, fill-in forms, or consent forms, be sure to use the right “person.” For example, when voicing a contract we would not say “By signing I agree to the following terms and conditions” as the narrator is not the person agreeing to the terms – the listener is. Change the wording to reflect the proper person – in this case the listener – by writing for the ear rather than the eye: “By signing, you agree to the following terms and conditions.”

For brochures and pre-printed material, re-script the piece for audio. Materials meant for print do not voice well without this extra effort.

Avoid abbreviated terms such as “e.g.” or “FAQ”. Use “for example” instead and make it a separate sentence. FAQ should be written in its entirety as Frequently Asked Questions.

Before finalizing your script, read your script out loud to yourself or a colleague – do NOT read it in your head. Only by reading out loud will you ensure that your script is appropriately written to be heard, rather than read.

When reading the text out loud, watch for areas of heavy sibilance (excessive “s” sounds), tongue twisters, or awkward phrasing. Re-write the section to correct or minimize the problem.

Know your final format needs. Different applications will require different types and sizes of audio files. Will the audio be for a PSA broadcast over the radio, an in-house corporate training video, a telephone answering system or a touch-screen kiosk – and will you need aiff, wav, mp3, ulaw or other types of files?

Remember, the ear catches what the eye misses, and a script should be ready to go when it is provided to us. The studio is not the place to be editing the final text and making changes. This is why it is very important to read your script out loud before sending it to the studio for voicing. Scripts that leave us with questions or changes that need to be made on the spot can increase your costs in the form of talent and studio time, or copy editing services that may need to be applied.

Thank you – and please let us know if you have any questions regarding your script that we can help with before your voiceover project begins

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