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The Actor's Guide to Delivering a Monologue

BY TYLER O'NEILL | LAST UPDATED: MARCH 9, 2021 9:20 AM

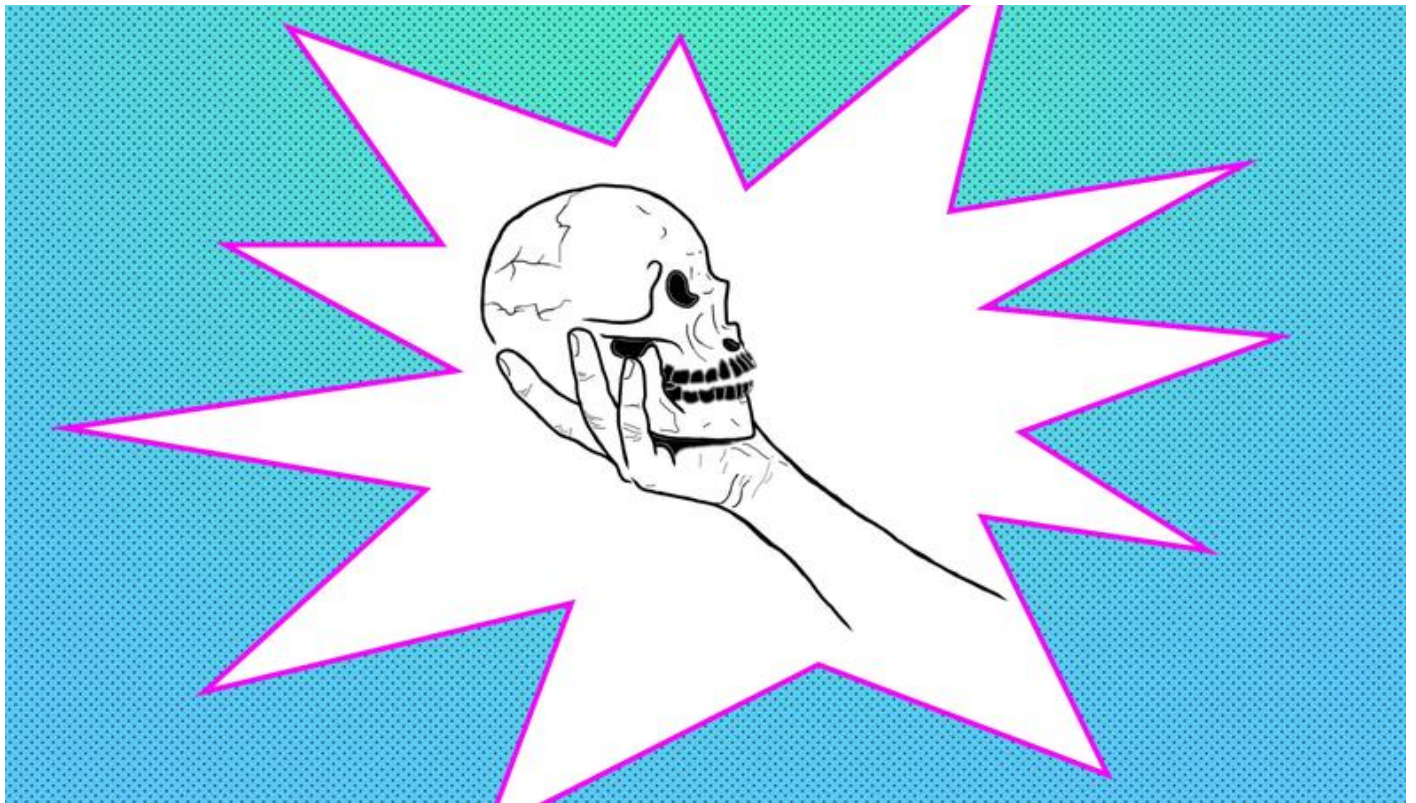


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Monologues are becoming an increasing rarity in the modern audition landscape—but that doesn't mean actors shouldn't master the art of performing one. By delving deep into a character's interior world, you can hone your craft and demonstrate your acting chops. But choosing, preparing, and delivering an effective monologue can often be a minefield riddled with clichés and

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What is a monologue?

A monologue is an uninterrupted speech delivered by a single person, pulled from a larger work (often a play or a film). Monologues can be used to gauge a performer's acting ability, imagination, and understanding of a project's overarching narrative.

You may have also heard the term "soliloquy" in conjunction with "monologue." Technically, a monologue refers to a speech delivered to other characters or,

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monologue as an umbrella term for any speech made by one character, so you may prepare a soliloquy should you so choose.

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While monologues are not the dominant audition material these days, they're still very important—especially for young actors applying to high school or [college theater programs](#). You're most likely to be asked to perform a monologue when auditioning for a play, conservatory, or acting program, or proving yourself to an agent. In most other cases, a casting director will assign you "copy," ["sides,"](#) or a script in advance of an audition, instead.

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comedic. It's helpful to be familiar with these terms as an actor, since you may be asked to prepare a specific type of monologue for an audition.

Classical vs. contemporary: Classical monologues are generally taken from works written before the 20th century, and contemporary monologues are those from the 20th century onward. (These binaries are not clear-cut; some early twentieth century playwrights, like Chekhov and Ibsen, have been categorized both ways depending on who you ask.)

Dramatic vs. comedic: Dramatic and comedic monologues are exactly what they suggest: dramatic monologues tackle a serious, often emotionally challenging topic, whereas comedic monologues are more humorous and lighthearted.

Generally, it's best to prepare something in line with the tone of the character and production you're auditioning for (assuming casting hasn't specified the type of monologue they want actors to deliver). An experimental contemporary monologue probably isn't the best fit if you're auditioning for a straightforward Shakespeare adaptation. A dark, dramatic monologue might not be the best way to show you're right for the lead role in a sitcom. Choose a monologue with similarities to the character you're auditioning for, and casting directors are likely to have an easier time picturing you in that role.

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What are some monologue examples?

The most famous monologues come from Shakespeare's many plays—and perhaps the most well-known monologue example of all is the [“To Be or Not to Be” speech](#) from “Hamlet.” In it, Hamlet cooks up a plan to take revenge against Claudius for the murder of his father. It begins:

*To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer*

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But there are a number of iconic monologues that come from more contemporary sources. One of the [most famous film monologues](#) of all time comes from “Pulp Fiction,” when Samuel L. Jackson’s character reflects on a Bible verse he’s memorized—Ezekiel 25:17. “I never gave much thought to what it meant,” Jules Winnfield says. “I just thought it was some cold-blooded shit to say to a motherfucker before I popped a cap in his ass. But I saw some shit this mornin’ made me think twice.”

But the more famous a monologue, the worse choice it is for an audition. You’re bound to draw comparisons to the world-class actors who’ve performed the material before you—and the comparison is unlikely to be favorable, even if you’re a talented performer.

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How long should a monologue be?

A monologue should be short—60 to 90 seconds long. Any longer and you’ll actually be [hurting your chances](#). “Every agent I’ve ever met made up their minds about an actor in less than 10 seconds,” says acting coach Gwyn Gilliss. “After two minutes they change their mind and it goes the other way.”

This applies [regardless of the environment in which you’ll be performing](#), notes Backstage Expert Craig Wallace. “Keep the piece at one minute unless otherwise instructed. This is important if you’re going to use it to audition for an agent or casting director. People in those professions are used to seeing auditions on reels in short bursts,” he says. “If you’re using it for stage or in a workshop, one minute is still a good idea, as your monologue will have more immediacy and you’ll show that you have the skill and confidence to deliver in a shorter time frame.”

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attention to the world of theater, film, and television. The more scripts and screenplays you read, and the more films and plays you watch, the more opportunities you'll have to find singular, exciting work. The staff at [drama bookstores](#) can also be invaluable when it comes to [recommendations](#), as can acting coaches.

But if you're crunched for time, Backstage provides a handy resource called [The Monologuer](#). A search engine featuring over 600 classic and contemporary monologues, The Monologuer also provides a synopsis of the scene and surrounding work for context. It features a number of filters, including age range, gender, play title, author, genre, and theme. Need to find a contemporary, female comedic monologue about jealousy? A classical male dramatic monologue about love? A Shakespearean monologue for teens? Just choose the criteria you're looking for and run the search.

You can also consult the many monologue lists our Backstage Experts have compiled over the years. We've collected a number of them below, divided by gender and age:

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What makes a good audition monologue?

A good audition monologue has an emotional arc, demonstrates your range as an actor, and suits the project and character you're auditioning for—and does it all in 90 seconds or less.

"[Monologues] need to [go somewhere and have moments](#)," says Backstage Expert Clay Banks. "And because it's so compact, you can really focus your attention on finding and filling those moments and executing an effective arc." A good place to start can be a monologue that's serio-comedic, combining comedy with pathos and tragedy. Get them laughing, then hit them with an emotional wallop. "[Avoid the 'Johnny One-Note' monologues](#) that show one emotion throughout," adds acting coach Gwyn Gilliss. "There is nothing worse than watching someone rant and rave angrily at the audience for four minutes."

Also watch out for story pieces or memory monologues which, "while funny or touching on the page, can [spew out in an unfocused ramble](#)," warns acting

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something in your wheelhouse, especially if you're just starting out," advises casting director Lana Veenker. "Help the casting director picture you in a suitable, age-appropriate role. Don't make their job more difficult." Your job is to **nail down your type as an actor**, to make sure that your monologue material is age-appropriate and makes sense physically. "It's agonizing to watch a 25-year-old trying to be 45 or a guy from Minnesota trying to be a Mafioso from Brooklyn," says Gilliss. "A monologue should show who you are, not add layers of dialects, character traits, a limp, or something outrageous to impress. If they can't tell you're acting, that's good acting."

If you're a young actor looking for your first monologue, stick to characters in your age range. "A young teen should not choose a monologue about their day at work, their bad marriages, divorces, or lovers," says acting teacher and coach Rita Litton, who specializes in teen acting. "Even if you play leading adult roles in your high school, **you should choose roles close to your age.**"

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Actors should avoid audition monologues that are overdone or tied to an iconic performance by another actor. Be particularly careful when selecting material by William Shakespeare, since his most famous monologues often fall into both of the aforementioned categories. These passages have been delivered so many times (by the best veteran actors) and are so obvious that you risk coming across as lazy and dismissible. To help you avoid this audition pitfall, we've compiled a list of the [most overused Shakespeare monologues](#), including:

- "To be or not to be" ("Hamlet")
- "I left no ring with her" ("Twelfth Night")
- "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!" ("Julius Caesar")
- "Now is the winter of our discontent..." ("Richard III")

Beyond the Bard, there are several other distractingly iconic monologues that will immediately put a damper on your audition. Below are a handful of monologues casting directors and acting coaches told us [they never want to hear again](#):

- Alec Baldwin's "Always Be Closing" speech from "Glengarry Glen Ross"
- Lynette's Charles Manson speech from "Assassins" by Stephen Sondheim
- Denzel Washington's "King Kong" speech from "Training Day"
- Anything by Neil Simon

To put it bluntly, you are not always closing, and King Kong does have shit on you. Acting coach Gwyn Gilliss sums it up: "You'll be compared to that star, and [you won't win](#)."

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Can I write my own monologue for an audition?

In general, casting directors don't recommend writing your own monologue for an audition. It can [distract from your performance](#) and call into question your memorization skills, among other things. "Casting directors may focus on the quality of your writing, instead of your acting," casting director Lana Veenker explains. "They may assume you haven't been hired on any real projects, that you have problems memorizing others' material, or even that you may be difficult to work with."

Never flout specific instructions in favor of writing your own piece. If an audition specifically requests a classical monologue, for instance, it's safe to say the casting director wants to hear something published. And refrain from writing anything from the point of view of the character you're auditioning for. Writer and casting director Charis Joy Jackson has seen this happen several times, and she [found it counterproductive](#). "Instead of paying attention to their acting, my focus shifted to how they'd incorrectly interpreted the character," she says.

So when is it appropriate to write your own monologue? If you're confident that you can create something dynamic and polished, and you're absolutely sure there's no other work out there that could showcase your abilities as well. "If you

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How do I prepare a monologue?

To prepare a monologue for an audition, start by reading the entire play or script. Then, consider your choices—what are the important moments that make up your monologue, and how will you deliver them? Here are five tips for rehearsing and preparing a monologue for your next audition:

1. Read the whole script. “This goes without saying,” says casting director Lana Veenker. “Give yourself the best chance [by understanding your role in its full context](#).” If you found your piece in a book of monologues, locate the original script and read it in full. Doing so will give you additional insight into the character—their motivations, relationships, feelings—and the ability to make better choices as an actor.

2. Think about who you’re addressing. “I’ve seen so many monologues over the years that were [just a series of words spoken into the air](#),” notes Backstage Expert Craig Wallace. “There was no particular point of view because the actor had no idea who they were talking to. Establishing who you are talking to and how you feel about that person in a deeply personal and specific way is what connects you to the piece and to the viewer.”

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advises acting coach Cathryn Hartt. "It might be the way you start with your back to them and then flip around. It could be a sound you make or an audible breath you take. Do something different; something they don't expect, something weird. Obviously, it should go along with the interpretation of the monologue."

4. Plan out your movements. It's not just the words that matter when you're performing a monologue. "Don't stand there and say lines from a dead body," says Hartt. "Even if you are barely moving, there should be life energy through your whole body. Think of it as dance. Your body tells the story, too."

5. Time your performance. Veenker suggests selecting a piece that runs a little short of your allotted time—then practice it with a stopwatch to ensure that you don't go over. "It's no fun to have the casting director interrupt you mid-sentence to inform you that time's up," she says.

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How do I memorize a monologue?

To memorize a monologue, some actors transcribe their piece by hand; others use apps specifically designed to rehearse lines. There's no one-size-fits-all method—but below are three techniques used by fellow actors and acting coaches to commit their monologues to memory:

Write it down: Write out your lines by hand in a big paragraph, and then run through the scene out loud. Do this five more times, breaking down the lines into smaller and smaller sections, and then try to do it the final time without looking at the script.

Rehearsal Pro: Acting coach Matt Newton calls this app [a game-changer](#). "You can highlight your lines in the app, record the other character's lines, and use it as a teleprompter," he explains. "Then it just keeps playing on a loop. The secret for me is to whisper my lines and read the other character's out loud when recording so I

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The Five-Minute Exercise: Actor and acting coach Cam Faull uses [this exercise](#) with his students to get them to approach monologues in a new way. Start by selecting an unfamiliar piece and set up in front of your self-tape camera or fellow actors. Then, start a timer for five minutes and begin reading. “[P]ay attention to the details of the story,” Faull counsels. “Try to see it with as much color and richness as you can. To turn off your ‘performing the lines’ voice, imagine that your friend in the cafe is telling you this story.” Then, when the five minutes is over, start sharing your monologue to the group or the camera. “I promise you, not only will you recall at least 80–90 percent of the monologue, but it will come to you naturally and comfortably as you perform the piece,” he says.



[An Acting Coach's 5 Tips for Memorizing a Monologue](#)

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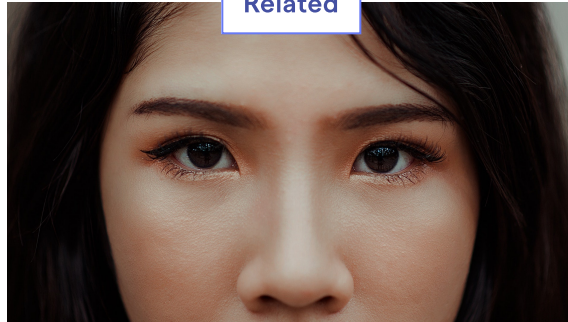
When you walk into the audition room to perform your monologue, start by stating your name and the title and writer of the project your monologue was pulled from. (You can also mention what role you're performing.) “[D]on’t be so nervous that you launch right into your monologue without an introduction,” casting director Lana Veenker says. “Allow your personality to shine through during your slate,

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poster, and an voice **anything that can serve as a visual marker.** Put your imaginary scene partner there, and though he may move around," says acting professor Jackie Apodaca, "the focal point will remain your anchor."

And if you do go over time, "don't get flustered, angry, or apologetic. Simply stop, break into a huge smile, say thank you, and exit confidently," adds Veenker. "Going over won't damage your employment prospects, but having a meltdown in front of the CD might."

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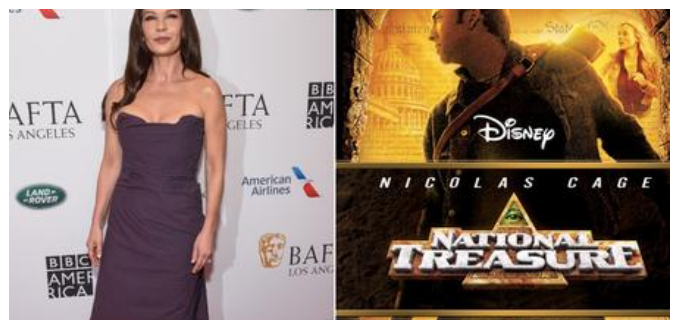
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