

Top monologue mistakes & solutions

By Karen Kohlhaas

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1. Not having the lines memorized well enough!

Believe it or not, this is the single biggest problem that most actors have in the audition room. The auditors of a recent EPA (Equity Principal Audition), told me that they could tell that the *majority* of actors, even subtly, were still trying to remember their lines. Therefore they were not fully acting their monologues. I completely disagree with the theory that not quite having the lines will keep an actor “fresh.” Would a serious musician in a competition dream of not quite knowing the piece? If any of an actor’s energy is going into remembering the line, that energy is not at his disposal to truly act the piece. **Solution:** Be like Anthony Hopkins, who runs his lines 200 times before shooting a scene. I think most people agree that his efforts are worth it. Maybe your number isn’t 200 – but find out what your number is – how much rehearsal do you need to have the monologue memorized so you can bring all of yourself to playing it?

2. Having no staging choices

This is second, if not equal to, not having lines. An auditor of another EPA said that *none* of the actors who came in during a whole day of auditions had made specific physical choices for their monologues. Instead, they just acted the piece and left the movement up to chance. Would anyone dream of sending a cast on stage on opening night with no staging, just hoping that the actors’ acting instincts would take care of everything? An auditioning actor is under just as much pressure. **Solution:** Having clear, fun staging will instantly improve your monologues and make you less nervous. Think carefully about what you want your monologue to look like from the outside, and give yourself a few concrete moves to help you tell the story. P.S.: Working in a chair is not a solution to having no staging! You need to make physical choices in the chair as well, so that your piece doesn’t have low energy/physical sameness all the way through.

3. Looking at the floor

Many actors look on the floor before, during and/or after their monologues. Unless it is for a specifically staged moment that actually refers to something on the floor in the plot, looking at the floor during the piece can look like you lost your line and it almost always drops the energy of your performance. Looking at the floor after the piece can look like you are ashamed or unsure. **Solution:** Look up! I do suggest dropping your *eyes only* (not your head) for a brief 3-second countdown into the piece at the very beginning, but otherwise, let the auditors see your eyes as much as possible. This will involve them in the piece and keep them with you.

4. Hating the material

You are the producer, director, actor and designer of your monologues, and every monologue audition gives you an opportunity to run with this incredible artistic freedom. If you, like many actors, hate your monologues, it's time to get some new ones and get excited about how you are going to present them. Auditors can tell when you are not excited about your pieces, and if you're not excited, why should they be? Do you like watching a cast that is not excited about performing the play? Your monologues have the potential to be expressions of why you want to act in the first place; celebrations of your favorite writers, and also thrilling experiments and challenges. **Solution:** Do whatever you need to do to find material you love (read more, do some thinking about what writing excites you the most) and get to work. See [Why you should have 20 monologues](#) and other articles on this website for ideas about finding material.

5. Acting to (looking at) the auditors

When we interviewed [7 industry professionals](#) for [The Monologue Audition Video](#), all but one said they hate it when actors directly to them, or otherwise 'use' them during the piece. Most actors seem to know not to do this, but it still happens. **Solution:** Find a place to focus that best creates the illusion that you are talking to someone just behind them. (You can adapt this focus if necessary to create the illusion that you are speaking to more than one person, a group, yourself, God, etc.). Practice working off of your own instincts and sense of truth, as you act the monologue to that focus choice (with someone watching, this is essential). Practice with a friend until you are sure your focus looks the way you want it to.

6. Acting in a 3/4 view to the auditors

A lot of actors do this, and it makes no sense. They end up acting their piece for the corner! **Solution:** Always give those watching you the fullest experience of your performance (they want to audition you, not your profile). Practice with a friend – watch each other and compare notes – until you're sure of the auditors' view of you.

7. Standing too close to the auditors

Acting too close to the auditors can make them extremely uncomfortable (as you would be if a stranger got too close to you!) I have recently been hearing of auditions that actually put markers down on the floor, and ask actors not to cross them. An actor who gets too close is an actor who is showing that he is unaware of, or doesn't care about, the audience's experience. Each audition room is different, and each room will require different choices. What is too close in one room won't necessarily be too close in a smaller or differently shaped room. You don't want to be too far from the auditors either; that can feel like you are 'lurking' in the background or like there's no one on stage. **Solution:** Learning how to find the best spot for your performance is part of your showmanship. Practice, ideally with a friend, walking into different rooms and identifying the best acting area. Put that acting area *behind* the place that would start to be too close to the auditors, and practice performing your piece so that you never cross that line. Practice until you can define the area instantly and habitually as you walk in.

8. Having an unsupported voice and/or mumbling

Both having an unsupported voice and mumbling are marks of an amateur. Regardless of whether your audition is for theater, TV or film, your commitment to a supported voice and clear speech demonstrates how committed you are to the character's point of view, and your audience's experience. It is also an indication of how versatile you could be as an actor. **Solution:** work on your voice and speech! For recommendations in New York and Los Angeles, see [Great NYC/LA teachers and classes](#). My favorite Mamet quote about voice is "Voice work is the easiest, cheapest way to happiness as an actor." Look to your favorite actors and I think you will find them vocally committed and articulate, no matter the role or the style.

9. Paraphrasing and/or removing the writer's punctuation

For serious theater auditions it's absolutely essential that the lines are said as written, and as punctuated – even if you think you have a better idea. Paraphrasing is often accepted in tv or film work, but I still suggest paying attention to the way a line was written – if you commit to it you may find out something essential about the character. If you paraphrase in a theater audition you are showing that you may not honor the writing when you rehearse a play. Playwriting is next door to poetry: meter, rhythm, and emphasis are all factors, and how a line sounds is often as important as what it literally means. Writers cringe when actors don't pay attention to their carefully worked out lines, rhythm and punctuation. The playwright Jerome Hairston says, "When an actor paraphrases, that means he doesn't understand the line. Once he understands the line, he'll know that it can't be said any other way." **Solution:** When preparing an audition, embrace the way each line was written, and practice until the language is part of you.

10. Playing the emotion

The great Shakespearean director, scholar and teacher John Barton talks about how the monologues and soliloquies in Shakespeare are not about *displaying* emotion, but about *handling* the emotion. I think this is true of all monologues. The character is usually delivering a monologue in an attempt to *do something* about what is going on at the present time (even if it's only to figure it out; even if it's to say he has no idea what to do, but he knows he needs to do something!). That means it is a given that the monologue is *already coming* from a state of great emotion, and that the emotion does not need to be emphasized. Just as in life, you usually want to avoid people who are trying to get something from you with great hysteria, rage, self-pity, or excessive giddiness, so auditors might react to actors who are only playing into the emotion of the situation. Yes you do want to play the *importance* of finding the solution, but that is very different than having an emotional fit, which will always take you *away* from the solution. **Solution:** Create order. Play the importance of what the character is trying to *do*, to accomplish, to get from the other character(s). Define the objective as specifically as possible, treat it as something you can actually achieve; put the full force of

your personality behind the objective, and not only will an emotional commitment naturally be there, but your auditors will see you as the hero – acting *while under* great stress, rather than as the victim who only complains about it.

11. Fidgeting

We all have fidgets – mannerisms we do unconsciously. Monologue work tends to put your fidgets under the magnifying glass because you are the only thing happening in the room. Fidgets can include: shifting weight from side to side; beating out the rhythm of the lines with arms or head; thrusting the head and also upper body forward so that alignment is pulled off and the voice suffers; fussy and/or repetitive hand gestures; blinking. Fidgeting is distracting and instantly takes the audience out of the piece. Fidgeting can be worked on however, and I have seen some incredibly fidgety actors transform themselves into focused, purposeful, riveting performers by working patiently with their fidgeting habits.

Solution: Know that every body movement “reads” – is apparent – to your auditors, and that every movement needs to be either a choice or a full expression of a spontaneous impulse (if it is less than full it becomes a fidget). Having purposeful, fidget-free staging for a monologue helps immensely. Work with movement and acting teachers, work with partners, to ground yourself and practice both stillness AND the full discharge of your movement impulses. For those who can stand it: have a partner videotape you from a side view while you act your monologue fully. When you watch it, watch it without the sound, and you will quickly see your fidgets, and when you are using your body purposefully and powerfully.

12. Having a neutral (or unpleasant) hello/thankyou

Do you have a specific attitude or philosophy that you regularly practice when representing yourself and your work to people? Most successful business people do. If you are neutralizing your non-performing interactions in the room, you are likely to look like you are not happy to be there. If you were hiring someone for a position of great responsibility, would you hire someone who looked unhappy? Your interactions in the room are how you show the auditors what you are like under pressure, and what kind of attitude they can expect of you in a production.

Solution: With enough practice, anyone can become an expert at making a warm, professional entrance, introduction, thank you, and exit. Think about what attitude you would most like to show in the audition room, and cultivate this attitude until it is habitual. It is completely possible to appear grounded, excited about your work, and happy to meet the people in the room, regardless of the atmosphere, or your nerves, if you choose your attitude consciously and practice it enough.

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*anyone who wants to present themselves well, available on her website
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