

Teleprompters Made Easy

Tips For Producers & Directors

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Prompters have been around as long as man could write. That's right; even in its simplest form, the cue card, the earliest form of prompting existed as a way to assist in the delivery of the spoken word. Then, as now, the importance of ensuring a well delivered message was paramount.

Automated cue cards first made their appearance in the form of large paper scrolls which rotated on a drum below or beside the first "talking picture" cameras. Teleprompters – electronic cue cards – came onto the scene in the early fifties when a smaller scroll of paper was pulled beneath a video camera, which in turn shot the image as it passed below. The image was then sent to a video monitor for reading.

The first computerized teleprompter systems were introduced in 1983. Like most computer technologies, the early computer prompting systems had limited features, were slow and had a jerky scroll. These days, teleprompter systems are almost exclusively computer driven, offering a variety of interactive features and options based off powerful computer programs. There are, however, some paper-driven systems that are still performing their tasks well and are being used on a regular basis to this day.

The following suggestions and ideas come from over 20 years of prompting experience. While some of these items might seem to be obvious or "given," I have learned not to expect every producer or event planner to have the same level of experience and familiarity with a teleprompter system. With proper preparation and attention to detail, your teleprompter service can be a valuable partner in the overall success of your event.

Ordering A System & Operator

-- Know the system you're renting and its capabilities. Not all teleprompter systems are created technically equal. Some computers are slower, some have older, less powerful software with fewer features, and some teleprompter programs are simply not capable of what the latest professional software releases now feature. For example, it may take longer on one system to accomplish the same task versus another system which may, or may not, become an issue.

-- Find out from your talent or director/producer what system or features they are used to working with. Common features include: the ability to change font sizes; to make a font "All Caps" from a "Caps and Lowercase" document; to reverse text color (white text on black screen or black text on white screen); to change font color (either as a reverse out box or literally different colors); to block and move sections of text; to spellcheck; to translate from other software programs; to print scripts, etc.

-- Know your operator. Ask your rental company and/or operator for recent production credits and referrals. Do they welcome script changes? How do they handle pressure? How well will they interact with your VIP's? Do they arrive self-contained? Are they dressed properly? Are they prepared for the unexpected?

Preparing Your Scripts

-- Most professional grade teleprompter systems are capable of translating the majority of popular software applications in use today. Most especially use or translate the universal "ASCII" protocol which is available on DOS, Windows and MacIntosh platforms. For specific information on the preparation of scripts, see *"Teleprompters Made Easy: Tips For Script & Speech Writers,"* located on Tennessee Prompter's web site.

Operator Performance & Expectations

-- A teleprompter is not a character generator or a rolling movie credit list. A good teleprompter operator follows the talent and says vigilant for misreads, improvisations and pauses. In my opinion, the ability to concentrate and follow the speaker/talent is the single greatest teleprompter operator attribute.

-- A teleprompter operator is trained to follow, not lead. Where necessary, directions like "Pause" or "Read List Quickly" can be inserted to assist the talent, but having the teleprompter drive or lead the talent inevitably leads to confusion and misreads. If you want your teleprompter operator to attempt to "slow the talent down" or to "speed them up," then do so reluctantly and when possible, inform your talent in advance to avoid performance anxiety.

-- There tend to be two types of producers: those who want feedback, suggestions and/or correction notices from their teleprompter operators, and those who do not. Teleprompter operators often notice that a word was missed or mispronounced, but don't have time to dwell on content or mark the position of the error without stopping the talent. You should let your teleprompter operator know if and when you would like his or her input if mistakes are made or discovered. This may mean interrupting the talent or giving feedback to the producer/director at the end of a flubbed take or rehearsal.

-- Take advantage of your opportunity to edit your scripts as needed. While paper driven prompting systems used to require scissors, tape and white-out, computer driven systems can make changes to scripts in seconds.

-- In critical situations consider having two teleprompter computers running simultaneously with an "A/B" switch. If problems occur on one computer, the script feed can be switched to the other computer with little interruption. For even more important situations, have a second operator running the backup system, you can then switch on the fly while both scripts are cued to the same place in the speech/scene.

-- A teleprompter operator should be able to print out a copy of your script. Ask your operator if he/she offers this service. This is especially helpful when the talent has made numerous changes to the text which was actually read and which differ from the original printed version. Scripts can be printed in single space, double space and columnar (which simulates the narrow column of text in the way that it will be seen when prompted.)

-- Plan ahead. Make sure your prompter operator has proper clearances if he/she will be working with artists and production/event VIP's. Prompters often need to arrive early to start script work and for production work are usually cut loose early to free up camera weight for hand-held B-rolls. Prompters also tend to work through scheduled meal breaks in order to be prepared for an upcoming rehearsal or performance. Let your caterer know in case late or early meal plans are needed.

-- Do you have a dress code or preference? Teleprompter operators are one of the few "crew" members who have regular interaction with your VIP's and/or talent. Let your operator know what attire is appropriate.

Teleprompter Staging Needs

-- Prompter operators NEED sound!!! The most frequent oversight made by film, video and event producers is to forget audio support for teleprompter operators. No teleprompter operator, no matter how experienced, can effectively operate a prompter if he or she can not hear the talent. The most natural and simple method is to have the teleprompter as close to the talent as the shot or occasion will allow. Line of sight with the talent is helpful in catching comments, corrections, pauses and directions on the set/stage, but if those directions and comments are captured and amplified, the teleprompter operator can be in a dressing room, hallway, stairwell, closet, garage, truck in the alley, etc. (I know because I've been there). Plan ahead and have a volume-controllable audio monitor or headphones for your prompter operator if they be can't situated near the talent or if you have a noisy set/event. It is preferred that the audio feed is "pre-fader" (straight from the sound board) so that there are no interruptions or missed audio cues and try to keep the area around your prompter operator as quiet as possible during rehearsals and performances to eliminate distractions, especially when talent is discussing the script with the teleprompter operator.

-- Always prompt with an internal computer battery or with an U.P.S. backup (Uninterruptible Power Supply -- a big battery,) to protect computer power and signal continuity. Power surges and drops, especially in large buildings like hotels and from location generators, can damage a computer or at the very least, cause unexpected and frustrating re-boots of your computer and potential loss of script changes not yet saved. A UPS backup, along with a rolling cart, allows your teleprompter operator complete freedom of movement, which is helpful in multiple location shoots.

-- If you are using a podium or "Presidential" presentation system there are a couple staging requirements that must be anticipated. The generally desired placement of the teleprompter monitors and reflective glass plates is designed to split the room visually into three equal thirds, i.e. your view from the podium would be; left-third audience then first plate, middle-third audience then second plate, then right-third audience. To accommodate the monitors for your floorplan, plan on leaving 24" to 32" of stage in front of your podium. If you must have your podium at the lip of the stage then plan on using risers or draped cases in front of the stage to elevate the floor monitors to roughly the same height as the stage itself.

-- If you are planning on shooting video, film or still photography during the speech you may need to compromise between the ideal placement of the glass plates for your speaker/talent and the need for your cameraperson to get a good, clean shot of the speaker/talent. Split the plates only as far as absolutely necessary. Extremely split plates encourage a jerky, intentional looking performance.

-- Teleprompter glass plates are designed to have a degree of viewing flexibility to accommodate the varying heights of your speakers/talent. However, extremes in heights between presenters can necessitate plate adjustments. If you can't avoid having a tall presenter follow a short presenter, then try to build in a break, video segment, or some type of distraction to allow your operator or assistant to adjust the plates between speakers.

Performance Tips

-- Consider the value of one-on-one rehearsal time between your talent/speaker and your teleprompter operator. If applicable, a good prompter operator can help coach talent/speaker on how to use the teleprompter to his or her advantage, and rehearsing a script with a crew of technicians on the clock can get very expensive.

-- Remember, rehearsing a script is not just for the speaker/talent, it is also a rehearsal for your oper-

ator's sake. Every speaker has his/her own inflections and speech patterns. Some improvise and wander off the written text. Some write their speeches in what I call "Neo-Outline," where there is sparse text and plenty of ad lib. Rehearsing with the same operator as the one who will perform during the event/shoot is extremely helpful.

-- Always have a printed copy of the script/speech at the podium, just in case.

-- For teleprompter performance or script writing tips, see Tennessee Prompter's articles *Teleprompters Made Easy; Tips For Better Performances* and *Teleprompters Made Easy: Tips For Script & Speech Writers* by Will Reynolds. Visit <http://www.tennesseeprompters.com>. Call, email or write for your copy today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Will Reynolds is the owner of Tennessee Prompters, a teleprompter service and equipment provider located in Nashville, TN. 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 is an active member of the Nashville Chamber of Commerce. 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 has been prompting for over 20 years and has worked with the presidents of companies and the president of the United States of America. He can be reached at Tennessee Prompters at (615) 834-9655 or <http://www.tennesseeprompters.com>. Tennessee Prompters is the official teleprompter provider for the State of Tennessee and Governor Phil Bredesen.

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