

Methods for Memorizing lines for Performance

A few tips and tips for actors

(excerpt from [Basic On Stage Survival Guide for Amateur Actors](#))

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About Lee Mueller

Lee Mueller was born in St. Louis, Missouri. For thirty years he has been involved in the performing arts, from acting, directing, improv comedy troupes and most notably as a playwright.

His first one act play, "In Between Days" was selected to be produced during a national writers conference at local Missouri College. His second one act, "The Favor" was chosen as a finalist in a short play competition by Pamoja Players in St. Louis.

For the past 15 years Lee has specialized in comedy murder mystery plays that have been produced all over the world. His play "Death Of A Doornail" won "Best Original Comedy" at the 27th Annual "Arty Awards" in Fairfield California.

His plays can be found at Play-dead.com

A list of his books can be found at [Lee Mueller's Author Page](#)

I am often asked, "what is the best way to memorize lines?" I don't know if there is one "best" way but I can suggest a few good ways that I have learned over the years.

Yellow Line Guide line

If you are new to the world of theatre, one of the first things actors do when they get a script is to highlight their lines and yellow is the most common color used for this practice. Highlighting makes your lines easier to see on the page: example- if you look away from your script, you can quickly glance back at the page and find your place. Having your lines stand out in yellow on a black and white page draws your eye toward it. Believe me, there is nothing more frustrating than waiting for an actor to find his place in the script.

Another fact about highlighting is that you can easily flip through the script and see which pages you have lines and those you don't. As you highlight your lines on each page, it's a good idea to also highlight (in a different color) the last few words of the line (or action) just before your lines. Knowing where and especially when to say your lines is important.

Case in point: I was in a play with an amateur actor who claimed he had memorized all of his lines before we even started rehearsals, I guess so we all could see how dedicated he was.

This actor claimed he could function *off book* because he had *all* of his lines down cold. So, we began running through the first rehearsal of the play and what do you know -epic fail! Our dedicated *lines-down-cold* actor was completely lost. Why? Yes, he knew his lines; however, he didn't know "when" to say them. He memorized his lines but hadn't memorized the "cues" for lines.

What's a cue? A **cue** is the line, sound or action that prompts your line.

Example:

PERSON 1: How are you today?

PERSON 2: I'm just fine! How about you?

If you are *Person 2*, the only way to know when to respond to Person 1, is by knowing what Person 1's is going to ask you. It's your cue.

Not only must you know your lines, but you must also know the lines that “cue” your lines. That's why I suggest highlighting your cues in another color because you will need to know them. I suggest 'another color' to prevent you from accidentally reading someone else's lines in rehearsals because it will happen. I've done it.

Ready Set Action

Another Cue Example:

The wind blows through the open window and extinguishes the burning candle.

PERSON IN THE DARK: Oh great! The candle went out!

Here you are "Person In The Dark" and as you can see, your cue is not a line that is spoken or any kind of sound you will hear, it will be something you "see." It's a cue based on an action. One of the hardest things to remember is a cue from some type of action or effect.

In most cases, the actual "*wind blowing through the window extinguishing the candle*" may not actually happen until the "Tech Rehearsals."

Novice Note: "Tech Rehearsals" (Technical Rehearsals) are usually the final week of rehearsals. This is where the all the lighting cues, sound cues and other effects (wind and candles) are worked out.

Until you get to tech rehearsal, hopefully, someone will follow along in the script and read any "action" cues out loud so you will be aware of them. I have spent what seemed like hours on stage in a rehearsal waiting for someone to say a line only to find out it was an action cue. "Knock at the Door "

It's a good idea to be familiar with the lines leading up to any kind of action whether it's a lighting change or sound effect etc.. For instance, going back to the candle being blown out by the wind, if the line just before the action is - "My! It sure looks windy out there!" You may want to be aware of that line and know *a wind* is about the blow the candle out –which is your cue.

Hi, How Are You?

OK. Now that I've made you aware of *what* to memorize, let's get back to methods to help you memorize.

The first thing many actors do is the read the script a few times. (Many people suggest reading it 3 times) Next step is to re-read the scenes you are in - those will be the pages with lines highlighted in yellow.

While you are re-reading these scenes, look for easy parts to remember, such as responding to questions.

Another character asks: "How are you today?" and your line is "Just fine." Or they ask "Where did you put the gun?" and your line is- "I threw it in the river." In lines such as these, your cue is a question and you simply respond. Responses to questions are easy to remember, aren't they? (Yes, they are.)

Mind Games

Another trick is to pay attention to the subject of the line just before your line. Look for clues or easy prompts. In many cases, your cue line will contain a word or idea that relates to your line.

Example:

SALLY: The trees look oh so lovely in fall.

DICK: Yes they do. I must get wood for the fire.

In this case, the cue for Dick's line is relative to Sally's line. The subject of her

line is "trees." Dick responds to her statement and then seems to begin a new subject about "wood for the fire," but we can see it's the idea of "trees" that cue "wood." This is what I refer to as Cue /Clues: A subject in one line relates to the thought in the next. Cue/Clues are also easy to remember.

Once you search your script for easy Question/Answer lines and Cue/Clues you can move on to other advanced memory games.

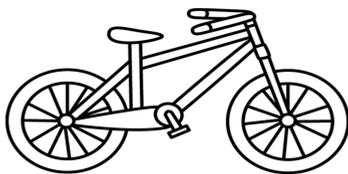
Picture This

In my early days on the stage, I was given a great technique that I still use today. It's very similar to the Cue/Clue example I cited above of relating one subject to another. I was a novice actor in a fairly large role and I was having trouble with a short monologue because I had to rattle off a list of items. Lists can be difficult to remember. One of the actors took me aside and suggested visualizing each item in the "list" and connect it or relate it to the next item and create a visual picture. In other words, see one big thing instead a lot of little things.

Example:

GEORGE: When I was a kid I had a bicycle, a wagon, a dog and a purple umbrella.

The actor said to picture each item flowing or connecting to the next item in the list. The key word here is "picture." If you can see a series of images in your mind, instead of a list of words, it makes it much easier to recall from memory.



In the example above, the list is a bicycle, a wagon, a dog and a purple umbrella. I pictured myself as "a kid" riding a *bicycle*. And the bicycle was pulling a *wagon*. And in the wagon was a *dog*.

And since I didn't want to ride too fast, there was a *purple umbrella* on the back of the wagon to act as a parachute. One picture



of many items related together instead of a list of words on paper.

Connect the Dots

I have used this method of "picturing" to help me memorize ever since, especially long monologues. Most monologues contain "ideas" such as Hamlet's famous soliloquy which begins "To be or not to be."

The main idea in the soliloquy is "death" and Shakespeare uses different metaphors (images) to express Hamlet's basic question about life and death. Seeing the images can make memorization a lot easier.

The way most monologues are written, the character's subject is made up of connected ideas; this idea leads to *that* idea and the structure similar to a list. A list of ideas or thoughts instead of things. The kid riding the bicycle (first idea) that's pulling a wagon (second idea) and so on.

In Hamlet's "*to be or not to be*" speech: the subject, of course is death. The very first idea is the question of "*to be*" or "*not to be*" (living or not living). This leads to the next image of "*slings and arrows*" and then to "*take arms against a sea of troubles*". Since you know the main subject is death, you can relate the images of "*slings and arrows*", which of cause death. And "*take arms*" which are weapons, again it relates back to death. Or you can picture *arrows* flying out into the *sea* or whatever image you would like to help you build up the list of ideas.

Pretzel Safe Diamond Peanuts

Sometimes, a script may seem to have lines that present ideas that don't seem to be connected to anything. You may have a scene between 2 or 3 characters and they are all talking about 2 or 3 different things.

Example: I was in a play where a husband and wife arrive at a home and each character's lines are on a different subject. The wife's dialogue is only related to the furnishings of the house while the husband is complaining about how hungry he is, at least two pages of dialogue between two people that had no real connection or ideas relating to each other, two different subjects with no easy question/answers or Cue/Clues. I simply created mental images cues which were triggered or by the wife's unrelated lines.

Example:

WIFE: I bet she keeps all her jewels in a safe!

HUSBAND: I can't get this pretzel bag open!

WIFE: She has a dozen real diamonds you know!

HUSBAND: These peanuts are unsalted! Who buys unsalted peanuts?!

Based on the Wife's line about "jewels in a safe", I needed something to cue my line; "can't get this pretzel bag open".

So, I thought about an image of "jewels in a safe" and connected it with "pretzels" in "bag".

The jewels are locked away in a safe and you cannot *open* a safe. The pretzels are in a bag. I can't *open* the bag.



For the next line, I visually connected "a dozen real diamonds " to "peanuts are unsalted!"

Diamonds are clear crystal objects. Salt is a clear crystal object. The simple association of "diamonds" + "salt" worked as a cue for my line.

Sometimes if the cues or images are not in the lines, you must invent your own.

Between The Lines

Another method I have used to memorize lines is a digital tape recorder. I would record myself reading the cue lines followed by my own lines. I then listen to the tape over and over, while I'm driving or working or whatever.

Much in the same way you learn the words to a popular song or a commercial

jingle from hearing it over and over. (Repetition is the key. Repetition is the key.)

After listening to that tape for a while, I would make another tape of myself only reading the "cue" lines and allowing the tape to be blank where my line is spoken. Then when I play the tape, I would say my lines from memory during the blank spaces.

Under Cover

Another method is to simply read the script and cover up your lines with a piece of paper. As you come to your cue line, (which is highlighted in a different color) say your line out loud from memory. You can then move the paper to see how close you were to knowing the line.

You're Out of Order

When I say "close", what I mean is - as you begin committing your lines to memory, you will remember the gist of the line.

If the line is:

"Joe and me are going out for awhile, I'll pick up the ransom money on the way back. I'll see you later."

At first, you retain key phrases or clumps of words such as: *"going out"*, *"picking up ransom money"*, *"way back"* and *"see you later"*.

Rarely at first, will you recall the line in the exact order as it appears on the page. You may recite it from memory as:

"See you later. I'm going out for a while with Joe. On the way back, I'll pick up the ransom money."

You've got all the key phrases, but in the wrong order. Welcome to the wonderful world of paraphrasing! Don't worry, we all do it at first – but try not to make it a habit.

Why?

Because problems can occur if you continue to paraphrase right into the performances - those lines may be someone else's cue. Another actor may have committed to memory the last line or last few words you deliver as his cue and if you paraphrase or jumble the order of your words, it can make it difficult for everyone else. As an example – in the ransom line from before:

"I'll pick up the ransom money on the way back. I'll see you later."

'I'll see you later' may be a cue for another actor, but if it's the first thing you say instead of the last thing, it may cause the other actor severe trauma.

One of my favorite personal examples of the paraphrase fallout came during a performance I was in of the play *"You Can't Take It With You"*.

An actress playing the part of a Russian Countess never said her lines the same way twice which made it difficult for another actor, who relied on her lines to cue his one and only line. He developed a strategy to simply wait until she stopped speaking to say his one big line: "I'll make sure you're on time, your Highness."

He would say his line regardless of what she said, because he knew it came directly after her line, so when he heard a reasonable amount of silence, he knew she was done and that was his cue.

One night, for some strange reason, the actress said her line exactly as it was written in the script. Hearing his cue as it was meant to be, caused some type of malfunction in the actors mind and after a slight pause, his line came out; "I'll make sure you're on *hime* your *tiness*".

Realizing what he just said, his eyes got very wide and literally his body jerked

with a shock. (Some day I may write a chapter on how to suppress laughter on stage.)

So, be careful of paraphrasing your lines.

The Write Thing

I know an actor who approaches memorization, like studying for a final exam. He will sit at a table and read his lines over and over. He will then test himself by closing his script, taking a piece of paper and pen and writing his lines down from memory. He will then check the script to see if he made any mistakes. He does it over and over until it sinks into his memory. Rarely does he paraphrase.

Read To Me

A common method which is probably the most popular is to find someone willing to follow along in the script and feed you your cue lines. They read from the script while you squirm and struggle to recall your lines uttering phrases such as: "No, don't tell me! I know this! This is where I say something about the thing..... OK! How does the line go?" Having a somewhat impartial person to help you can... well, help you. If you say your line incorrectly or paraphrase they will more than willing to correct you.

Pause Turn Page

Some actors I've known simply memorize their script with no special methods or outside help except a photographic memory. They can actually visualize pages of the script in their mind. I knew one such actress who, during her performance, would pause at odd times. Right in the middle of a line, she would place a beat (*novice note: Beat - pause of about one second*) for no real reason. I later found out that each pause she took corresponded to a place where her line was continued on the next page. Essentially, those odd pauses she took, were the places she mentally turned the page.

Memory Cement Blocks

Allow me to tie this all back into the process of rehearsal because this is where your memory will be tested. You can listen to your lines on tape or recite them

with a friend but it is not until you're in rehearsal that all your work finally develops and begins to click and stick into place. In a rehearsal, you are hearing your cue lines from the actual actors who be saying them. Also as you rehearse you will be moving around the stage with your blocking which can really cement the lines into your memory.

Move Speak Move

You will discover that your movement/blocking will attach itself to your memorized lines. I discovered how deep this "movement = line" connection was during a line blitz.

Novice Note: A "Line Blitz" or "line rehearsal" is usually a panic session the director calls for when the play is about to open. The actors sit around and simply run all the lines from the play, no acting, no blocking, just dialogue. Sometimes, you are asked to run all the lines as quickly as possible.

Extra Trivial Note: I've also heard this referred to as a "Rain Rehearsal". The story goes that if there was bad weather during a performance, there may be a chance the power would go out. If the power went out, the audience would want their money back. But, technically, if the play was beyond the half-way point, the theater did NOT have to issue refunds since the audience saw more than half of the show. To prepare for this, actors would have "Rain Rehearsals" which was a 'speed metal' version of the play.

So, during a line rehearsal, line blitz, rain rehearsal, whatever, we were sitting around running our lines. I noticed as I was sitting there, I was having a very hard time recalling my lines. Sure I heard my cues, but the words that followed weren't entering my mind as they normally did in rehearsal.

In frustration, I got up and began pacing. As I walked around, I noticed I was picking up my cues faster and having no trouble with recalling my lines. Why?

My blocking! I realized how much of my memory of the lines were embedded in my blocking. When I say *this* line, I'm standing by the door. And for *that* line,

I'm walking to the table. Not only can a someone else's line prompt you, but so can your own movement or location on the stage.

You can use anyone of these methods or combine a few or even create one of your own. Again, it will be the repetition of saying the lines from memory that will solidify your memorization.

Don't forget to memorize your cue lines or actions. Break a leg!

For more information relating to tips and tricks for the amateur performer such as What to expect at an Audition, What goes on in Rehearsal and the unwritten rules of the Stage – check out the full book

[Basic On Stage Survival Guide For Amateur Actors](#)