

Writing for Broadcast

How does one write for cable? or fiber optics? or any other electronic mass medium? Writing is writing is writing. No matter what technology is used to send and receive the audio and visual signal the program form is essentially the same.

TV restricted by small screen and the amount of time: 21-24 for half-hour show, 42-49 for hour-long show.

The writer must always keep in mind that TV is visual. The radio/TV communication process is essentially one-to-one: the presenter at the microphone or in front of the camera and the individual receptor at home.

There are 7,000 film, TV and radio writers in the Writers Guild of America (Western US). Half of this number will work in any given year. Half of this half derive their sole income from writing. Out of this group, 25 percent will make a substantial living - \$50,000+ a year. The Guild brings in about 400-450 new writers a year.

Structure

- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion

Introduction--Its purpose is to command the attention of the audience. To do this, the introduction should be written in conversational style. Use short, punchy sentences. Use a creative "teaser" stating your objectives.

Body--Where the details are presented. The how-to

Conclusion-Tell them what you told them. Wrap it up.

Four differences between writing for the ear and for the eye:

1. Broadcast news is telling - not chronicling - what happened. The style should be conversational, informal but not cozy.
2. No array of facts - especially figures -- can be thrown at the listener all at once. The fewer figures the better.
3. Each sentence, ideally, should contain only one idea or image.

4. And sentences generally should be brief

Writing for the eye *and* the ear

- In broadcasting writing, be brief. A good news story ranges from a few hundred to a few thousand words. The same story on radio or TV may have to fit into 30 seconds - 100 words - or if it's important, 90 seconds.
- Retain an informal tone. No "formal" language. Be conversational.
- Be specific. Vague, generalized action or information tends to be confusing.
- Personalize. Demographics are essential to understanding and reaching a specified audience. Try to relate the style and content of your writing to that audience.
- Be natural. No flowery language. For example, avoid the tendency to write this way:
Enough timber was consumed by the rampaging fire in the north woods to create 232 thousand square feet of prime budding lumber, the embers of these never-to-be-realized residential manors reaching in the heavens above charred, twisted treetops, disappearing into the void fire hordes of migrating fireflies.

Instead, write:

The north woods fire destroyed enough timber to build 100 six-room homes, the smoke and flame visible as far as 40 miles away.

- Be simple and direct. "Spoon feed" your audience by giving them a unit of information at a time. If you give them too much information, they can't take it in.
- Choose words that are familiar to everyone in the audience.
- Use slang ONLY for characters in a play.
- Use the present tense verb and the active voice.
- Make sure you use the right word.
- Keep a dictionary handy, and a thesaurus.
- Avoid errors, like its and it's, your and you're, there and their. A news script with grammatical errors is difficult to read. You could lose your job.
- Know the pronunciation of cities, names. If difficult, write them in.
- Avoid abbreviations.
- Avoid gender-specific terms. Use plural nouns in most cases.
- Be sure you have the facts right before you write.
- Have all the information you need to be objective.
- Identify all people clearly.
- Thou shalt not dangle attribution. Don't end a sentence with attribution; put it up front.

Basic format

- All newsroom copy is typed.
- Double or triple spaced.

- Use upper/lower case.
- Date the first page of your script. Use paragraphs and indent.
- Write - more - in parentheses at bottom of page if goes to a next page.
- Make the sentence at the bottom of a page a complete sentence.
- Don't use copyediting symbols. Cross out the entire word(s) and write corrected word(s) above it/them.
- Avoid saying "quote" and "unquote." (Always ask yourself what a direct quote adds to the story.) Paraphrase. Also can read it with emphasis to put strength on the person's words.

EXAMPLE: He attacked the program calling it "a boondoggle and a sham."

He said - and we quote him - "The lady is a tramp."

- Punctuation
 - Don't use semicolons.
 - Do use ellipses and dashes for longer pauses than commas.
 - Use underlines for emphasis.
 - Abbreviations are to be avoided. Write out days, months, states, military titles (Capt., Pvt.).
 - Can abbreviate Mr., Mrs., Dr. and common usage ones, but punctuate them -- U-N, I-O-U

Word choice

- Be sure you know the meaning of the words you use.
- Be aware of nuances in words. (example: difference of "says" and "claims")
- State is NOT a synonym for say. State -- set forth in detail.
- Another word to avoid is meanwhile. Only use when a close relationship exists in subject matter and intervening time.

Writing for TV news

- Grab the audience's attention. Pay particular attention to the lead.
- Use interview soundbites throughout. Soundbites should not be longer than 20 seconds.
- Don't forget about the suggested studio introduction. Need to have a lead-in to your story.
- The first requirement for writing news for broadcast is clarity. Understanding must be immediate. If have the cleanest copy (devoid of grammar mistakes), and is unclear, you've not done your job.

Script format

Script formats vary from station to station. All have similar components. Four basic script formats in TV and radio: single column (radio), the single column sometimes used in TV, two column principal TV format, with video on the left and audio on the right, and the film or screenplay format, with each sequence consecutively numbered.

Script preparation begins with a summary or an outline ... a short overview of what the script is about.

The treatment or scenario is a more detailed chronological rundown of the prospective script, giving information about the plot, setting and characters, and examples of the dialogue.

Storyboarding

- Rough sketch of the anticipated shot. Emphasis on *rough*.
 - Number them to when you will change a shot on your script.
 - Give commentary at the bottom.
 - What this does is gets you to visualize what your show will look like.
 - Also if going to different cameras, let you know if will have problems.
 - Draw outline of set and cameras to see if will move.
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Scriptwriting

To help you get started in the scriptwriting process, here are some tips:

- Start by dividing your page into two columns. Video commands, explanations of what shots you need, and other special effects should be listed on the left side; anything related to the audio should be included on the right side. This will help you and your producer visualize what you need to say, and will remind you to explain what you need to show.
- Decide what the of approach your video will need. Do you need a straight voice-over (narration over video)? Will it be hosted by someone on your staff? Hosted by a professional? Will you include interviews?
- Consider your audience. What will the audience members' interests be? How long will you be able to retain their attention? An adult audience's attention span will last about 8 to 10 minutes, if the viewer does not have a vested interest in the subject matter. If the viewer does, then the attention span can be stretched a little longer. For children, plan for three to five minutes. This is often one of the most difficult aspects of writing a good script. There is often too much to include in a short time-span.
- Write the way you speak. Write for the ear, and remember that unlike something written, your audience cannot go back and refer to something in a previous paragraph. Most people will not stop a tape and rewind to refresh their memories, so write in simple, easy-to-understand sentences.

When you've finished writing your script, use the following as a checklist:

- Have I explained myself in simple language? (When I read the script aloud, does it sound like I'm talking to an audience or just reading to an audience?)
- Have I avoided technical language?
- Have I used music and natural sound (background sound) to help tell my story and break up constant narration or interviews?
- Do I have any lists or main ideas that could be reinforced on the television screen as they are being discussed?
- Will my audience be interested throughout my entire program?

To save time, use on-screen text to support what you need to state. Another method of saving time is by avoiding lengthy introductions and conclusions. Remember that your video tells a story without your needing to state everything. If your video about an academic program shows children intent and focused on a lesson, you do not need to tell your audience that children in this program are 'intent and focused on their lessons.'

Once you have a completed script, if you used two equal video columns on 8.5 x 11 - inch paper (12-point type), consider that a full column of video will last about 30 to 45 seconds per page. After you've finished writing your script, why not let someone in your intended audience read over it? You may learn that you have included jargon or inadequate explanations in some areas. You also can determine what areas your intended audience will find the most and least interesting.

Basic Scriptwriting Guidelines

Words

- Never split words or hyphenated phrases from one line to the next.
- Eliminate most abbreviations.
- Underline words that require special emphasis or words that may be difficult to pronounce and provide the pronunciation next to the word.

Numbers

- Spell out figures through ELEVEN. Use numerals for 12-999. Use hyphenated combinations for numerals and words above 999. (Example: 33 -thousand.)
- Round off numbers unless the exact number is significant.
- Use "st," "nd," "th," and "rd" after dates, addresses and numbers to be read as ordinary numbers. (Example: "2nd Street," "May 14th")

Titles and names

- Titles precede names.
- Use complete name in the first reference, then last name OR first name thereafter.
- Omit obscure names and places if they are not meaningful to the story.
- Use phonetic spellings for difficult pronunciations.
- In age reference, precede the name with the age. (Example: The victim, 21-year-old)

Rob Roy.)

Punctuation and quotations

- Use direct quotes SPARINGLY. ((Let people say their own words.)) IF you must use a direct quote, set it off with such phrases as: "In the words of.." "As he put it..." or try to paraphrase as much as possible.

Miscellaneous

- Avoid repetition of time element "today."
 - Don't begin a story with a person's name unless the person is famous. Use a "qualifies" to introduce the person. Include the name later.
 - Grab the audience members attention by writing a strong first sentence (lead).
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Types of content

- **Information** - content that informs. Can come from pictures and movement, as well as from speech, other sounds, or their combinations.
 - **Description** - content that gives form to the qualities and characters of a subject so that the viewer can understand and appreciate it. Describe things simply to verify that others see the way we do.
 - **Narration** - content that tells a story. Perhaps the most powerful means of communicating content. Has a beginning, a middle, and an end.
 - **Question** - seeks some answer or resolution. Try to keep the audience "hanging." (mystery)
 - **Conversation** - content that allows the audience to observe an interaction between two or more people. Role-playing. Need to be able to communicate relationship.
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Content Structural Devices

- **Prologue** - precedes the title of a program. Sets up an audience. Usually used in programs of longer length.
- **The "hook"** - images and sound used to grab the audience's attention and hold it. Prologue also can be used as a hook. Usually contains the best visual material. Might be a montage.
- **The background** - content devoted to presenting a historical, causal, or formative content to provide a perspective for the audience. Gives preliminary information that will be the basis of the primary content.
- **The focus** - the primary content. The communicative objective. Brings the subject into focus.
- **The action** - intrinsic to video. Action content is where people (or other elements) on the screen are doing something. The message is often revealed by action or inaction
- **The setup** - involves content that prepares the viewer for a new direction. It can be a soft shift or a hard, emotional shift, depending on the producer's purpose for that

content area.

- **The reveal** - allows only part of the content to unfold at a time. (Example: Promotional video - only see part of a new car over the course of the entire video.)
 - **The payoff** - what the audience has been waiting for. Boy gets girl. Girl gets boy.
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WRITING HINTS

1) Keep sentences short.

2) Prefer the simple to the complex

Example: Use words like **buy**, instead of *purchase*. **City**, not *metropolis*.

3) Avoid unnecessary words.

4) Put action in your verbs. "The fullback hits the line." NOT "The line is hit by the fullback."

5) Write like you talk. Ask yourself "How would I say that? What would I tell the person if he were on the other end of a long-distance phone call?"

6) Don't use technical jargon.

7) Write with emphasis on picture. (We are creating a video program not an audio program.)

8) Don't get "wordy." Let the visuals carry the message.

9) Use plenty of pauses or music bridges.

10) Write in transitions. Transitions carry the viewer from one event to the next and become an important element in creating successful videos that flow naturally, without visual disruptions.

11) **READ THE COPY ALOUD.** That will give you a feeling for timing, transitions, information flow, conversation style and believability. The audience will **HEAR** a script, not **READ** it, so it has to be appealing to the ear.