

Teleprompters Made Easy

Tips For Better Performances

by Will Reynolds, MediaMan® Productions, Nashville, Tennessee

The history of speech and script prompting is rich and ever-changing. Since the earliest days of written communication, the need to recall and recite long sections of text has challenged speakers. Today there are four types of visual script prompting that you are likely to encounter; crib notes, cue cards, paper-driven teleprompters, and computer-driven teleprompters. Crib notes give a strong sense of security and cue cards, which are often overlooked in today's high technology minded environment, are still an effective means of conveying text and/or talent directions in some situations.

Teleprompters are script prompters which use video, and often computer technology, to scroll the text from which a speaker reads, and are not only more popular but are becoming irreplaceable for today's meetings and film/video productions. Unlike cue cards and crib notes, teleprompters allow a speaker to have direct eye contact with an audience, whether he/she is looking into a camera or into an auditorium. Computerized teleprompters allow a speaker to make text changes to his/her script literally seconds before reading it. They allow a speaker to change the size of the text characters he/she reads from and have numerous other features that allow a teleprompter operator to assist a speaker in the best execution and performance of his/her script. Some experienced newscasters actually scroll the teleprompter for themselves using a foot control unit, however, for the sake of this article, we will be discussing a typical computerized teleprompter system with a dedicated operator.

All teleprompters rely on a video playback device such as a video monitor (television) or video projector to play back the scrolling text so that a speaker can read it. Sometimes a speaker will be asked to read directly from these playback devices, as when using floor monitors at the edge of a stage or a large monitor centered in the audience. Other times a speaker will actually read his/her script or speech from a reflection of a video monitor utilizing a piece of specialized glass, which is angled precisely to reflect the image towards the speaker. This is how a podium teleprompter and an "on-camera" teleprompter playback system work. A podium playback system, often referred to as a "Presidential" system, uses large video monitors which are face-up on the floor (the glass is held in place by microphone-like stands), and a on-camera system suspends a small monitor just below the lens of a camera (and the camera looks through the glass).

The following points of information are intended to make a speaker feel more comfortable reading from a teleprompter and to assist him/her in communicating with his/her teleprompter operator.

Common Computerized Teleprompter System Features Include:

- Most are DOS based and can translate popular DOS software like MSWord and WordPerfect. Some operators also have the ability to translate to, from and between Macintosh and DOS computer platforms.
- Ability to edit text on-site as needed, especially during rehearsals.
- Ability to reverse text color, i.e. black text on white background or white text on black background.
- Ability to prompt using colors (requires Windows-based software and color monitors.)
- Ability to change size of the text being prompted.
- Ability to indicate the "active read" line with an arrow or pointer (see "Reading Suggestions" below).
- Ability to place a "bookmark" at the beginning of each speaker's script, at the start of each scene,

etc., which allows your operator to quickly cue up or down to the beginning of a particular section's text.

- Ability to cut and paste sections of text within one or multiple scripts.
- Ability to arrange and link multiple script elements into one unified script.
- Ability to prompt text as "All Caps" or "Caps & Lowercase."

Better Reading Suggestions:

- One common misconception concerning teleprompters is that the text will scroll like the text in movie credits and that you, as a speaker/actor, have to keep pace with it. When you are reading a script you are the leader. You set the pace and your teleprompter operator should follow you. But it is also your responsibility to communicate your needs and desires to the teleprompter operator. It is especially helpful for you to point out problems that may not be apparent to your operator like distracting reflections, visual obstacles, your desire to add a line break to separate segments of a long sentence or to remove a break so that two sections flow together.
- When multiple text sizes are available, use the medium sized text when possible; smaller text may cause your head to move left and right as you follow the script and larger text means fewer words on the screen so the scrolling speed must be much faster, and thus is harder to follow.
- Most speakers and actors read best when there are 5 to 7 lines of text on the screen at one time and when the "active read" line is the second or third from the top. This allows you to see the last line or two that you've just read, above the "active read" line, and lets you preview 3 or 4 of the lines that you will soon be reading.
- Most speakers and actors find that a script typeset in "Caps and Lowercase" reads easier than "All Caps" text because the capitalization of titles, names and sentences set them off visually from the body of the text. If this is your preference, let your script writer know prior to rehearsal. Many script writers use All Caps to set "read" lines apart from directional information (usually set in Caps & Lowercase) in a script.
- Utilize the underlining and All Caps features to emphasize key words in your script.
- Add directional commands like "Ad Lib," "Pause," "Recognize V.I.P.'s," "Read List Slowly," etc., to assist you when needed. Have these commands set-off from the body of the text or have them reversed out so that you know that the commands are "non-read" lines.
- When there are multiple speakers, have the text for each speaker's name reversed out or highlighted to set it apart from the text to be read.
- Place a line break between long sentences to set them apart from each other.
- In cases where improvisations and ad libs are called for, rehearsals and directional commands insure the best performance possible.
- In cases where you are very familiar with your text or don't want to read a prepared script word-for-word, use the teleprompter to list your objectives or to list bullet points of an outline of your text.

Miscellaneous suggestions:

- Rehearse whenever possible and remember that rehearsing your text is not just for your sake, but also serves as a rehearsal for your teleprompter operator. Even though you may have read and practiced your script before, your teleprompter operator is usually seeing your script for the first time. The more you plan to ad lib, the more you need to rehearse!
- When you rehearse, try to first isolate yourself and your teleprompter operator from distractions. This is usually best done by sitting next to your operator at his or her station. This way there aren't

others being held up by your need to rehearse, and you can interact with your operator more easily. This also makes dress rehearsals easier for you since you've seen your script in advance.

-- Teleprompters are often used as "insurance" to protect an event planner or producer's investment in an overall project. Don't take the suggestion or directive to use a teleprompter personally, rather, treat it as a necessary performance element that is designed to help make your job easier.

-- Always have a "hard copy" of your script if performing/speaking before a live audience. Have that copy with you at the podium just in case...

-- FYI: Another common teleprompter misconception is that the reflective glass plates used for podium teleprompters are "bullet-proof". While they are very expensive, they are not bullet-proof.

-- For teleprompter script preparation and staging tips, see MediaMan® Production's article *Teleprompters Made Easy; Tips For Producers & Writers* by Will Reynolds. Call, email or write for your copy today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Will Reynolds is the owner of Tennessee Prompters, a Division of MediaMan® Productions, located in Nashville, Tennessee, and has been prompting for over 20 years. Reynolds is a two-time President of the Tennessee Chapter of the International Special Events Society (TISES), has served four years on the Board of Directors of the Tennessee chapter of Meeting Professionals International (TMPI), and served four years on the International Curriculum Review Board for George Washington University's Sports & Event Marketing & Management program. Reynolds was named TMPI's 1994 Supplier of the Year and 1994 Chapter Manager of the Year, is an internationally published award winning writer and video producer. He can be reached at Tennessee Prompters (615) 834-9655, <http://tennesseeprompters.com>; or MediaMan® Productions (615) 834-4090, <http://mediamanproductions.com>.

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