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Writing for radio and television

Writing for radio

Introduction

When writing for the radio, you should always bear one thing in mind: you are writing for listeners – not for readers. The listeners will only hear your text once and they will have to understand it immediately.

Readers of a newspaper or an online article can read sentences that they do not understand two or three times. They can even look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary.

Radio texts have to be well presented, logically structured and easy to understand. If listeners stumble over unfamiliar words or cannot follow your train of thought, you lose their attention.

❖ Characteristics of radio writing

- In radio, **simplicity** wins. Simple words, clear
- **short sentences** and a **logical structure** are necessary: Research shows that listeners find it difficult to understand sentences with more than 15 words.

Example

Not good (sentence too long): The globally-active pharmaceuticals group PILLCO, which – at its Supervisory Board meeting on Friday of last week

- Radio language should **be lively**. But it is even more important that it should be understood immediately. Radio language should be **very close to spoken language**

- For instance, when you are writing a script about the U.S. Ministry of Defence, it might not be a good idea to use the synonym “Pentagon”. Not all of your listeners would know this term
- avoid **long, complicated sentences** and **specialist jargon**. If you use words that your listeners do not understand or language that they find offensive, you alienate them and not get your message across
- **Repeat important terms:**
It is confusing for radio listeners, if you replace nouns or names with pronouns. It is better to repeat the name or noun. This may not sound elegant, but it guarantees clarity
- **Numbers and figures :**
Radio is not the medium for detailed figures and numbers. Example (not good): 50 %
(better): half
- **Active verbs**
If possible, write in the active voice.
Example
(not good):
”A contract between PILLCO and city officials will be signed today.”
(better):
”PILLCO and city officials will sign a contract today.”

❖ **The structure of a radio script**

1. Strong introduction

Always start with a strong opening, which catches the listeners’ attention, arouses their interest and makes them want to hear more about this topic.

2. Details:

3. Summary/Conclusion:

❖ **The outward appearance of the radio script**

➤ **Only write on one side of the paper**

If you have to turn the pages of your script to read text on the reverse sides, your listeners will hear your rustling pieces of paper. This unwanted sound will distract them.

➤ **Space between the lines and clear paragraphs**

Generous space between the lines of your text will make it easier for you to focus on the text while you are reading it on the air. It will prevent you from accidentally slipping into the wrong line.

➤ **Avoid words and expressions that are hard to pronounce**

If you think you could have a problem pronouncing a certain word, choose a simpler one.

Numbers and figures can also be linguistic stumbling blocks, especially larger numbers. It helps if you write out thousands, millions and billions in words rather than figures. It's easier to read "two million" than to see a figure like "2 000 000" and have to count the zeroes to figure out whether you are dealing with millions or billions¹.

Writing for television

What Is Television Writing?

Television writing is the art of writing a TV show. Television is an exciting medium for writers because they get to control everything from the stories that are told to how the sets are built. TV writers develop stories, write scripts, make edits and revisions, and help determine what an episode looks like

Basic Principles

- should make selection of words as simple as possible.
- be objective.
- the target audience of TV is the general people so a TV writer, must not use the complex and difficult words.
- A simple principle is that no one should be in the need of a dictionary while consuming the TV news.
- Always remember the golden rule of news writing i.e. K.I.S.S. – Keep It Short and Simple. And you can keep your news writing short and simple by using the words used in daily conversation amongst us.

Fundamental Rules

There are a few fundamental rules of writing:

- ❖ **Write for the eyes and ears of the viewers:** Yes, you got it right. A TV viewer must be hooked in the beginning of the story and therefore the script should be emphatic enough to garner his/her attention to the TV screen. You should read your script out loud after completing it.
- ❖ **Write as much as possible in active voice:** In a good TV news script, passive voice has no place. Due to this, the viewer's brain has to work more

¹ DW-AKADEMIE, Writing for radio, 53110 Bonn, Deutschland, <https://www.rtc@dw-world.de>

than the normal to understand what is being said. A basic thumb rule is to avoid the use of “by” in a sentence.

Example: “The district magistrate has ordered to impose curfew in certain areas of the city. (Active voice)”

In certain areas of the city, the curfew has been imposed by the order of the district magistrate. (Passive voice)”

- ❖ **Use present tense as much as possible:** TV news should sound like “now.” because no one is interested to know about the old and stale news.
- ❖ **Stories should be people-centric:** It is a smart idea to weave the stories around people as viewers tend to connect with such stories. If viewers sense that your stories do not directly affect them, they would not show much interest.
- ❖ **Use action verbs in your story:** In news writing, you can use action verbs to make the story more interesting.
- ❖ **Try to draw viewers’ attention towards screen:** Your words should be catchy enough to get the attention of the viewers to the television screen.

Consider this sentence, “The Khans of Bollywood - Shah Rukh and Salman met and hugged each other.”

Now read this, “What happens when King Khan and Bhai of Bollywood meet, let us watch.

- ❖ **Present your story as something special:** So, what will make your story more interesting? The ability to present your story as something different and superior. These days you must have heard the use of words “exclusive”, “never before”, “first time on television”. For example “**We are the only channel with exclusive.....**

How to Pitch a TV Show

Once you have a great concept for a show, there are three things you’ll need:

1. A treatment: A treatment is a document that provides an explanation of your TV show’s setting, main characters, and storyline. Every treatment should include a title, logline, synopsis, summary of episodes, and character bios.
2. A pilot script: A pilot is the first episode of a TV series. Your TV pilot needs an opening that is going to grab your viewers and says something important to your audience about the show they are going to watch.
3. A show bible: A show bible, also called a story bible or a series bible, is a document that contains the history of your characters, an outline of every

episode in the first season, and how you see the show expanding into future seasons. Writing a show bible forces you to think beyond the pilot episode and can help you see the bigger picture of your show idea.