

Vocal Delivery

Stop for; a MOMENT and try *to* think about the difficulty of ... grasping. The sense, of something where *the* into-nation IS wrong. Jenni Mills (2004)

If you're reading something, you have the opportunity to go back and read again if the sense is not clear. Your listener does not have that ability, so it's vital to signpost meaning through the way you deliver the information. This does not merely mean emphasising words or phrases - it's more subtle than that. The broadcaster Jenni Mills has described intonation as **the five P's**.

Punch

This is what is known as emphasis, and it can be overused. It means stressing the word by increasing the volume. Poor broadcasters - and an audio-describer is a broadcaster - will often stress the first or last word in a sentence as a matter of habit.

It is very important to stress the *right* words. The key words of a character or set description or a piece of live description need to be brought out, but equally it is important to know which words to drop away. There is no need to stress words such as *the, an, of, a*.

Used poorly, Mills writes, **punch** is like constantly thumping on a table.

Pitch

In everyday conversation you may not be aware how you vary the pitch up and down to emphasise certain words. Try the following sentence aloud:

This one's over here and that one's over there.

Instinctively you will have lifted the pitch of your voice on 'here' and lowered it on 'there.' That's the variety you're aiming for.

The danger with pitch is that some describers allow themselves to fall into a pattern, always stressing the end of a phrase or sentence with a downward or upward inflexion. This regular, monotonous rhythm rapidly

becomes intrusive, as is an unremitting sing-song delivery that comes with trying to vary the inflexion without considering the sense of the material.

Pace

You should not speak so quickly that you become unintelligible, or so slowly that your listener loses interest. You should, however, vary your pace. Delivery that comes at an unrelenting pace can be as distracting as gabbling. There will be information that we want to give the listener extra time to absorb. 'The play lasts for two hours and fifteen minutes, and please note, there is no interval' may be something that you will take a little more time over in order to foreground the information.

When checking your introductory notes or through-description, imagine you're being conducted. Which parts should be *adagio*, which *largo* and which *andante*?

Pause

Pausing before or after a phrase is another indication to your listener that this information is of particular importance. When reading introductory notes, it's helpful to leave a tiny pause before each character description so that

your listener can 'tune in' afresh. Some describers leave infinitesimal pauses between each word, believing they are enunciating clearly, but actually achieving a staccato and artificial effect.

In natural speech we use a process called **elision**. The lips and tongue begin to shape the next sound before they have completed the last one, resulting in a smooth glide from one sound to another. Pronouncing every sound in a word sounds unnatural to the listener. Remember you're writing for the ear, not the eye.

Try the following to discover the sounds you are making in natural speech.

- The girls played **basketball**
- The children were building **sandcastles**
- They waited by the **bus shelter**
- They voted in a new **Prime Minister**

You should aim to retain that elision when using a microphone.

Contracting 'he is ' or 'they are' to 'he's' and 'they're' also sounds more natural and does not distract from the message. Make sure that you *write* these contractions rather than expecting to remember them each time.

Tone

In live description, the actors' movements will act as a cue to your voice. If their movements are relaxed and unhurried, your vocal delivery should be equally calm. In a fight or fast action scene you can pick up the pace slightly and give a harder edge to your voice - but don't forget that your writing can do a lot of the work for you. Short vowels and hard consonants will sound much crisper than long vowels and continuants such as 's' and 'm'. Over loud music or sound effects you might need to lower your voice to cut through the noise. Don't shout, or you will sound reedy.

Don't be tempted to compete with the actors in your delivery. If the writing is vivid enough the information will speak for itself and our listeners will make up their own minds about the characters' emotional reactions, without having it imposed upon them. However, there will be occasions when you will want to vary the attack, perhaps

to indicate a more intimate scene from the one before. In that case you can lower both the pitch and volume of your voice to offer a softer sound. Creating 'scene sympathy' is an essential part of a describer's range of vocal skills. Saying 'He knocks her down' in the same way as you say 'He kisses her' is jarring and risks foregrounding the description rather than the performance. It's a fine line, and you must tread it.

Authority

Knowing and organising your material is the best way to sound authoritative and in control. If you find yourself stumbling over words, the problem is normally tension, which affects your breathing and affects those muscles that control fine mouth movements. You should try to discover what is making you stumble. There are several possibilities.

- You may be trying to sight-read. The best advice is *don't* unless it is absolutely unavoidable. Practise the script before you have to deliver it. You'll be able to identify any words that are likely to trip you up and re-type or re-punctuate anything that's likely to be a problem. Read your description aloud once you've written it. Don't wait until recording or live performance to find out that there are problems.
- The speech sounds in a sentence may be difficult to enunciate clearly. Writing '**She carries a big black backpack**' is asking for trouble.
- You may be trying to read too fast. Try slowing up a little so that your eyes are able to read slightly ahead - but remember the caveat about pace - it is *variety* of pace that makes a delivery interesting.

- Your material may be poorly organised.
 - If reading introductory notes with several pages of material, organise the text so that each page ends with the end of a sentence, or better still, a paragraph. Make sure the font is big enough and clear enough for comfortable reading - at least 12 point. Sans-serif fonts like Arial or Verdana are clearer than fonts like Times New Roman. Use 1.5 spacing and re-type and re-print any alterations rather than writing in the margins.
 - Make sure you know how to pronounce difficult names. If faced with a name like Dvoetochie, [d'VErt'chee] write or type it phonetically every time it appears in your script. Mispronunciation spoils your credibility and can distract you from the next piece of description.
 - If writing in pencil on your description script, write clearly and make sure you know how to navigate around it or you will sound hesitant. Don't scribble in the margins of a script and use arrows or asterisks to indicate the next piece of description -

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you will lose your place. Some people find it useful to mark the cue word with a yellow highlighter and a number and write the description next to a corresponding number on the facing page.

- If you're describing a long scene without dialogue, use symbols that will help you pace your delivery – for example / for a pause, // for a long pause.
- Include sound effects, musical cues, or pieces of *solid* stage business that will help you time a piece of description; 'door slams', 'piccolo trill' or 'George drops his glass' will cue you, but ensure they've been distinguished in such a way that you don't mistake them for description. A strong-coloured highlighter may help.

Remember, at all times you're aiming for a *natural* delivery. If it's possible to have your dry run recorded, take the time to listen critically. VocalEyes describers have each dry run recorded with their voices on it so that they have the opportunity to examine their delivery as well as the content of their description.

Once you've identified the intonation tools at your disposal, try to forget about technique and focus on the *sense* of what you're saying. If you take the time to get

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to know your material, finding the right intonation will begin to come automatically.

Reference:

Mills, J (2004) *The Broadcast Voice*, Focal Press ISBN-13:
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