

Monologue Writing 101: 10 Elements of Great Audition Monologues

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Introduction

How do you write a killer audition monologue? Good question. In Monologue Writing 101 I've broken it down for you into 10 Elements of a Great Audition Monologue. In truth, there are so many different things that make any piece of writing unique, effective, gripping, funny, moving, engaging, etc. that one could write volumes on the subject. However, I'm guessing for many of you, you have a class assignment or an audition coming up soon. Plus, as one slightly well-known playwright once said: "brevity is the soul of wit."

The 10 Elements were created as a way to boil down lessons in playwriting learned over the course of several years -- and several volumes of books on the subject -- into a short essential list. I taught these 10 Elements to students as part of the nationally recognized Joanne Woodward Apprentice Program at the Westport Country Playhouse. The material they wrote using these Elements was consistently surprising, entertaining, and enjoyable. I owe a great deal to my mentors playwright Milan Stitt and director/novelist Kathleen George in helping to shape my thinking on these elements. I am pleased to pass these on to you and I hope you, in turn, will pass them on.

10 Elements of Great Audition Monologues

Element #1: Your character must have a strong want. Think about the times you have become the most aggressive, upset, or combative. Most likely, if you felt this strongly, it was related to something you wanted or cared about very much. A character in a play or a monologue needs to want something badly. Without a strong want there is no drama -- or comedy for that matter. Often the character needs to get something from the person they're delivering the monologue to. They may need to unburden themselves by revealing a secret. Or they may need to get themselves charged up to do something difficult. They might speak a monologue to build courage, strength, or bravery for a task ahead. Or they may want to speak in order to change the way someone feels about them. Or if the monologue has an internal struggle -- they may be speaking in order to change the way they feel about themselves. Whatever it is your character wants, we need to hear that want clearly behind the words they're speaking.

Element #2: The monologue must have high stakes. Meaning, there is something important or significant at stake for your character. If the character doesn't get what they want, what will be the consequence? Perhaps they'll lose social standing, lose a friend, lose their self respect. Maybe they'll lose their faith, or lose their once chance to prove their love to someone? Stakes give the monologue dramatic tension. Without stakes, a monologue is a walk in the park, its unimportant. There has to be something at stake for the character, so that if they fail to achieve their goal in the monologue, there will be significant negative consequences for them—either in a tangible or emotional form. A tangible stake might be, if the character fails to get what he or she wants they'll lose the relationship with the person they're delivering the monologue to. This clearly has emotional stakes as well—they'll feel terrible, lonely, etc. A purely emotional stake might be that if the character fails to get what he or she is pursuing, they'll lose their self respect, lose their nerve, lose their faith, etc. So you see, high stakes are important. When working on developing your monologue, ask yourself: what is at stake for this character?

Element #3: Variety of Tactics/Persuasive Moves. A great monologue has a character use a variety of tactics to achieve their want. A character might try to flatter the person they're talking to as a tactic in order to make them more receptive to hearing them out. If flattery doesn't work, or isn't working by itself, they might switch gears and try the tactic of intimidating the person. Intimidation isn't working; or it hasn't clinched the deal? Perhaps they try enticing whomever is listening to them with something they know the other person wants. An enticement can be promising or even giving the person hearing the monologue something tangible, but more often emotional, that is of significant value to them.

For instance, a father trying to get his daughter to change her behavior may show her affection as a tactic. This might be a particularly effective tactic if the father knows his daughter values his affection highly because it's a rare commodity coming from him. In the end, a monologue is about persuasion. It's about making the right "persuasive moves," which are designed to work with the person who is hearing the monologue. And it's about having the character use a variety of persuasive techniques to achieve that. Think of tactics like a dance—a dance is boring if it repeats a few steps over and over—it becomes interesting with variety. The more inventive you are in giving your character persuasive moves to make, the more interested in that character the audience will be. And the tactics you employ don't only have to be geared outwardly toward the person whom the character is speaking to. If the monologue has an internal struggle going on, where the character is trying to convince themselves of something, then ask yourself: What must the character do to persuade themselves to take an action they know they need to, or to face something difficult, or to change something about themselves? The possibilities – and tactics – are limitless.

Element #4: Hook Opening. A good journalist, novelist, magazine writer always needs a hook—a killer first line that pulls the reader in and makes them want to read the next line, and then the next, and the next. Similarly, a monologue with a strong hook should peak the audience's attention (of course the rest of the monologue has to pay-off the excitement and expectations it sets up). There are a number of different kind of hooks. A hook can be a headline, which encapsulates the story the monologist is about to launch into—it lets us know what happened, but now we want to know how it happened and the monologue that ensues answers that question for us. Another hook is the "Thesis" or "Argument" hook. The first line sets up an argument—something the character believes, wants their listener to believe, or wants themselves to believe—and the rest of the monologue serves to prove that this opening statement is in fact true. Yet another hook is the Relationship Dynamics hook. This is a first line or opening statement that quickly sets up a dramatically charged relationship between the monologist and whomever they're addressing.

Element # 5. Button Closing. When your monologue ends, you don't want the audience to wonder, is he/she done? Is this a dramatic pause? You want your ending to be clear. Like a gymnast nailing their landing, a "button" is a line that gives an actor a clear end-point to work with. A "button" can bring the thoughts expressed in the monologue to a conclusion. Often it is the moment when a character finally accepts something, finally overcomes an obstacle, finally figures something out, or comes to a decision point. What is a decision point? The moment when a character is ready to take – or is taking before our eyes – a decisive action. Think of a monologue like a mini-play. The arc of the monologue should build to this final line. If the monologue's hook opening brings a question into the audiences mind, the button close should answer it.

Element #6. Include detail that engages the senses! What should a monologue make us do? Empathize! If the audience isn't feeling what the character is feeling, if they aren't going through something with the character, the monologue has not achieved its purpose. One of the most effective ways to engage your audience is to engage their senses. We all share a common five senses, and using them to describe something that happened to us brings our audience right into the experience with us. For instance, using sensory details can communicate to an audience how a character is feeling without the writer having to label the emotion. If someone tells us that when so-and-so approached them, their heart began to race, for instance, we know they're excited or scared (depending on the context) without them having to spell-out for us what emotion they were feeling. Can you write an effective monologue that engages empathy without sight, sound, touch, taste, smell? Sure, but it would be a lot more difficult. Talking about ideas, situations and feelings without linking them to sensory experience may work when connecting with people in real life, but it generally tends to be less effective for stage and screen. Writing that taps into our senses holds incredible power to move us.

Element #7. Character overcomes internal obstacle(s). Some of the most interesting monologues feature internal struggles. Shakespeare is filled with soliloquies that do this; the cannon of modern drama contains a number of examples we can draw on as well. Watching a character conquer their own self-doubts in the course of a speech or soliloquy will hold an audience's attention. For an actor, internal-struggle pieces provide a terrific one-person showcase. The actor playing this material is given an opportunity to show themselves in a state of weakness and turmoil from which they are able to emerge stronger, even changed, as they overcome the internal

obstacles/doubts/fears that stand in their way. Good writing is complex and layered—a monologue can have a character grappling with both internal and external forces simultaneously.

Element #8. Balance Past and Present Action. So many monologues get stuck in the past, recounting stories that don't connect with the here and now. A great monologue connects with the present even when it discusses the past. We can feel the current relationship between the monologist and the person hearing it. Often we can see the monologist adjusting what they say based on how their listener is reacting. And we can feel that the character wants something, is seeking to gain something (be it tangible or emotional) from whomever or whatever they're addressing. Keep in mind, while the monologist is often addressing another person, they can also be addressing a part of themselves, an idea, a force, etc. So, as you write a monologue that has your character recount a story, think of how they are using it as a tactic to accomplish something with whomever or whatever they're speaking to now. Your character might recall a story to prove a point to their listener. To hurt their listener, your character might bring up a memory they know is painful for them. To make peace and reconnect with someone, a character might talk about a time when they were friends. Here are a few examples of how a character can use past events to deal with their own internal obstacles: A character may recount a painful memory—something that is holding them back—in order to heal. To fight sadness in the moment, a character may recall a happier time. To fight weakness in the moment, a character may recall a story that illustrates their strength. Walk the tightrope between past and present action well and you'll be on your way to a strong monologue.

Element #9. Discovery! We don't want to see a character do something they've done a million times in the same way they've always done it. For example, a door-to-door salesman calling on someone and giving their rehearsed speech is boring. But, take that same door-to-door salesman and have them realize during their rehearsed speech that what they really want is to leave sales and sing opera. That's another matter entirely. A monologue is dramatic when the monologist doesn't know exactly what they're going to say until they say it. We are seeing them figure things out, right now, in the moment, as they speak. We are seeing them make decisions about how they are going to proceed with every sentence. Often we are seeing a character come to a realization, a personal discovery, or a new or more complete understanding of something for the first time. We do not want to know where the monologue is going to end when it starts. The element of surprise, of discovery, of unexpected directions, twists and turns makes for an entertaining journey.

Element #10. Exercise restraint to build dramatic/comedic tension. A character trying hard not to cry is much more interesting than one all-out-bawling for two minutes straight. Most of us try to avoid displaying strong, overwhelming emotion. A good monologue shows that struggle to keep strong emotions under-wraps. That's not to say you can't have a character have intense emotional outbursts, only reserve those expressions for key moments—perhaps the climax of your monologue. Have your character work, just as a real person would, to keep powerful emotions bubbling up just under the surface under control. Watching a person about to explode, about to be overwhelmed with emotion, but exercising will power and holding back is interesting. It builds expectation—are they going to lose it? Are they going to maintain their cool exterior? What a character doesn't say, or doesn't do—what they might be on the verge of doing—tells a story that contains inherent dramatic tension.

Using the 10 Elements

While skimming this tutorial fast when you're in a rush will definitely help you get a decent monologue done on deadline, not everyone strikes gold their first time putting pen to paper. So don't get frustrated if your first go of it isn't the monologue of your dreams. If you are patient with yourself as you work through these 10 Elements and apply them in your writing you will see results.

If you're serious about writing great audition material, I recommend coming back to these 10 Elements over time to get the most out of them. If you put in the investment of time and energy to learn and absorb each of the elements here, and if you read lots of monologues to see how these elements are used, you'll have the tools to write great audition material consistently. You'll begin to gain insights into what makes a monologue work and why many fall flat.

As you read and study monologues for the 10 Elements, you'll find that some monologues contain several of the elements discussed here, while others may only feature one or two of them. Start by tracking which elements each monologue you encounter is using. Ask yourself some basic questions. Are the elements you identified in the monologue used effectively by the author? Why or why not? How are they used? Having specific examples of each of the Elements is the key to building a depth of understanding. Keep a list of the monologues that use the elements effectively. Build your list and keep good notes. Which elements recur again and again? Which ones do you encounter less frequently? Use this knowledge to imagine your own truly unique piece; one that will stand out from everything else out there. The more you understand how the monologues you admire use these elements, the easier it will be to write killer audition material on a *consistent basis* yourself.

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