



RESEARCH ARTICLE

2024, vol. 11, issue 1, 383 - 385
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.#>

THE ART OF WRITING FOR RADIO

Davian VLAD
University of Craiova

Abstract

In the ever-changing landscape of media, radio continues to be a powerful, reliable, and intimate medium based mainly on the art of storytelling through sound. Crafting a compelling radio script requires a unique set of skills, as the absence of visuals places the written then spoken word in the center of the sonic universe in a way that resonates with the most intimate constituents of the audience. This article explores some of the most important nuances and techniques of writing for radio, delving into the key components that contribute to creating engaging, emotional and impactful audio narratives.

Keywords: radio, techniques, writing, script, new media

Radio has remained reliable and relevant in the constant and profound process of media paradigm changing because of its ability to adapt and to fascinate through its genuine power of stimulating imagination and creativity. This is the reason why the new media revolution, once foreseen as a potential mortal enemy for radio, has proven to be a rather bidding, reliable and hospitable platform, an environment which provides the necessary space and multiple opportunities for all kinds of media. The habits of media consumption have consequently evolved and the products diversified, but the fundamental structural elements of communication remain unshakeable. The ongoing transition from on-air to on-line transmission has been challenging, sometimes even disconcerting, but the process of adapting to the new paradigm has proven worthwhile, a lifeline which could not be neglected by the radio stations worldwide. This “second life” or “afterlife” in the context of the emergence of the new digital platforms changed the landscape, including habits and targets, for the entire traditional media, not only for radio, and this process gained additional speed during the health crisis, the sanitary turmoil in 2020: “Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the daily habits of journalists have changed quite a bit. Many started working from home and only those who could not work remotely remained in the newsroom. Thus, editorial meetings no longer took place in the newsrooms at the institutions' headquarters, but in virtual newsrooms on specialized conference platforms” (Stanescu, 2022).

Despite these paradigmatic adjustments, the core elements of radio journalism have been preserved as the audio communication has some particularities that cannot be changed while switching the platforms or means, terrestrial or online. And as most of the spoken words heard on the radio are basically based on a written text, the craft of writing for radio is still circumscribed by the traditional rules that have been followed almost religiously by so many generations of radio editors. That is why most of the golden rules for writing a radio speech summarized by Frances D. Saettler are still as relevant and reliable as they were almost three-quarters of a century ago: “*Be terse and exact. Keep dry statistics out. (...) Never say that you are going to prove something. Avoid pedantic speeches. (...) Avoid lengthy introductions. Don't use generalities. Leave out oratorical and flowery speech. Stay away from argumentative style. (...) Don't speak too much about yourself. Never have too long a speech and crowd it into time allotted. Build the speech around a few simple, easily stated facts. Make the material logical. Clarify each point of the speech. Repeat for clarity. (...) Summarize points during progress of speech. Conclude with entire summary*” (Saettler, 2014). Saettler also emphasizes the most effective ways available to check the script before reading it on-air: “*There is real purpose behind the talk. The content has general interest and appeal. It was written in conversational style. It was also written in simple language. The sentence structure must be simple. It must be written to inform, not to impress. It must catch the attention immediately, or else the whole purpose of the talk is lost. Script must be timed carefully*” (Saettler, 2014). Along the same lines, Robert McLeish comes with a more specific and practical exemplification of how to organize the content: “A script on the page or on the screen should, above all, be clear and easy to read. Double or triple spaced, with wide margins for any notes or alterations.

Difficult words, foreign or unusual names may be given their phonetic pronunciation in brackets. Numbers can also be written in words if this helps, i.e. '10 700 (ten thousand seven hundred) tons of food aid were supplied'. Where possible such statistics are simplified, so this becomes 'almost 11 000 tons'. Clear paragraphs should be used to separate distinct thoughts or items. We use one side of the paper, and good quality paper at that, because it's quieter to handle. Computers don't care about the ends of pages, they just go on printing on the next. However, best practice doesn't break a sentence at the bottom of a page, hoping that the reader will follow on. Each page ends with a full stop. Finally, why have a written script at all? Whether on paper or on screen, its purpose is to tell us what to say, in what order, so that nothing gets left out and it runs to time. It is also a safety net, reducing the stress of having to remember. Essential for news, but even informal spontaneous programmes will have scripted notes – even the best ad libbers are better with an aide-mémoire for names, points to make, stories to tell. More than this, preparing a script provides the opportunity of thinking more deeply, adding substance, expressing ourselves more accurately, and developing the well-crafted memorable phrase" (McLeish, 2005, p. 51).

The inverted pyramid is a very effective method for catching and retaining the attention of the listening public. It refers to a narrative structure in which the most important information, which could be regarded as the conclusion, is presented from the very start of the story. The most relevant questions (who, what, when, where and why) are answered in the first sentences of the script, then the supporting details and background information are presented on-air. It is obvious for anyone that simplicity and clarity still represent fundamental principles of writing for radio, including here news, diverse radio programmes, or even radio drama broadcasts. As the attention spans of the audience constantly decrease, the radio scripts must be utterly clear and concise, avoiding complex and convoluted sentences, because the public relies only on the spoken word in order to receive and decrypt the conveyed message. That is why a simple conversational tone is required in the radio scripts, an approach which induces a sense of direct connection between the speaker and the listener.

Being at its essence a "theatre of mind" because by imagining the listeners participate themselves at the construction of the story, radio scriptwriters must describe the events as clearly as possible in order to elaborate, to induce vivid and compelling images only with words and no graphic support whatsoever. The listeners and characters from a radio broadcast "breathe", live into a magical common space: *"In theatre, writers often talk about the 'fourth wall' – that invisible peephole into the lives of the characters on stage. In radio it's rather a different sensation – the listener is inviting the characters into the home. It's not like switching on the television where drama is safely locked away behind the screen. On the radio, characters exist in the ether – they breathe the same air as the listener. This immediacy is one of the real joys of the medium"* (Hill, 2015, p.2).

Thus the art of storytelling is the bedrock of radio writing as all the notions, emotions, scenery and ideas are verbally delivered, and this is applicable to both news and entertainment radio shows. The emotional strand of radio contributes to gaining awareness and consolidating the power of information to change mentalities and even the society in its entirety: *"Radio is a universal and versatile medium of communication that can be used for the benefit of society. Throughout the years, radio has been used to encourage positive individual behavior change and constructive social change through formal lessons or didactic lectures delivered by renowned scholars and authorities. While it is certainly true that lectures, talks, and discussions on radio can be used very effectively to assist people to improve their lives, it must not be overlooked that in some circumstances radio can be used - often more effectively - to bring exciting, entertaining dramas into the homes and lives of millions of listeners. These dramas draw listeners' attention and affect their emotions while informing them of new ideas and modeling for them new behaviors that can improve their lives and their communities"* (de Fossard, 2015, p.5).

Another parameter to be taken into consideration when conceiving a radio script is time and its ruthless constraints. A skillful radio editor manages to deliver coherent and impactful content within the designated time frame and in accordance to the guidelines of the station: *"In broadcast writing, be brief. Although your writing for print - whether news, an essay, a novel, a short story, or other form - can be as long or as short as it needs to be for optimum effectiveness, your broadcast writing is constrained by time. A good news story in a newspaper ranges from hundreds to thousands of words. The same story on radio or television may have to fit into 30 seconds - perhaps no more than 100 words - or, if an important story, 90 seconds or 2 minutes. And unless you have reached the stature of writing a miniseries of four, six, or more hours, you have to condense what might in print be the contents of a novel or a play into the equivalent of 42 minutes for the hour show or 21 minutes for the half-hour show"* (Hilliard, 2015, p. 71). Moreover, an experienced radio anchorman or newscaster has the exquisite ability to conceal the fact that they are reading a written text by expressing their message in a proper natural manner.

Using the active voice instead of the passive one is also a pivotal element of radio writing. Hence the sentences become more dynamic and appealing, maintaining the attention of the listener for a longer period of time. In this respect, the rhythm of speaking is also crucial. A slow pace is counterproductive as the public might lose the interest in the transmission, while a very fast one could lead to misinterpretations or even the complete failure of

receiving the message. A descriptive language and the appropriate cadence are a guaranty for a proper delivery of a radio message. Clarity and consistency in pronunciation are also very important, leaving no room for unwanted ambiguities. Objectivity is also a cornerstone of radio communication. The facts must be presented clearly and in a total absence of biases. Information, not opinion, this is another golden rule for a radio scriptwriter: *“Some declare it to be impossible, that we are inevitably creatures of our own age and environment, seeing the world through the filters of a particular time and culture. In this sense, only God is truly objective. But broadcasters must be concerned with truth – even when quite different perceptions and beliefs are held to be true. Objectivity here means recounting these truths accurately and within their own context, even when they conflict with our own personal values. The difficulty is that professional news judgements must, in the end, rely on personal decisions. This is why the question of individual motivation is so important: why do I wish to cover this story in this way? To tell the truth or to make a point? What the editor, producer or reporter must not do is to introduce a partiality as a result of conscious but undisclosed personal convictions and motivation, even for the best of reasons. Decisions based on one’s own political, religious or commercial views put oneself before the listener. The impartiality of chairmanship is an ideal to which the producer must adhere, for any bias will seriously damage one’s credibility for honest reporting”* (McLeish, 2005, p. 41). And, last but not least, an editor should be at any time aware of the trends and cultural changes so that the content will remain relevant for the targeted audience. Reviewing and refining the way of writing for radio based on reliable feedback can contribute to the success of a radio scriptwriter.

Radio scripts are meant to be received only by hearing, so it’s imperative to take full advantage of the strengths of the audio medium. And the fact that sound can be comfortably received while engaging in other activities represents such a formidable advantage: *“In normal circumstances, radio has the advantage that it doesn’t dominate the listener’s attention. They can drive, baby-sit, cook, build a shed and go jogging while listening to the radio. Radio is company through dull chores or lonely tasks, while not stopping the listener doing what needs to be done. Any situation where a person can do something while having a conversation at the same time is a situation where they could be listening to the radio. The writer’s aim, of course, is to stop them in their tracks, preferably without causing a traffic pile-up or a dropped infant. A piece of radio has really succeeded when the listener forgets the task in hand and only listens. In the meantime, its portability and its lack of demand on the attention, compared to television or a book, is what will attract listeners to radio in the first instance”* (Caulfield, 2009, p. 11).

The craft of scriptwriting is still a fundamental skill in radio production. The well-written texts represent an essential component in shaping the identity and relevance of this powerful medium. The art of writing for radio consists of the most effective ways of conveying information and emotions, ensuring that the content resonates with listeners in a personal and immediate way. That is one of the main reasons why, in an environment overwhelmed by visual products, radio masterfully manages to preserve its unmatched intimacy and imagination that only audio storytelling can provide, assuring its status as a timeless form of art.

REFERENCES

- Fossard, Esta de, *Writing and Producing Radio Dramas. Communication for Behavior Change*, Volume 1, 2nd Edition, SAGE, 2015
- Hill, Christopher William, *Writing for Radio*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015
- Hilliard, Robert L., *Writing for television, radio, and new media*, Eleventh edition, Cengage Learning, 2015
- McLeish, Robert, *Radio Production*, Fifth edition, Focal Press, 2005
- Saettler, Frances D., *A Course of Study in Radio Writing Types for Junior College Students (1950)*, published by ProQuest LLC, 2014
- Stănescu, Georgiana C., *The Impact of Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality on Storytelling. The Future of Journalism in Metaverse*, Social Sciences and Education Research Review, 2022, 9(2)

www.bbc.co.uk

www.journalism.co.uk

www.mediahelpingmedia.org

www.nngroup.com

www.thenewsmanual.net