Guide to Effective Scriptwriting for Message On Hold & Telephony Applications
Table of Contents

Introduction: Working with Voice .................................................. 3

Pronunciation – Importance of Phonetic Protocols ....................... 5
Long Vowel Sounds ................................................................. 6
Short Vowel Sounds ............................................................... 6
Other Common Sounds ............................................................ 7
Dialects .................................................................................... 8
Translation Services ............................................................... 9
Special Words/Symbols/Phrases ................................................. 10

Message On Hold ................................................................. 11

Voice Prompts / Auto Attendant Greetings / IVR
Announcements .................................................................. 16

Online Audio: eTraining, Virtual Tours, Audio for Social
Media .................................................................................... 19
eTraining .................................................................................. 19
Virtual Tours .......................................................................... 21
Social Media ............................................................................ 22

Appendix .................................................................................. 24
Introduction: Working with Voice

Before we delve into the best practices for writing a clear and effective audio marketing script, we need to dissect the process of “script writing.” There are at least two questions one should consider before beginning a new project: “What type of script am I writing?” and “What is the function of this script?”

Is the application a set of voice prompts for an IVR system, or a narrative for a Message On Hold program? Is it primarily meant to direct, inform, promote, persuade, and/or entertain?

Regardless of form, the script must capture listeners’ attention so they remain engaged while navigating menu options, or waiting on hold for a live attendant. And, it must do so in a manner that is efficient and unambiguous, user-friendly and productive. Along with linguistic considerations and call routing logistics, script content is essential toward achieving a positive customer response and experience.

When the Music On Hold feature was first integrated into phone systems (PBX and key systems), most interconnects and businesses were clueless about the marketing potential and value of hold time. FM tuners quickly became one of the most widely used audio sources, much to the chagrin of music licensing organizations, such as ASCAP and BMI. Soon, companies would turn to alternative solutions to avoid copyright infringement and the risk of costly
lawsuits. This allowed them to realize the potential of “waiting on hold” as a “one-on-one” advertising medium, where they could promote and cross-sell their products and services, special events, and company news. But who had the time and resources to generate fresh content, produce new programs and upload them to the phone system?

Content creation is what makes the scriptwriters' role essential. They must assume the important responsibility of representing a client’s image, researching timely information and organizing it into an aurally pleasing, but informative, listener experience. One of the most challenging aspects of writing for "speech" lies in successfully optimizing text from a printed medium to a recorded one. When developing "spoken word" scripts, special considerations and nuances must be taken into account, starting with the obvious (see Pronunciation, below). Along with linguistic issues, such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc., the scriptwriter must address the voice talent "performance" aspects, including directorial and production requirements, timing, pace, pronunciation, style, tone, and more.

The following will give a brief overview on basic mechanics of writing for voice talent, then explore the two main categories of audio scripts – voice prompts and message on hold – concluding with innovations in the field, such as audio for eTraining, virtual tours, and websites.
Pronunciation

One of the most challenging aspects of writing a successful script is outlining the proper pronunciation. English is a language based on stresses – the stress in a word, or the syllable that is accented, varies tremendously. Most native speakers memorize where the stress falls in a word, since there is no definite pattern. However, the placement of the stress can significantly alter the meaning of a word. For example, “produce” can be pronounced as “PROE-duce” or “pro-DUCE” – the former referring to "vegetables," and the latter to "the act of making an object or idea." 

Therefore, it is crucial to define your phonemes, or “smallest units of differentiating sounds,” regardless of traditional spelling. For example, “arrest” would be written as “uh-REST.”

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1 For an expanded list of ambiguous pronunciations, see Appendix on p22.
The following are tips for translating phonemes into easily readable, and pronounceable, sounds:

**Long Vowel Sounds**

- **ae** – signifies the long A sound (as in “day”, “date”, “main”)
- **ie** – signifies the long I sound (as in “pie”, “sigh”, “guy”)
- **ee** – signifies the long E sound (as in “me”, “sea”, “seed”)
- **oe** – signifies the long O sound (as in “most”, “boat”, “wrote”)
- **ue** – signifies the long U sound (as in “you”)

**Short Vowel Sounds**

For short vowel sounds, the vowel will often be followed directly by a consonant. For example, the first syllable in the word “data” can be said alternately with a Short A or a Long A, depending on your client’s preference. If a client wants the **Short A**, you would write: DAT uh. For the **Long A**, you would write: DAET uh.
Other common sounds

- **uh** – this is the schwa sound, otherwise know as the upside down “e” (as it appears in dictionaries). *Examples:* “via” is VEE uh. “Arrest” is uh REST.
- **oo** – the “oo” sound as in “choose”, “chew”, “move”, “tune”
- **ah** – the “ah” sound as in “hot”, “mock”, “Bob”
- **ow** – the “ow” sound as in “wow” or “out”
- **aw** – the “aw” sound as in “awe” or “all”
- **ar** – this can either be the “ar” sound in “car”, or the “ar” sound in “arrow”. We will specify which way.
- **air** – this is the “air” sound in “share”, “bear”, or “hair”
- **ail** – this is the “ail” sound in “male” or “sail”
- **kw** – the “qu” sound in “quick”
- **zh** – this is a rarely used, but it’s necessary for words like “abrasion”, which would be listed as: uh BRAE zhuhn
- **y** - The word “view” would be spelled phonetically as vyoo. “Beauty” would be BYOOT ee.

Remember:

1) You are writing for a voice talent who has to read your script clearly and correctly. You do not want your voice talent stumbling over words if he or she cannot read/understand your sound cues.
2) Sometimes rhyming words can help with pronunciation. For example, “pronounce ‘rouge’ like ‘luge.’”
3) Every so often, a client will have a pronunciation that requires a bit of foreign flair. For example, certain Spanish-related words require
R’s to be trilled. You should indicate such instructions in the phonetics and call your client to verify.

4) Online dictionaries are a reliable resource, but be careful to identify the dialect.

5) You must always verify pronunciations of people, places, and company names. Some common ambiguous pronunciations: Caribbean, Oregon, Colorado, Roosevelt, and Alzheimer’s. For international spoken dialects of English, compile a list of altered pronunciations

**Dialects**

Messages on hold are written for real people in real places – they depend on location and context. If you record a message for a company based in Louisiana using a Bostonian pronunciation outline, you are bound to receive upset clients. If your pronunciation cue for Illinois is “il ih NOYZ” (incorrect) and not “il ih NOY (correct),” your client’s message will lose authenticity.

Below are some examples of major differences between UK and US English pronunciation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORD</th>
<th>AMERICAN</th>
<th>BRITISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>PRAH-sess</td>
<td>PROE-sess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Versatile</td>
<td>VUHRS-uht-uhl</td>
<td>VUHRS-uh-tie-uhl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garage</td>
<td>guh-RAHZH</td>
<td>GAR-ahzh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>in-oh-VAY-tiv</td>
<td>in-OH-vuh-tiv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lever  leh-ver  lee-ver
Vase  vayz  vahz
Aluminum  uh-LOO -mi-nuhm  ah-loo-MI-nee-um

Translation Services

If a script needs translation, locate a professional. Make sure to discuss the process with your translator in order to retain the integrity of the script, for oftentimes content is lost in translation.

There is an additional service called back-translation, which is the process of translating a script or document that has already been translated into a foreign language back to the original language – in this case, English – using an independent translator. You can then compare the original English script with the back-translated English script to see if your client’s message is accurately expressed. However, back translation is expensive – only used in high risk / high return situations.

Special Words/Symbols/Phrases:

- **Productivity** – proe duk TIV ih tee  {There is only ONE way to say this).
- **“Eastern Standard Time” vs. “Eastern Time”** – Although most people use these phrases synonymously, when in doubt use “Eastern Time,” which encompasses both of these factors:
  - Eastern Standard Time is from 11/1- 4/4.
  - Eastern Daylight Time is from 4/5 – 10/31.
• **Symbols**
  o For “/” which appears in websites, check if client wants it said as “slash” or “forward slash.” Also make sure how the symbol is titled in a foreign language.
  o The number “0” in telephone numbers, addresses, etc – ‘zero’ or ‘oh’?
  o # - ‘pound’, ‘the pound sign’, ‘the pound key’?
  o *- ‘star’, ‘the star sign’, ‘the star key’?

• **Phone Extensions:** Holdcom’s default is to read multi-digit extensions as single digits. Example: Extension 22 would not be read as Extension twenty-two but as Extension Two Two. Extension 1116 would not be read as Extension eleven-sixteen but as Extension One One One Six.

• **Suffixes**
  o **-land: land or luhnd (Midland, Woodland)
  o **-ton: "ton" or "tin" (Clinton, Washington)
  o **-man: man or muhn (Fleischmann, Fisherman)

• **Prefixes**
  o Multi-**: MUHL tee or MUHL tie (Multi-lingual, Multi-ball)
  o Semi-**: SEM ee or SEM ie (Semi-automatic, Semi-sonic)
  o Anti-**: AN tee or AN tie (Anti-virus, Anti-gravity)
Message On Hold

A Message On Hold program is like a radio commercial in form, but more like a radio talk show in function. The format of MOH is traditionally a pre-recorded script set to catalogue-bought (pre-licensed) music, which in turn reflects an ambience that the client wants to set for their potential, or returning, customers.

Before writing your script, make sure to discuss the tone of the piece. Is the script meant to offer savings and discounts to returning customers? Or to remind returning customers about deadlines and requirements? Is the script a sale pitch; and if so, directed towards consumers or businesses?

To write a targeted script, it is important to keep open communications with your client relations and marketing departments. Knowing who your clients are, where they fall into your company’s segmented (categorized) target demographic, and the nature of client feedback can lead to the development of a refined message on hold script.

Once you have your target audience, you can tailor your word choice. For example, if your client were a local mom and pop bakery, you would want to include strong verbs and sensory descriptions that arouse smell, sight, and taste. If your client is a hospital firm you would want to sound professional, but not sterile: words like “warm” and “attentive” should be used frequently. Some may argue that
choosing the exact word is an art, but it is also a skill that can be acquired through experience and proper research.

Though you have freedom with word choice, your language needs to reinforce the brand you are representing. You could establish a template for every “cellular phone company,” but you would completely miss the company’s personality, what distinguishes them for their market. Take Virgin mobile and compare their message on hold with Verizon: the former is directed towards a youthful market - their voice uses slang and a has a laid back lilt - while the latter is directed towards the business environment - their voice speaks clearly with pinpoint articulation.

The following is a sample from one of Holdcom’s monthly message on hold scripts:

[3]          CASEY                  {The Holdcom Voice}                     {music}

As part of our commitment to our clients, "The Holdcom Voice" - our company newsletter - is published on a monthly basis. Each month we offer diverse articles ranging from business tips to featured technologies, always providing a glimpse of what's new at Holdcom. If you're not receiving our newsletter via email and would like to, email us at "Newsletter at Holdcom dot com" or inform your Holdcom representative.
• What is the function of this message? To inform.

• What is the goal of this message? To inspire a “call to action” for the customer to investigate Holdcom’s newsletter.

• What is the subtext of this message? That Holdcom has many opportunities for businesses that go beyond simply providing a service – we care about our customers and want to be the source for audio production.

• What is the tone of this message? Direct. Open. Inviting.

Compare that sample to these segments from a script for IS3 (Security and Antivirus Software):

Did you know that our premium support team was nominated for the American Business Association’s Stevie Award for Outstanding Customer Service?

We know you didn’t call us to be put on hold, but we’re currently providing other subscribers with the superior service that has won us millions of dedicated users.

Did you know that Seventy-five thousand engineering drawings were used to produce the first Boeing 747 airplane?
Did you know that? Halloween candy sales average about 2 billion dollars annually in the United States? Halloween is the third biggest party day of the year behind New Year’s and Super Bowl Sunday, respectively.

- **What is the function of this message?** To entertain.
- **What is the goal of this message?** To demonstrate IS3’s outstanding service and to keep the listener preoccupied while waiting on hold.
- **What is the subtext of this message?** That not only is IS3 renowned in the professional world, but also has personality. These random facts are not only placeholders, but also representative of IS3’s interest in the pursuit of knowledge. These facts are about quantifying “the greatest” or the “most,” something that distinguishes the individual from the crowd, as IS3 wants to be distinguished from other software providers.
- **What is the tone of this message?** Outgoing. Concerned. Genuine.

With the proper word choice, music, and target market, you will captivate your audience. They will not only stay on hold, but will have an *emotional* reaction to your message. Depending on the presentation of your message on hold, they will either develop an affinity with your brand, a trustworthiness, impartiality, or distaste. Though your customers may not consciously be aware of these associations, your brand will create a deep impression, which is later
transferred through word of mouth. Since individuals can pick up on the slightest, most subtle social cues through the human voice, an initial positive impression is crucial to spreading your company’s message.
Voice Prompts / Auto Attendant / IVR Announcements

As opposed to the passive nature of message on hold, voice prompts are aggressive; they are designed to elicit a physical reaction from the listener – a “call to action.” Typical voice prompts are one-line commands that instruct the listener to press a button, speak into the phone, or recall information. The voice prompt is more forward than the message on hold, but has a greater chance to increase brand loyalty through interaction.

Interactive Voice Response (auto-attendant system) is a telephone system that allows customers to access a pre-recorded client database through keypad input or speech recognition – the commands are usually voice prompts.

The following are several tips for a successful IVR script:

- **Write for the Ear**
  - Always remember that navigating through an IVR system is an *aural* experience. Be sure to write for the EAR, not for the eye. Your callers don’t have the luxury of seeing your script laid out in front of them when they’re listening to your various menu options, list of departments, employee directories, etc. Use language that is easy for callers to comprehend the first time they hear it without the need to have it repeated.
Keep your phrasing as concise as possible.

- The main objective of a caller navigating an IVR system is to get to his desired party’s extension as quickly as possible. If your script contains convoluted and overly wordy phrases, the longer it will take for the caller to reach a live representative, and the more frustrated he or she may become. Take, for example, the following phrases; which would help a caller reach his destination faster?
  - “If you would like to be assisted by a member of our Customer Service Department, press 2 to speak with the next available representative.”
  - “For the Customer Service Department, press 2.”

Place extension numbers at the END of menu options rather than the beginning.

- When a caller listens to a laundry list of menu options, he is waiting to hear the option he requires and most likely has little to no interest in the other options being offered. Once he hears his desired option, he’s then ready to hear the corresponding extension number – not vice versa.
  - Good Example: “For Sales and Catering, enter two-zero-one. For accounting, enter two-zero-two.”
  - Bad Example: “Enter two-zero-one for Sales and Catering. Enter two-zero-two for accounting.”

Avoid repeating the words “please” before each directive.

- Avoid “dial,” for this implies rotary phones. Instead, use “press” or “enter.”
Don't include unnecessary symbols in your script.

- Example: “Press number one” instead of “Press #1.” The latter can be misinterpreted to mean, “Pound one” (same goes for the *, or star, symbol).

Extension numbers best stated as separate digits.

- For example, “one two one” and not “one twenty one.”
- Use “zero” in place of “oh” to rule out any risk of miscommunication.

Say “Eastern Time” to incorporate both “Eastern Standard Time” and “Eastern Daylight Time.”
Online Audio – Etraining, Virtual Tours, Audio for Social Media

With the explosion of social media, smart phone applications, and independent web/app developers, there has never been a more abundant time for a business to immerse itself with rich media content.

**eTraining**

Also known as eLearning, this is a form of media where companies provide online web-tutorials to train their employees, schools develop online courses for all ages, or individuals want to make “how-to” guides for the general public.

Here are several tips for writing a successful eTraining script:

- **Understand your objective.**
  - Are you teaching customers how to effectively use a product? Are you preparing new employees for on-the-job-problems? Are you educating, or demonstrating?
- **Know your audience.**
  - Identify your audience and keep them in mind during the writing process.
  - Don’t assume they know everything you know – remember, you are trying to teach them.
Be conversational.
- If your eTraining script entails dialog between “characters”, your writing should mimic natural conversation. Avoid formal language you would normally reserve for printed media. A dialog is more engaging and easier for your audience to follow when it sounds authentic.

Provide situational comparisons, when appropriate.
- You not only want to teach the right way(s) to deal with a problem, but also the wrong way(s) as well; your audience will see the difference between correct and incorrect problem-solving methods.

Keep it simple.
- Your script should be easy for a voiceover to record and easy for your audience to understand.
- Avoid complex run-on sentences.
- Eliminate tangents and irrelevant information – a good way to edit is to read your script out aloud and ask, “Does this catch my attention?”
Virtual Tours

Virtual Tours are exactly what they sound like – every nook and cranny of a home is filmed, and then collated into a collage that seamlessly joins the images/video together. The user can then “walk” through the digitally re-created space. However, without audio, virtual tours seem empty, almost haunted. If you walked into a room at night with a roaring brick fireplace and a skylight, wouldn’t you want a soothing voice telling you about the history, the space, and the function of the room?

Here are some tips for virtual tours:

- **Create an authentic atmosphere.**
- **Know the space.**
  - Watch the video beforehand. Make sure that the voice, or voices, are consistent for each room.
- **Know your audience.**
  - What is the target market? Measurements and specifications may work for a handy family, while location and reputation may matter for others. Who is the general viewer of these tours?
- **Be clear and precise, but not robotic.**
  - Remember, you are talking to people wanting to settle down and establish a place they can call their “home.” Personal anecdotes and humor work best.
Social Media

Social networks are a relatively new medium for script writing. Content and knowledge rule the web, so as a writer, you have more freedom. However, with freedom comes great responsibility.

Here are a few tips for blogging, generating website content, and more:

- **Keep your blog posts between 250-350 words.**
  - There is so much content being thrown at Internet users that the shorter and more relevant to their search, the better. If you can get to the point, be entertaining, fresh, and abundant in your content, then you are on the way.

- **Incorporate relevant images and video into your content.**
  - The Internet is a gold mine for media. The more interactive and visual content, the better – you do not read the Internet so much as you watch, click, and listen. Your content should not serve as the “frame” for an image: rather, it should support the image, making both types of content richer and more compelling.

- **Become a part of the community.**
  - What is the point of creating content if you have no followers? Being an active participant in forums, industry-related blogs, and live chats can not make your content more reliable and trustworthy, but can serve as sources for new entries.
Link to your followers and community members – but don’t clutter your content with hyperlinks, for this will only distract the reader from your message.

There are two types of links: outbound, where you link to existing content, or inbound, where other people link to your content. Inbound links are more valuable to increase traffic to view your content.

Write!

You should update your web content once or twice a day, at minimum!

Thank you for reading! For further information,

visit

www.holdcom.com

or

Email us at info@holdcom.com
### Appendix

**Common Words that have Alternate Pronunciations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Pronunciation 1</th>
<th>Pronunciation 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address (noun)</td>
<td>Favorite</td>
<td>Ophthalmology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisement</td>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Panoramic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambience</td>
<td>Forest</td>
<td>Plaza</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-</td>
<td>Gala</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Applicable</td>
<td>Inc. (“ink” or</td>
<td>Prestige</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aquatic</td>
<td>“incorporated”</td>
<td>Prestigious</td>
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<td>Associates</td>
<td>Inclimate</td>
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<td>Project</td>
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