

20 Tips for Learning Lines

Actors of all ages struggle with learning their lines; it's part of the job that we have to get through until things start to gel on stage. But there are ways of making it easier and more effective. Understanding the process of memorization can help you find out how you learn things best so you can use a combination of techniques that work for you. (Note: numbers 1 and 20 are essential, and the most effective of all.)

Short term memory doesn't last very long, so while we can keep a brief exchange fresh in our minds for a few minutes, being an actor requires moving such exchanges into long term memory. Below are a few fundamental ways that human beings are able to do this through a process of *consolidation*.

Focus. Just as it says, actors need to focus their mind and attention on the script without too many distractions. They need to focus on the story, the characters, the blocking, the director's notes, the world of the play...all of which informs and strengthens their connection to their lines. But in the initial phase of learning lines, the script should be the focus.

Repetition. Actors need to repeat the memorization process regularly. The more times they work on their lines, the more lines are locked in place more permanently. It's like playing a guitar or hitting a tennis ball; mastery comes down to practice, practice, practice.

Rehearsal. As we know, actors must get up and actually say the lines and do the physical movement regularly. This is not quite the same as repetition, because you are now using things like kinesthetic recall (muscle or body memory), personal interaction between characters, and discussion with the director to make the lines more 'real' and therefore easier to learn.

Association. In order to make the lines more familiar for their brains, actors must make links to the text in various ways, such as imagery, character memories, movement, mnemonics, etc. But the most important associations are with the script, the story, the characters and the relationships in the play. Understanding the play itself is the most effective association actors can make with their lines. This is an important early step in the process.

Retrieval. Every time actors study lines, go to rehearsal, or run lines with a fellow cast member, they retrieve the information again and make it more likely to be moved to long term memory. When it comes to neural networks, *what fires together wires together*, so the more we go back and retrieve what we've stored, the more we strengthen the connection.

Rest. Sleep and rest are essential for long term memory. After a round of rehearsal, repetition, and retrieval, stepping away gives our brains a chance to set up the neural connections needed and allow the information or ideas to incubate. The physical connections are made in the brain while we sleep, but other connections can be made in a creative state of relaxation. Relaxing on your deck, a long walk, a Sunday drive, or other peaceful activities, increase mental clarity and creativity, helping to generate the associations and links that are also needed for long term memory storage.

Now, here are 20 tips that use focus, repetition, rehearsal, association, retrieval, or rest to help you learn your lines.

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- 1. Attitude.** First off, view line learning as an opportunity to get to know the play, uncover the secrets in it, explore your character and the relationships involved, and unearth all the mysteries that lie beneath the words. Attitude is everything, and your brain will work better for you if you tell it that the process is going to be a fun and interesting challenge.
- 2. Quiet.** Find a quiet, comfortable place that you like to be in where you will not be disturbed while you learn your lines. Crying children, televisions and road construction will only distract you. Being relaxed, calm and content is key to memorization.
- 3. Consistent.** Stick to a schedule. Learning lines is like doing anything else: practice makes progress. Schedule a slot of time each day to work on your lines; an hour a day is usually sufficient. Doing it at the same time can help you get into a routine.
- 4. Get in the Zone.** Listen to classical music when you study your lines. Studies show that university students retained a lot more of the material they were learning when studying with classical music in the background.
- 5. Scene Study.** Read the play several times before you try to learn your lines. In fact, doing some script analysis early on in the process will help you understand the story and your character's part in it. You can get a good idea of what your objective (s) and obstacles might be, which will also help you understand what's going on for your character in each moment.
- 6. Highlights.** Once you're familiar with the play and you've done some reading and analysis, begin highlighting those lines. I like to say the line out loud, highlight it, then say the line again. Rinse and repeat for each line.
- 7. Chunk it Up.** Lines are best learned in small blocks. Try nailing down three lines together, then add a fourth and a fifth. Keep it to a single beat/action/subject. Once you have a block of about five lines (depending on the length of the lines, of course), memorize them as a unit. Be sure the lines make sense as a group and have some connection to one another. If all of the lines are about the same thing or continue a similar tactic, they should be fairly easy to move into your memory banks.
- 8. Visualize.** When it comes to sections like monologues, stories, memories or other kinds of highly descriptive text, use visualization. In your imagination, see yourself going through the experience or in the place that you're describing. See it. Feel it. Smell it. Hear it. Using all of your senses, visualize actually being in the moment the character is describing. See the vivid colours, hear the barking dogs or ambulance sirens, feel the warm sunlight and soft breeze, smell the baked bread...put yourself there, using the words in the script as your guide. When the moment becomes almost like your own memory, describing it will be effortless.
- 9. Give Yourself a Hand.** Write your lines out. Most people will remember things they write down more reliably, so write your lines out, by hand. If there are just too many, write them out one scene at a time, as you work them.
- 10. Try some Keystrokes.** Type your lines out. Handwriting and typing may have different effects on the brain in terms of memory, but both have a kinesthetic aspect. After you write them by hand, try typing them out, and find which (or both) work best for you.

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11. Listen. Record yourself reading through the scene. Lots of people are auditory learners, so listening to your lines might be just the help you need. You can either read both parts or have someone read your scene partner's lines for you. When you record, try to be a little more neutral in your delivery, and be careful not to get too attached to the way you're saying things. You have no idea how your action and subtext may change in rehearsal, and you'll want to stay open and make lots of offers to your director. Even if you're learning a monologue you'll be working on by yourself, now is not the time to make any hard and fast decisions.

12. The Body Knows. As you get into blocking rehearsals, there are two things you should be aware of. The first is that any lines you have already memorized may fly right out of your head. And second is that, once the blocking is set, your lines will begin to cement themselves in your brain. Both of these oddities are caused by the same phenomenon: muscle memory. Physical movement is a huge memory aid, and you should take every advantage of it (see tip #17, for an example). So, take good blocking notes and practice the text and moments together whenever possible.

13. Parla Velocemente! When you start to get close to learning your lines, try Italian runs. They can really help find the tripping points and set the lines in stone. Get on the phone or Zoom if you can't get together with your scene partner, and just run the lines as quickly as you can. Mark off trouble spots so you know where to work. So, try Italian runs. Repetition is a powerful tool, so use it often. (See what I did there?) This tip will help aural learners, in particular, as well as any actor who is struggling.

14. Imagine. Visual learners may want to experiment with a version of the "memory palace" technique. With this method, you create a series of locations within an environment, and tie keywords to each stop along the way. For example, let's say you're doing Vicki's monologue from my play *MUSE*, where she confesses to Grace about how her perceived neglect led to Grace's injuries. The first lines are "I was just a kid, Grace. 13!" You could imagine a cottage by a creek. The first stop could be the front porch, and you could see a child playing, or the door could have the number "13" on it in primary colours. As you move through the cottage, create visual signposts for each key word or idea in the monologue. The memory will flow as the ideas in the script do, from one to the other, taking you through the monologue (and the environment) with key words and phrases marked in each location.

15. Be Specific. With lists, make each item specific. Unless you are throwing the line away or are intentionally rattling the items off, each thing on the list should have its own meaning, and be chosen by your character for a reason. If they are recounting where they went that day for their partner, they may choose specific places to itemize for a reason. What is your character playing with each item? They may be trying to make a point with one item, or mock or shame with another. They might omit some, lie about others, or make the whole list up entirely. But it all comes down to why the character chose those words, why and what importance or meaning each of them have.

16. Getting it Right. Sometimes you'll have lots of little moments of near repetition, where very similar but not exactly the same lines are repeated throughout a section of text. Such things can drive an actor mad when they try learning their lines. For example, I recall doing a play which had my character say lines like, "Get out of here," and "Get lost," then "Get out of here now," and "Why don't you get out?" It was tough to know when to say "Get lost" and when to say "Why don't you just get out?" Blocking rehearsals undoubtedly help, but you can work on memorizing the correct lines in the correct order beforehand. The trick is to figure out why your character is repeating himself in slightly different ways. "Get lost" and "Get out of here" can be two very different things to a character, and depending on what's going on in each specific moment, these small changes will make perfect sense. Work on what is happening in the moment, with your character's objective in mind, and why they would say "this" here and "that" there.

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17. Find the Problem. When you find trouble spots, examine what the problem is. Are there specific details like numbers or names that you're stuck on? Do some lines feel like they're coming from left field? Do you change the subject all of a sudden? Many of these things come down to making it make sense to your character's brain. Why does she repeat herself? Why the slight changes? What do they mean, or what is she reacting to? Why does he change the subject? Why did he suddenly mention his mother? You need to know why your character says things, in response to what, and in the context of the moment happening on stage. Understanding the problem will help you find ways to make your lines make sense.

18. Create Links. Sometimes you just have to use memory tricks until you find the reason for saying that exact line at exactly that moment. If you always forget that your character wants a salami sandwich with dill pickles and Dijon mustard on rye bread, take the key descriptors (salami, dill, dijon and rye) and make something out of them (besides the sandwich). You could simply remember SDDR, or you could make an anagram out of the letters. If you can't figure out why your character brings up an old friend, Frank, at your mother's funeral, you could create a back story. For example: seeing flowers at your mom's funeral reminds you of the orchards from your wedding which makes you suddenly mention your ex's best man, Frank. If it doesn't interfere with the story or the script, go ahead and devise something that makes sense to your character, and let them think/remember/experience their way into the line.

19. Back it Up. Weirdly, walking backwards can increase memory, and it doesn't take much to see improvements. Multiple studies show significant improvement in memory when participants spent time walking backwards. These included one study where just 30 feet of backwards walking showed a 10% increase in participants' ability to recall details from a video. As a bonus, walking backwards also improves knee strength and lower back pain, cognitive control, balance, and even fat loss. For learning lines, try walking 30 or 40 backward steps before and after studying your script. Just be sure to choose flat, even ground, and maybe take a buddy along to walk beside you going forwards, or find a smooth trail with a railing.

20. Story, Story, and More Story. Saving the best for last: the NUMBER ONE, CRUCIAL TIP for learning lines is to understand the moment that you are responding to. What do you want? What was just given to you (a line, a gesture, a prop, etc.)? How would you respond? Why would you say that line in that way? If you truly understand what is *really* going on, in that moment of that scene, within the context of that relationship, the line will make perfect sense, and will be the thing that you would *want* to say. Knowing what you want, why you want it, and what just was said or done that you are responding to is the key to learning what your character would do and say next. So, get to know the play, intimately. The more you understand the story, the more you will understand the little pieces that make it up (a.k.a. your lines)

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