

Conquering Lists In Industrial and/or Narrative Copy

By

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Beware...there are traps in your script! They are waiting to snare you and put you on auto pilot, making you sound like a robot simply reading a list of words. Even worse, they aren't necessarily easy to find. So, how do you find them? And most importantly, how can you use lists to sound smarter and connect with your audience?

First off, look for lists in any sentence that details 2 or more items. It can be two adjectives: for example, "The actor was articulate and attractive as she stood before the mic." It can be 2 or more actions: "The actor laughed, sighed and cried while reading a single sentence." It can be exactly what you'd expect: "In order to succeed at voice acting, you must study your craft, practice the basic skills, and never forget how important it is to have fun every time you perform." And a list can sneak up on you: "Getting paid a substantial sum of money is rewarding, yet not the most important part of every job."

Don't forget, there are two aspects to voice acting...the sounds you make, and the sounds you don't make. Finding lists helps you decide when to pause. Why is pausing good? It gives your listener time to understand either what you've just said, or what's coming next. Let's look at the obvious list.

"In order to succeed at voice acting, you must study your craft, practice the basic skills, and never forget how important it is to have fun every time you perform."

Name the 3 things on the list. Good job, you even said them out loud! Now answer this...what's the last word that appears before the first item on the list? In other words, what's the word that goes with each of the three things on the list? Is it "you"? Here's how you can check: does the sentence still read correctly when "you" is inserted before each item in the list? Let's see...

"In order to succeed at voice acting, you must study your craft, **you** practice the basic skills, and **you** never forget how important it is to have fun every time you perform."

Hmmm...some of the poetry is definitely gone, right? So, how about "must"?

"In order to succeed at voice acting, you must study your craft, **must** practice the basic skills, and **must** never forget how important it is to have fun every time you perform."

Better! So, "must" is the last word that appears before the first item on the list. And here's how you use that information. Put a slight pause after the word that

goes with all the elements in the list. That will warn the audience to remember the word that goes with everything. Like this:

“In order to succeed at voice acting, you must ...

- study your craft,
- practice the basic skills,
- and never forget how important it is to have fun every time you perform.”

Obviously you need that professional tool all voice actors use – a pencil. Mark up your script to show yourself the lists. That way they won't sneak up on you. My script looks like this:

“In order to succeed at voice acting, you must / 1. study your craft, 2. practice the basic skills, and 3. never forget how important it is to have fun every time you perform.”

I always put a slash after the last word before the list begins, and number the items in the list. You can do that, or make up your own method. All that matters is that you know a list is coming. Let me show you once more...this time adding the silent dialogue that happens between you and the listener as you perform a list using pauses.

“In order to succeed at voice acting, you must (Listener: Yes...I must what?) study your craft, (from the way you said that, there's more coming...) practice the basic skills, ok, what else? never forget how important it is to have fun every time you perform.” Ok, cool. I will.

Now try it with this piece of copy. Mark it up.

“He has been instrumental in developing Cisco's Graphical Modeling System software, and Enterprise RTView, a real-time monitoring, analytics and visualization platform.”

Here's how mine looked:

“He has been instrumental in developing Cisco's / 1. “Graphical Modeling System” software, and 2. “Enterprise RTView,” – a / 1. real-time monitoring, 2. analytics and 3. visualization platform.”

Moving on, where's the list in:

“The actor laughed, sighed and cried while reading a single sentence.”

Where should you pause? Where's the list? Good! What about when the object of the list comes after the list?

“Getting paid a substantial sum of money is rewarding, yet not the most important part of every job.”

Go ahead...mark that sucker up! But this time, you'll have a word or words that goes with each item in the list, before and after the actual list. Here's how I tame that beast of a sentence:

“Getting paid a substantial sum of money is / 1. rewarding, yet 2. not the most important / part of every job.”

Here's the silent dialogue that takes place with your reader:

“Getting paid a substantial sum of money is **what?** rewarding, **what else?** yet not the most important part **of what, life?** of every job.” **Oh...tell me more.**

Finally, how does all this make you sound smarter and connect with your audience? Obviously, when you pause for the audience to think, they're connecting because they're participating. But you also sound smarter because you seem to know what's coming – as if these are your thoughts, not just something you're reading. And why do people write confusing lists when they know it's hard for listeners to keep up? That's another column, but get this...we actors love it when they do. If they didn't, people without training could also be voice actors...and the competition is tough enough as it is!

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