Teleprompters Made Easy
Tips For Script & Speech Writers
by Will Reynolds, Tennessee Prompters, Nashville, TN

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, most teleprompter systems are computer driven, offering a variety of interactive features and options, and they can be 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.

The following suggestions and ideas come from over 20 years of teleprompting experience. While some of these items might seem to be obvious or "given," I have learned not to expect every script or speech writer 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 delivering the message that you've worked so hard to shape and to the overall success of your client's event.

Know Your Producer's & Talent's Expectations
-- Find out from your producer what expectations they have for the script as it relates to the performance of it. Are there time constraints? Does he/she expect a lot of last minute changes? It may be, for example, advantageous to break large scripts/speeches into smaller segments to give you greater flexibility in making last minute edits. Your teleprompter operator can then link the segments in order when prompted.
-- Find out about your talent and any restrictions or requirements they might have. Do they have trouble physically reading prompter scripts? Do they struggle with complex words or have speech impediments? Anything you can do to shape the script to the talent's capabilities will assist the teleprompter operator in helping the talent deliver his or her lines.

Preparing Your Scripts
-- While it is sometimes unrealistic, it is best to have only one person designated to authorize changes or alterations to scripts whenever possible. Confusion and chaios can reign if producers, directors, talent and script writers are all making changes to the prompter script at the same time.
-- Remember that you are, showbooks aside, writing primarily for only the talent/speaker to read. English conventions that you wouldn't consider in print are often acceptable or preferred for

teleprompter scripts. For example, it is perfectly acceptable to use phoenitic spellings of difficult names, to place hyphens in words that don't need them, etc. The principle here is, "if it makes it easier to read," then it's acceptable.

-- Speaking of broken English conventions, it is best to eliminate paragraphs for teleprompter use. Each sentence should be self-standing with a return (blank line) between each sentence. If you don't do it, then your teleprompter operator most likely will.

-- Production scipts are often created with separate audio and video columns. If at all possible, please send your teleprompter opreator only the portions that will be prompted or spoken. It's not a big deal to clean out all of the non-read lines, but it takes time and, more importantly, it leaves room for mistakes or miscommunication. This especially applies to scripts done in "tables" or spreadsheet form. Your teleprompter operator has to go into each cell of the spread sheet to cut and paste the script back into one document.

-- Most professional teleprompter systems are capable of translating the majority of popular software applications in use today. The majority use or translate the universal "ASCII" protocol which is available on Windows, DOS and Macintosh platforms. First save your script in the native language that created it (like MicroSoft Word) <u>THEN</u> also save your script in the ASCII "text only" format for safety. Rename and label each file clearly.

-- Always send or bring a "hard copy" (printed copy) backup of your script/speech, especially if you're prompting live to an audience, and use 3.5" discs if you haven't emailed your script in advance. Few prompter computers can handle CD's or ZIP-type discs directly, however, as CD's become more popular their use will become more commonplace. In other words, check ahead with your operator to be sure you have no unexpected on-site "opportunities."

-- There are several differences to observe when preparing your script for teleprompter (the spoken word) as opposed to print use (the written word), due primarily to how words and symbols appear and read when being prompted. While all scripts can be altered during rehearsal, and some speakers will have specific preferences (the user is always right), here are some suggestions to help speed up the process;

– Type your script using the "Caps and Lowercase" form instead of "All Caps." Caps and LC reads easier, allows for the use of capitalization to emphasize words or names, and most prompter programs allow the operator to override the Caps and Lowercase format by prompting your script as All Caps if your talent desires it. However, a script entered as All Caps can be prompted only as All Caps.

– Spell out words that have symbol shortcuts like "percent" instead of "%" and "dollars" instead of "$."

– As a general rule, type out all single digit numbers like "nine" instead of "9," and use numeral form for numbers above 10 like "55" instead of fifty-five.

– Add periods between letters of an acronym if it is not clearly obvious like "J.D.Vision" instead of "JDVision," or "A.S.A.P." instead of ASAP.

– Use commas or "... " to create a pause instead of a colon or a semi-colon. When using "... " place three periods without space between them and attach them to the end of the last word... like this... then a space before the next word. Colons and semi-colons can be difficult characters to read.

– Underline or capitalize a word for emphasis instead of adding an exclamation mark which can look like an "l" or "i" when prompted and which can't been seen until the end of the sentence, after having read the word.

– Spell out proper names like "William" instead of "Wm" or "Charles" instead of "Chs."

-- Read your scripts to yourself out loud, like your speaker/talent will have to do. Find any tounge twisters, incomplete sentences, lengthy sentences without an obvious break for a breath, etc. and make the changes before the production/event clock starts ticking.

Operator Performance & Expectations

-- 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.

-- It is often easier and less time consuming to bring a hard copy of your script with edits and additions written in, than it is to bring a disc with your entire revised script. The reason for this is that your operator can not tell where the changes were made if you only provide your script on disc. He/she therefore has to reformat the entire script all over again. Typing in edits and additions are typically easier, unless you've made major changes to your original script, in which case it may still be easier to cut/paste any long sections.

-- 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.)

-- For teleprompter performance or production tips, see Tennessee Prompter's article *Teleprompters Made Easy; Tips For Better Performances* and *Teleprompters Made Easy: Tips For Producers & Directors* by Will Reynolds. Visit http://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.