

An illustration on the left side of the page features several gears of different sizes and colors (black, grey, white). A large black arrow points from the top right towards the gears. A dotted arrow points downwards from the top left. A thought bubble is shown with a magnifying glass over it, containing a small gear and a lightbulb. The background is white with a grey pencil tip pointing towards the top right.

Memory play

Exercises to help get your
actors off-book

BY TRACEY MOORE

OH, THEATRE! The glamorous life. Well, most of the time. But as every actor knows, there are some mundane and unglamorous parts of the job. One of these is learning lines.

Some directors require actors to arrive at the first rehearsal “off book.” Other directors set a date by which scripts must be set aside, permitting actors to “call” for a line but expecting that the bulk of the words will be committed to memory. Some directors will set aside a day or two for line work, but the expectation in all of these approaches is that the actors already know how to memorize.

Perhaps, when we all used to have to memorize multiple phone numbers and facts, our memory “muscles” were in good shape. But now, when even our computers remember our passwords for us, when every phone number is stored in our phone, and when the Internet provides memory “backup” for, well, everything—memory muscles aren’t used as frequently, and students may need some instruction.

So, in an effort to help those who have trouble memorizing, or who want to get the maximum benefit out of time spent in this endeavor, here are some techniques to get those words—both lines and lyrics—off the script pages and into our brains and bodies. As with any skill, people learn differently, so a combination of these techniques might be the key.

Choosing the right exercise from the list below depends on the kind of text that needs memorization and the personality of the actor. Of course, the sooner actors

begin to practice these techniques, the better. Last-minute memorization is stressful for everyone involved in a production.

Using paper and pen

Writing it down

An oldie but a goodie. It's a fact that writing things by hand helps memory. When using this technique for lines, actors should work on the script one piece at a time. Target a particular scene and write it multiple times (no less than three). This is very effective for lyrics and monologues.

Don't spend a lot of time on the cue lines. You can use a piece of paper to cover up your lines and slide the paper down the page to read the cues, then write your lines in a separate notebook.

To be clear: typing the lines on the computer does not have the same effect as handwriting them. After writing the scene three times, try the following.

Writing down the first letter

This is to see if the memory is working as fast as it needs to for speaking the lines. Write down, as fast as you can, the first letter of each word of the line. If I were memorizing Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech, I would write, "t b o n t b t i t q" for "To be or not to be, that is the question." Writing just one letter rather than the whole word forces the memory to move faster and begins to help actors move from writing to speaking the line.

Finally, after writing down the first letter of the scene that you are working on, make that your "script" and speak the lines, referring only to the first letter to jog your memory if you get stuck.

Here's a hidden bonus to this exercise. This "first letter script" helps the actor to see whether a particular sound is recurrent in the speech. A lot of s sounds for a sneaky character or a lot of p's, b's, t's, and k's for an energetic character will illustrate to the actor why the playwright has chosen those particular words. For the

advanced actor, this knowledge opens up a world of options for vocal characterization.

One word at a time

Using your mouth

The ideal way of understanding a monologue or song is to have a substantial thought process underneath the text and to have those thoughts move you from idea to idea and from word to word, but some lines and lyrics are a little superficial or are so repetitive that the subtext is the same. In such cases, I borrow from the handwriting and motor skills technique above but use my mouth.

This is also a helpful technique for monologues, speeches, and lyrics that ask actors to go from the end of one word, thought, or line to the next without another actor providing a cue or new information.

At the end of one line, exaggeratedly move the mouth to speak (out loud) the last word, for example, a big "o" shape with your mouth or an exaggerated "m" on the final consonant. Then move from speaking that exaggerated sound to speaking the first word in the next line, also exaggerating your mouth shape.

For example, in moving from the first to the second line in the "The Star-Spangled Banner," you would exaggerate "Oh, say can you SEE" as you move to "BY the dawn's early light," speaking the combined word several times with exaggeration—SEE BY, SEE BY, SEE BY.

Observe and feel the exaggerated movements of the mouth, lips, and tongue as you explore the bright EE sound and the plosive B. If you are working on a song, do this while speaking, not singing.

Then speak the lines or lyrics completely and observe how the mouth "remembers" moving from SEE to BY. You will notice that the mouth gets there first, and that the movement prompts the mind. Refreshing this a few times a week will establish the muscle memory pattern, so you won't have to think about it anymore.

Building up

Young actors who struggle with concentration and focus may have trouble with this exercise, which can feel slow. But for actors who will stick with it, it is very effective. It works well with lyrics, monologues, and speeches but can also be useful for deepening memorization or for trouble spots that refuse to stay in the brain.

Get in a comfortable position on the floor, reclining on your back with legs bent: knees pointing up with feet on the floor, or knees open to each side with feet together, or lower legs resting on a chair seat keeping the lower back on the floor. Hands and arms should be comfortable, not tightly crossed or clutched. Gently resting hands on the stomach is fine.

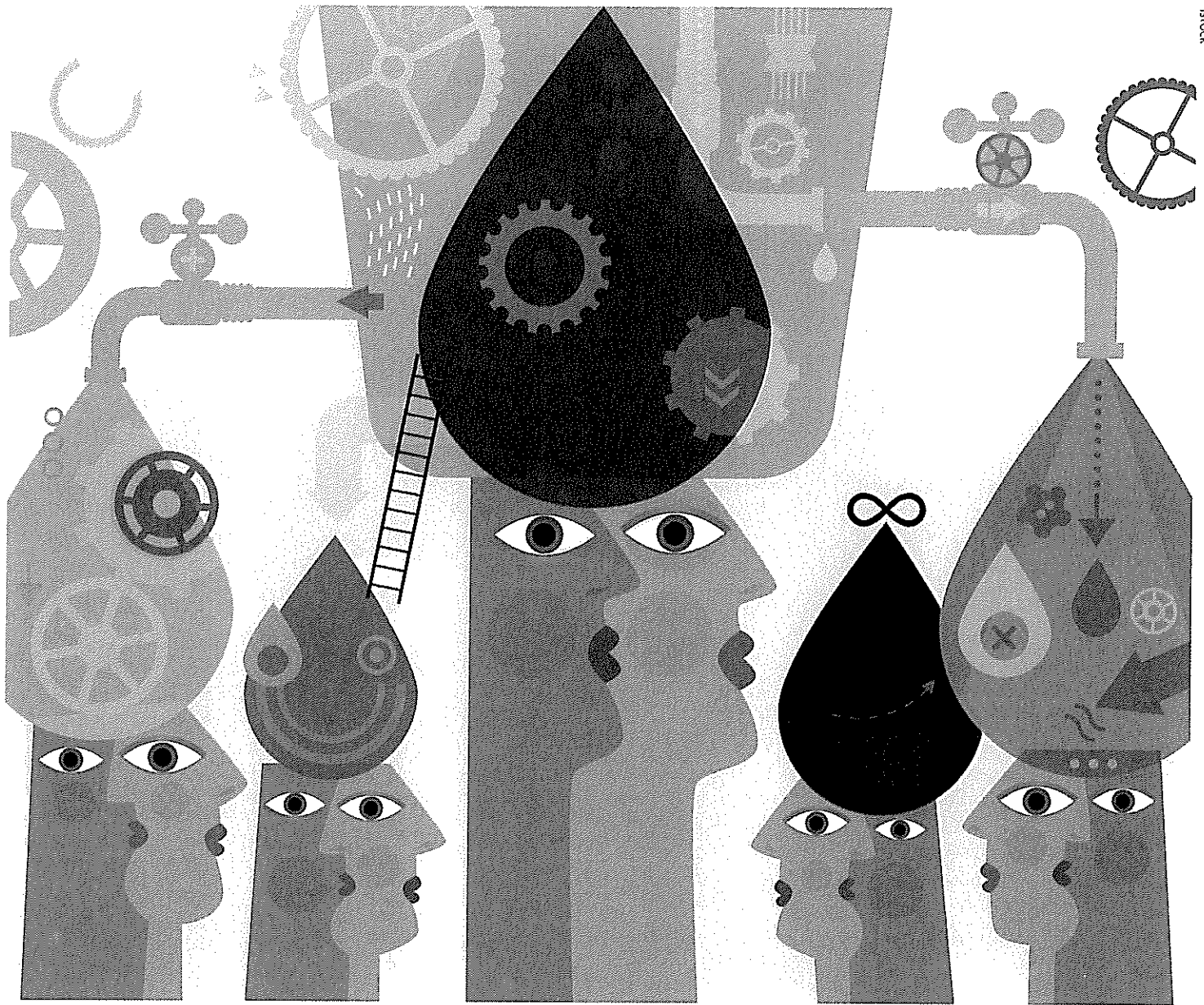
Begin by observing and relaxing the breathing. Then, starting with the first word of your text, take a breath and speak it out loud. Do this adding a word with each breath. I'll use the Hamlet example again. The exercise would sound like this: (Inhale) "To." (Inhale) "To be." (Inhale) "To be or." (Inhale) "To be or not." (Inhale) "To be or not to." And so on.

This exercise takes time, but if the actor will breathe, speak, and listen, the words will begin to connect in a way not previously understood, and they will stick in the mind.

One word per sentence

This is as simple as it sounds and is very helpful in remembering a chunk of text. After studying the chunk as a whole, and making sure that the lines are understood, actors choose one important word from each sentence in the chunk and make a list of words. That list of words must make sense in some way.

It could be an alphabetical list. It could move from small to large, morning to night, low to high. Or it could be a list of active verbs. When saying the lines, the actor uses the list to track the next line, and an awareness of the important word will help prompt the line itself.



The trigger in the cue

This is a very helpful technique for group scenes where many people are interjecting or where the lines are similar and easy to get out of order, like the picnic basket bidding scene in *Oklahoma!* The key here is to listen carefully for the cue lines and notice how they're different.

Using the whole body

Dance the monologue (or song)

This exercise works for all but is most effective with those who are physically free or naturally uninhibited. The key is not to use actual dance movements or choreography but to create spontaneous movement that comes from the sounds of the words. Again, it's a little time-consuming,

but because there is a lot of physical action, this works well for young actors.

Actors should have some space in which to move and be dressed comfortably. Bare feet or socks work best. Have actors stand in a neutral position and begin to sound the individual sounds of the first word of their line. They can (and should) do this as a group, so you'll have a cacophony of different words and sounds and lines all happening at once.

In "To be or not to be," for example, the first sound is "t," so the actor simply stands and says, "t." This may come out sounding like "tuh" or "tih," and that's fine. Then, the actors should allow themselves to explore

where in the body this "t" sound occurs or how it makes them want to move.

The "t" sound is quick and explosive, so it might generate a sharp movement of the arm, hand, or leg. Or, because the sound primarily resonates in the mouth and head, it might generate a lifting or tilting of the head or a popping up of the chest. There is no correct movement. This is an individual experience of the sound, so the results will vary with each individual actor's kinesthetic and physical comfort.

After the actor has explored "t" with body and sound for a while (thirty seconds to a minute is the minimum time, but there is no maximum), they will find a movement

they enjoy, or that they keep returning to, or that feels “true” to the sound. That is their “dance” for that sound.

Next, they should move to the “ooh” sound of “to,” exploring what that sustained, closed, darker vowel prompts from their body. After a minute spent on “ooh,” they should put the two movements together (while speaking the word) to create a “dance” of the word “to.” When they’re finished with that word, move on to the next.

At some point, depending on time and interest and energy, you’ll reach a stopping point. There are three final steps to finish this exercise. Actors should do these next steps individually, one at a time, not as a group. While one actor “presents,” the others should watch until it’s their turn.

First, have the actor speak the words and “dance” them at the same time. Second, have actor “dance” the words without speaking. Finally, have actor stand still and grounded, and speak the words. Don’t worry if you don’t have time to do the whole speech or song. It will be profound for actors to feel the difference between the lines they have “danced” and the lines they have not.

Tie it to your blocking

And speaking of blocking, all directors have experienced that moment when the actors go off book and forget their blocking, because the memory cannot process both things at once. So tie the lines to the blocking. Have a rehearsal where the actors relish and experience where they are as they say a particular line.

If they’re walking, have them do it slow and exaggerated, while speaking the line. If they’re sitting, have them spread out or touch the material of the chair. If they’re standing, have them speak the line while noticing what’s in their line of vision—a corner, a wall, someone next to them, the prop in their hand.

Yes, speak the line to the prop. Speak the line while touching the

prop. Notice the position of the hand or arm and the weight or bulk of the item. Connecting movements and lines while blocking will help memory of both when the scripts are put away.

Place it in space

This works well when the list or the story involves people. Have the actor place people at specific points in the room or set. This can be done with real or imaginary people. Then, as the actor goes through the objects or people listed in the lines, they should specifically adjust and direct focus to whomever or whatever they’re talking about.

The actor’s action of turning to the right or facing the chair will help stimulate memory, and those “turns” can become smaller and smaller as the memory solidifies, so they needn’t interfere with blocking.

Working with lists

In long speeches, classical writing, verse, or lyrics, the text often contains lists. There are a few techniques for lists or ordering, which can help with sequential stories, too.

Build a totem

Actors can put the objects in a stack, working high to low or low to high, to make a totem pole. Drawing a picture of the totem is extremely helpful for memory.

Draw a picture

Once again, the physical action of the hand will help the mind, so cutting out pictures from a magazine to make a collage won’t have the same effect. If you have students who are artistically inclined, have them draw the list, the story, or the events on large paper, using color.

Use your body

If it is a list that builds (and most do), you can have actors move or touch parts of the body to “name” the items. Using the feet, knees, hips, hands, elbows, and shoulders, the list can work its way up (or down) the body.

Place it in the room

This is another technique that helps with lists, as well as a distinctive word or image in a group of sentences. The idea is to have the actor take literal or metaphorical images of objects or ideas and put them somewhere specific in an imaginary house. The actor “walks through” the house in their mind, seeing each item in its place—opening the door and seeing an item on a chair in the foyer or sitting on the couch.

Objects can be anywhere: on a wall, on a clock face, on the kitchen table, or in the refrigerator. This can be a fun visualization exercise, and if the images and places are clear and deliberately chosen, the actor will be surprised that all they have to do is “walk” and “look” to find all the prompts they need.

With another person

Switch parts

This exercise works best for two-person scenes. Have the actors switch parts. Hearing your lines from someone else (and hearing yourself say the cue) can make the scene more meaningful. Make sure that actors know the goal is not to parody each other. They should play the scene as authentically and truthfully as possible. Is it easiest to have actors sit across from each other and not try to recreate blocking.

Whisper in my ear

This works well for monologues, speeches, and song lyrics. Have actors sit facing in opposite directions but close together, as on a conversation chair. One actor’s right hip should be in line with the other’s right hip, so they can comfortably whisper into each other’s ear. If the monologue or song lyric belongs to Actor A, then have Actor B whisper (really whisper) the words into Actor A’s ear. Don’t rush—and be sure to whisper into the ear, not off to the side.

Read to me (two ways)

Again, this is effective for monologues, speeches, and song lyrics. If

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the lines belong to Actor A, have Actor B read Actor A's sentences one at a time—slowly and accurately. Don't attempt to "act," just read the lines so that they make sense. Actor B reads sentence number one (the sentence can be broken up if it is very long) until Actor A nods. At that point, Actor B should move to sentence two, repeating that sentence until Actor A nods, and then move to sentence three, etc.

The nod is an indication that the line has been fully heard, in a substantial and complete way, and that the actor is ready to move on. It is fine if Actor A needs to hear the line multiple times. After going all the way through, Actor B can go back to the beginning, read the first line, and let Actor A try to repeat it. If Actor A messes up, Actor B should read the whole sentence, from the beginning, and Actor A can try again. Only move on when the line is delivered correctly.

Warm up with the lines

If you do a group warm-up before rehearsal, replace tongue-twisters with lines from the show. Have actors choose a different line each night and use it as they would a tongue-twister, repeating it several times with speed. If you don't do a group warm-up, you still can instruct actors to prepare in this way.

With the help of the director

Fully understood

One of the best ways to ensure memorization is to make sure that the actors understand why they're saying what they're saying and the meaning of each word. Memorization often fails when actors memorize words rather than ideas. Many actors don't understand that they're responsible for creating transitions between lines and thoughts. Asking a lot of questions in rehearsal can build understanding and help actors learn how to transition.

Questions can be very simple and open-ended, such as: "Why do you think you are saying that?" "What's

that about?" "What do you think is going on here?" "What's happening in this moment?" "What do you mean by that?" "What makes you speak up at this moment?" "Why don't you stop talking? Why do you continue to speak?" "What are you hoping will happen now?" "How do you feel about what you just said?" "Has anything changed?"

Make sure that actors understand that "I don't know" is an acceptable response. You will lessen embarrassment and anxiety by letting actors know that the director is there to help: You will figure it out together.

Italian run

This technique is useful near the end of the rehearsal process and can be a great way to wrap up a final dress rehearsal, as it usually takes about half the run-time of the show. Simply have actors sit in a circle and say the lines as fast as they can. Eliminate all pauses, picking up the cues as fast as possible and saying the words as quickly as their mouths will allow. Sometimes an Italian run points out where actors are pausing indulgently and jokes may become funny again once the pauses are removed—a good lesson for all.

Memorization can be a chore, and it takes the mind time to assimilate text. Although short-term memory is temporarily effective, true memorization cannot be rushed. These exercises can make memorization less burdensome and may yield helpful information for the actor about the role or character. Add these exercises to your list of favorites to help young actors learn how to help themselves with this necessary skill.

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