

Ep #21: To Script or Not to Script?



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With Your Host

Michelle Barry Franco

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You are listening to the *Beyond Applause* podcast episode number 21.

Welcome to *Beyond Applause*, a podcast for mission-driven leaders, coaches, and creatives who are ready to share their expertise and stories through public speaking. Here's your host, Michelle Barry Franco.

Hello, my speaker friends. Hurray, we're here together again. So I'm in Virginia right now. I spent two hours today in a room full of my new dear friends under tornado-watch. We were all gathered in the ballroom here at the hotel. It was pretty exciting for this California girl.

I mean, we have earthquakes and for sure they're devastating and I've been through some pretty scary and devastating earthquakes, but with earthquakes, you don't know when they're going to happen. So you don't have all this weird anticipation. So that was a whole new thing.

There were all these alarms going off on our phones and at the hotel with these big announcements. So it was really exciting. Though I am happy and grateful to say the tornado didn't come directly through this area, but I do know that there was some devastation in other areas. And I know that there is a lot going on in other parts of the southern East Coast, so I'm definitely sending thoughts and love and a lot of care.

So as I've been on the East Coast this past couple of weeks, I've been facilitating these trainings. And during these trainings, this question keeps coming up over and over again, and it really does at every training I facilitate. And it's also a question I've gotten in various forms from listeners of this podcast, from clients, pretty much from everywhere.

So that's what I want to talk about today. We're going to talk about this question. But before I tell you what that is, I want you to come with me on a little imagination adventure. Don't worry, I'm pretty sure this will be familiar to you, so it will be real easy for you to conjure this in your mind.

So it's 10:30am on Monday morning. You're arriving late to work because you had a dentist appointment. So you sit down at your desk and you open

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up your computer and, of course, you go to your email quickly. First mistake, probably. And you watch the string of emails roll into place before your eyes.

So, with this fluttering in your belly and a rising sense of stress maybe, probably, you start to dig in and you're getting a sense of what's there and what to handle first so you can get caught up. And then this meeting invite pops up on your screen. This meeting starts at 10:30. You basically need to hop up, leave all of that behind and go spend an hour in this meeting that you're not even really sure why you've been invited to this meeting.

So you walk over to this meeting, walk into the room and the presenter is standing at the front clicking through his slides. And it's slide after slide of bullet points filling the screen with the occasional over-labeled chart here and there.

So people are sitting around the table on their phones already completely checked out before the presentation even begins and you find your seat, sit down, pull out your own phone, and try to tackle some of that email while this presenter gets started. It's the worst, right?

I mean, first of all, it happens over and over and over again and we just immediately shut down when it's happening. And the problem is, we also definitely don't want to be this person. Maybe we make our attempts. Maybe not all of your slides are covered with bullet points. Maybe you have brought in some of that imaged-based element.

And yet, the struggle is, you don't really know how to prepare a presentation in a way that you can remember everything you want to say without putting it all on the slides. So that's the question, right, how do we remember what we're going to say when we know we have a lot of things to cover?

Now, maybe you don't work in this kind of environment anymore, or maybe you never did. So possibly, you're delivering more keynote-style talks or breakout sessions at conferences and maybe these include your own story

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of transformation and other inspiring elements that are meant to change lives in big ways and maybe you're not putting a bunch of bullet points on slides. Maybe you don't feel like you need to because this isn't going down for documentation inside the company records, which is a lot of what people inside of companies are struggling with.

But still, you want to know, how do you share what you mean to share without forgetting anything important? It can feel like we need slides or a script with the words, or maybe like superpowers of memorization. But the truth is, you don't need any of that. Today, we're going to talk about this very common question, to script or not to script? That is the question.

And I tell this story about slides because that is often the first level alternative that people think of to writing out a whole script. But really, it's just trying to solve the same problem. It's kind of a script on slides.

So you may have heard me say that I struggle with writing. It can just be so painful for me and I get just kind of caught up in resisting all those painful feelings as I sit down to write. Yet, every once in a while, I do get into the flow. And when I do, I can write something that is so good that I can't even believe it came from my being.

I mean, I'll think, like, really, who wrote that? And then, of course, I want to preserve it. I want to keep it and I want to share it. I want to make sure this audience gets to hear this brilliance that I just miraculously crafted.

So if this is for a talk, I'm in pretty big trouble because suddenly it feels like if I don't say this thing, I'll lose my chance at fame and fortune and being the amazing speaker that I dream of. And I know that I'm not alone in this because I see it happen with my clients all the time.

So they'll go through the process of – we dig through and reveal all these stories related to their talks. It's a really fun rich exercise and often, they're kind of being reintroduced to stories that they have tucked way back in their psyche. So they remember this perfect story to illustrate this point they

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want to make and they master that story in writing because maybe that's, for them, the most natural way for them to flesh out that story.

And then, essentially, they marry the idea that this story has to be told exactly as they've written it, or else they've just failed the whole talk because, of course, after all, this is the story that's going to make or break the whole thing.

And this is understandable. I mean, we do love when we're brilliant and we want to share this brilliance, especially when we're doing something high-stakes like speaking. But here's the thing; this is also a big barrier to amazing speaking because when we get attached to saying things like a certain way, we lose our presence and our connection with the audience.

We get caught up in ourselves and our delivery and this perfectly formed story or phrasing that, once upon a time, we wrote in this moment and sort of crystallized into perfection in our minds. So you know by now, if you listen to this podcast, that being perfect is pretty much the antithesis of great speaking. It just is.

We don't actually want our presenters to be perfect. We want them to be competent, captivating, compelling, engaging, but perfection, it's kind of off-putting. We start to question. We don't trust as much. And I think a lot of that has to do with presence, being able to be present.

Great speaking is about trust, connection, presence, and of course, bringing value, expertise and inspiration, kind of all woven in together. We've got that, right? It's not a high bar...

It isn't actually as high of a bar that it can feel like if we let those first elements lead, the trust, connection, and presence. And we can do that when we prepare really well. So that's really what I'm going to talk with you about today.

See, the thing is, we can't do all of that, create that kind of connection and presence and memorize our speech, pretty much ever. There is only one

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exception to this, and even that isn't a pure exception. I'll tell you more about that in a little bit.

So if we shouldn't memorize our speech, what should we do? Let's talk about how to get all of your material out of you and into a format that you can use for practice. We're going to skip over the parts about how to get the best content and then organize it, because we covered that in The Only Presentation Outline You'll Ever Need episode, so we'll link to that in the show notes.

But just assume you've already done that, kind of, blossoming part and you're working really with an outline. So you've got your content sort of in a structure, but you need to know, kind of, what am I going to say? You go from the structure, this outline, to needing to string a bunch of words together in a way that flows, right? And how do you really lay it out for practice and then delivery in a way that's useful so that you don't have to memorize?

So we're going to talk about how to get your full content out of you and into external format, so that you can use it for prep and then also delivery. And then I'm going to share with you how to practice your talk so you aren't so afraid you'll forget something. And we'll also talk about that one almost exception when we talk about this as well. And then finally, we're going to talk about what to use for delivery, really what to bring with you for the delivery so that you feel confident that you'll cover all of the important things that you want to say.

So let's start with how to get your full content out of you and into an external format so that you can practice from it. So everything of any substance I've ever created started on a walk and talk. My books were all mapped out walking and talking into my voice memo app. Every talk I create for myself is crafted this way. Usually, I do this before I do the brainstorm session and after the brainstorm session.

So I'll do an episode on brainstorming for content because it's a really valuable part of this process. But often, I'm a person who doesn't know

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what I think until I say it out loud. And some of us are like that. Some of us don't know what we think until we write it out. Some of us don't know what we think until we get to sit quietly and think quietly. So knowing yourself in this domain is really helpful.

But once you have that internal process, you do want to get it somehow into an external format. And usually, that happens in the form of either speaking it out – so I do this – I put it into my voice memo app and then sometimes I can even structure an outline on the fly. Now, I couldn't always do that; that's because I have years and years of crafting outlines. But I'll talk through the content and then I'll just upload it to a service like Rev.com, or whatever your favorite transcription service is, and then I'll have it in writing.

And for me, that's beautiful because writing can feel so painful and I try to avoid it. But many of my clients actually enjoy writing and that is their easiest access to what they want to say. So they'll do their first run of their talk content in writing. They'll start with their outline and then they just free-flow the content. And really, either of these works fine, but the important thing is to know that the first phase is to get the flow of your content out somewhere in external form. And usually, it ends up in writing, right?

So, even mine ends up in a written outline format that's really blossomed. So I have my structural outline that I start with – that's The Only Presentation Outline You'll Ever Need. Then, I go for a walk and I talk it through and I add a lot of words to it; I blossom it is the way I talk about it, or describe it. And then, I might have that transcribed so that I have it in a fuller format, and then I can use that to start practicing from.

The other option is to take the Only Presentation Outline first draft that you've created, The Only Presentation Outline You'll Ever Need, and then actually flesh it out in writing. Fill it out with the words, create the flow, actually add the transition sentences and all of that so that you actually could work with that outline and talk it through like a full talk.

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Okay, so you've got this blossomed outline that's really the first draft of a full talk. Then, what do you do? Now you need to practice your talk so that you aren't afraid you'll forget something, right?

This is what this is all about. The reason we want a script is because we're afraid we're going to forget to say something that feels important to us. So I want to talk about how to practice your talk so you aren't afraid you'll forget something. Here's where we get to the crux of the question, and it's really time to answer it, which I think I've already basically alluded to.

It is almost always a bad idea to script out your talk. And when I say that, I mean to script out your talk and then use that to practice form and deliver from. This is unless you're the president of the United States, or possibly doing a main stage TED Talk. And honestly, even then I'm not sold on it, having worked with a number of TEDx speakers now. Even then, memorization causes so much stress.

So the problem with memorization is that it requires you to remember every line in order to cue up the next line. So the stress of remembering each line is so high that it often interferes both with memory recall – isn't that kind of ironic – but also that stress of trying to remember and going into your own head actually interferes with your connection with the audience.

You can probably even picture this. Like, imagine yourself, you're trying to remember, so where are you going with your attention? You're going back into the deep rich archives in your mind that have many, many words and you're trying to find a certain string of words so that you can pick back up where you left off last.

That is the opposite of being present and connected with your audience and having your attention on them. It keeps you in your head and not with your audience. The other problem is, you sound like it's memorized, and that's just not as powerful and connected.

Again, there are some exceptions and really – I'm going to talk more about this in a little bit, but those exceptions take so much practice that most of us

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just aren't going to get there for most of the talks that we're delivering. So the thing is, we're such intuitive beings, we humans.

So your audience, a bunch of human beings, they can feel when you aren't present with them. As I said, great speakers practice way more than you can imagine. Jill Bolte Taylor in her amazing TED Talk, Stroke of Insight, she practiced that talk 200 times. This is more persistence and tenacity than most of us have, and really, more time than most of us can or are willing to create for many of the talks we're delivering.

But that doesn't surprise me. That 200 times practicing doesn't surprise me as a TEDx coach. My TEDx speakers, the amount that they practice, the hours and hours of practice they put in is really surprising and it is amazing and it does help them deliver an incredible talk. But even they are not memorizing their talk. They're actually practicing so that their talk begins to live in them, and I'll talk more about that in a minute as well.

So the way you get here is you work from an ever-skeletalizing outline – is that a word do you think? So we're every stripping down this outline. So you start with this kind of rough draft basic outline when you do the first level of The Only Presentation Outline You'll Need. Then you blossom that outline so that you can feel the flow and you work through, you practice with that blossomed outline.

And then, once you feel like you've got a pretty good handle on it, you start taking out sentences, taking out detail, making the sentences shorter, maybe even into phrases. So as you skeletalize this outline more and more, you're relying on your own memory, your own familiarity, let's say it that way, with the content so talk it through.

The key is to not try to say it exactly the same ever time. So as I said earlier, I like to say you want to practice until the talk lives in you. It's like it's just there for you, easy access and flow right inside your belly, inside your being. And when you've practiced a lot, it will live in you that way.

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But here is the important point; only memorize your outline, that's all. You're going to let the rest of it flow from familiarity of talking through that ever-skeletalizing outline. So can you see how this happens? As you strip away written content and strip away written content, you come down to a very, very skeletal outline.

Let me see if I can give you an example. So if I'm doing a talk on how to, let's say, make amazing ice cream, the first thing I do, I memorize my intro lines, because this is when I'm most likely to be nervous. You come up to the front of this audience and we often get what I call the sea of faces, where we're kind of like, "Whoa, look at everybody looking at me." So it's really good to know exactly what you want to say those first few lines.

But then I just make sure that I know, very clearly, that I have memorized my three main points. So maybe my three main points for this talk is the ingredients, how to turn those ingredients into ice cream, and then the third one is unexpectedly delightful additions to your ice cream treat. So I've got that structure.

I can memorize those three things. That's easy. And then I would memorize my call to action so that I don't forget to say that part. Like, what do I want them to do? Do I want them to sign up for my ice cream newsletter? Or maybe I'm selling ice cream and I want them to buy my super delicious ice cream. Or maybe I want them to do this activity; I want them to make ice cream with their kids or grandkids.

So really, I've got five basic things to memorize; my intro lines, my three main points, and then my call to action. The important takeaways here, memorize your outline and practice until the talk, the flow of the talk, lives easily within you. And that's all you need.

So then it's time for delivery, right? You've practiced, you've got it stripped down to this very skeletal outline, the talk is living in you, but now it's delivery day and often our feelings are ramped up. We may be experiencing all that heightened energy in our body, so we're not as certain that we'll have access to all of this practice and flow.

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There is a certain amount of trust that comes at this point, and it does come when you've done two things; when you've practiced a lot for this so that you know that it lives in you, even beyond all those feelings, and also when you've done more and more speaking.

As you do more and more speaking, you start to go, like, "Oh, this is the part where I get nervous that I'm going to forget, but then I always remember because I've practiced appropriately." But that doesn't mean that you don't bring anything up to help assist you or that you don't have anything in mind to help you remember as you go up there.

So the first thing is, carry your outline either in your head or on one single sheet of paper. That's what I recommend. If you feel, many, many times you can carry that outline in your head and you are just fine, because it's just those five things. But if it feels better to you, just put those five things on a single sheet of paper. And you can even flesh that out a little bit.

So maybe under your first main point, under the ingredients, if you've got a really unique or unusual ingredient, maybe you want to write, don't forget the basil, you know. So it's totally fine to put some of your own little notes in there. But this single sheet of paper, you're not really counting on having to look at it. You're probably going to set it on the podium, which, of course, you're turning to the side so you're not blocked from the audience, or you'll set it on a table that's up front or whatever. But you'll have it in case you need it.

Some people like note cards, and note cards can work fine. Just be sure to either number those note cards really boldly, so that if you were to drop them, you would be able to put them in order quickly. Or you might even punch a little hole in it and put a ring through them so that they stay in order, if you feel like you really need to use note cards.

I just had a client who told me a story about another client, they just happened to be in the same meeting, and this client was painfully anxious about speaking; the one who was actually speaking that day. And he was delivering a talk that he was required to deliver and he had just gotten into

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the flow of the introduction and he had his note cards in his hand, and then he dropped all of his cards.

And so he stumbled around for a minute and tried to make sense of his cards, but of course, anxiety was rising, I'm sure, in that time. And he just gave up on the cards and he actually gave the best talk that this other client who was telling me this story had ever seen him deliver. And I have heard this time and time again about clients who have forgotten their notes and just gone up, and they'll call it, "I just winged it."

But that's not winging it. When you have prepared like crazy and you've got an outline structure that's really clear to you, you're not winging it. You're actually going up there really ready to deliver an awesome talk. You probably don't need those notes.

So just remember, there's only five things you really need to remember; your opening, your three main points, and your call to action. And then, because you have practiced a lot – maybe not 200 times, but so much so that this talk feels like it lives within you – you just let the rest of it flow from the practice that you essentially gifted yourself before delivery day.

So, my friend, you can let go of the script. You do not need a script. The script will actually, in many cases, cause you so much more anxiety and stress than you need, than you deserve, and really block your connection with that audience. You don't deserve any stress, by the way; no stress.

So take that huge stressful task of memorization off your plate. Your preparation, your presence, and your own internal trust from doing all of that preparation and that clear outline, that's what's going to help you deliver the most awesome talk possible in that moment.

So for your next talk, why don't you try just practicing from your outline over and over and over again? Practice everywhere; the shower, the car, while you're doing dishes, while you're cleaning the chicken coop. Do you have a chicken coop? We have a chicken coop, so somehow that came to me.

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So while you're doing all the things of life, just practice in all those places and times, and then experience the feeling of your talk slowly but surely taking up residence inside your heart and mind. It's such a wonderful feeling of trust.

And you know, you can get the tools to help you get to this place through the Get Started Speaking Guide at michellebarryfranco.com/start. That's where you'll find The Only Presentation Outline You'll Ever Need template that you can use over and over again, the audience analysis, and so much more guidance and support to help you feel confident and more at ease whenever you present.

Okay, my friends, that's what we've got for you this week. You can do this. Ditch the script; embrace the trust, and a memorized outline. And know, please know, that I am cheering you on as always. Remember, you were made for this. I know that because you know that. I'll meet you here next week.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Beyond Applause*. If you like what was offered in today's show and want more, head on over to michellebarryfranco.com/start to get your free complete guide to stepping into leadership speaking right away.