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# UNIT 12 WRITING FOR RURAL AUDIENCES

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## 12.0 AIMS

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In this unit we shall see what are the salient features of writing for a rural audience. I shall offer a functioning definition of what we mean when we say 'rural' as against 'urban' or industrial, and therefore, what we mean when we speak of 'rural issue'. I shall also outline the different kinds of features that it is possible to write for a rural audience, how to select a topic for your feature, and what kind of material you may have to collect for your feature. Editing and organisation of this material will be discussed next, as well as the structure, style and language that is usually required for such features.

By the time you finish reading this lesson, you should be able to:

- define 'rural';
- define what is meant by 'rural issues';
- formulate the different kinds of features that it is possible to write for a rural audience;
- list factors to take into account when choosing a topic;
- identify what material you will need and where to get it from;
- edit and organise the material; and
- write out the feature, keeping in mind some simple rules of structure, language and style.

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## 12.1 INTRODUCTION

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In recent times, the word 'rural' has been brought into focus by the media especially in a political context. You must have read about 'rural culture' as against an 'urban ethos', a 'rustic sense of humour' etc. What exactly do we mean when we say 'rural'? Rural is defined as against urban or 'industrial' according to the occupation pursued by 75% or more of the population of any given geographical area. Hence, a rural area is one in which 75% or more of the population pursues an agricultural occupation (as against an urban area in which 75% or more of the population follows a non-agricultural occupation). It is important to remember that the term 'agricultural'

covers, not only farming, but animal husbandry as well as certain cottage industries such as pottery and handicrafts. Thus, a rural audience is one which is engaged in any one of these occupations and living in a rural area.

I am going to spend some time talking about the complex composition of a rural audience. This is necessary because the nature of your feature for a rural audience will depend (more than other kinds of features) on your being able to identify the precise character of the people who will be reading it. The term rural, in itself, does not usually designate anything more than 'non-urban', even in social or economic studies and surveys. Hence, strictly speaking, any area that does not fall under 'urban',—as per the definition given above—is considered rural. However, rural areas are usually studied under three categories: occupational, geographical, and demographic (i.e. relating to population).

The occupation factor has already been defined; geographically, any area beyond the boundaries of an urban area is considered rural; and according to the population, any area having a population of less than 5000 is demarcated a 'village', that is, rural.

It is good to keep a few statistics in mind: for instance, your rural audience in 1981 would have amounted to roughly 525 million people. This would have accounted for about 77% of the total population of the country. There were, in 1981, a total of 5,57,149 villages in India. Of these, the states with the largest concentration of villages were Uttar Pradesh (which accounted for almost one-fourth of the total number), Bihar and Orissa, while 8 states had less than 500. Of all the villages in India, almost half of them have a population of less than 500.

Before discussing the kind of issues that concern a rural audience, one more factor must be kept in mind. Your actual readership might go beyond the purely rural to other groups of people who share the same characteristic without having been classified as rural. For instance, if your feature is an informative or educational one, then the single factor of most interest to you will be the literacy rate of your target audience since this will determine their level of education and information about the issue you are writing on. You will find, however, that much of the urban population will share the low level of literacy that you may expect to find in your target rural audience. Hence, your actual audience will consist of many readers who are not, in fact, rural at all. Similarly, if your features were meant for women, you might find that the issues you are raising are not restricted in their relevance to only rural women but to women in urban areas as well. Another simple example of the overlapping that occurs in defining your target audience is the case of small or 'cottage' industries (which, if you remember, are part of agricultural occupations); weavers and potters etc. live and work in both rural as well as urban areas, and a feature on, for instance, the rights of a weaver, would be read with as much interest by a weaver in a city or town as by one in a village. Hence, overlapping of other audiences with your target audience is something you should keep in mind while writing your feature.

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## 12.2 WHAT ARE RURAL ISSUES?

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A rural area will have its own peculiar life-style, customs, interests and problems; these are usually quite distinct from those of an urban area. Hence, rural issues deal with the unique conditions of living that prevail in a rural area. These can be broadly classified into the following categories:

- 1) political—this would include information about the authority structure in the particular area for which you are writing, an account of the various civil institutions there, and the rights and duties of the rural citizen within this framework;
- 2) cultural—under this category you would include items of art, craft and performing arts.

Either of these two categories could be:

- 1) educational, that is, in the form of text-books or other formal learning aids;
- 2) informational, that is, helping in raising awareness level of the audience in an informal manner;
- 3) entertainment, that is, you carry no responsibility of disseminating information of

any sort and are mainly concerned with providing a source of entertainment for the audience.

Of course, you are free to choose whether you would like to use fiction or non-fiction depending on the function and nature of your feature.

### Activity 1

1) Make a list of 3 rural issues and a counter-list of what you would consider 'urban' issues. How would you explain the difference?

- i) .....
- ii) .....
- iii) .....

**Hint:** These would necessarily arise out of differing life-styles. Now read on.

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## 12.3 TYPES OF FEATURES ON RURAL ISSUES

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Given such an overall framework, we can now identify specific areas on which you might want to write, and discuss their nature and significance.

### 12.3.1 Features on agricultural occupations

You will remember that if 75% of a population is engaged in agricultural pursuits, that area is classified as rural. You will also remember that agricultural activities include animal husbandry and cottage industries as well as farming. Hence, a feature for a rural audience that discusses any aspect of these three fields is likely to be very well received, popular and educative.

### 12.3.2 Features on social issues

Our society is ridden with class distinctions and divisions. Some of these are harmless and desirable, while others are discriminatory and destructive. As educated people, we are able to see the difference between the two, but for people who are not informed, these distinctions, good and bad, are taken for granted and accepted without thought. Hence, it is essential that the rural people are educated about the many social practices, customs and problems that confront them in their lives.

Women's issues are a major area of interest and significance for anyone wanting to write on social issues for a rural audience. The need for literacy, education and emancipation for women, their rights and needs, the opportunities available to them, these are just some of the issues that you might want to raise.

Another major area of significance is the life and problems faced by rural children. How are their lives different from their counterparts in urban areas, what are the positive points of growing up in a village, what are the opportunities open to the rural child, what are the hardships and deprivations that he or she faces, what are the laws governing child-labour, are some of the topics that you could write about.

Under-privileged classes are usually kept that way through a lack of education and information about their rights, status and identity. Since such classes form a large portion of a rural audience, you might want to focus your attention on their needs. Features for these sections of the rural population could be educative and supportive.

Lastly, it is important to realise that your feature may be one of the very few instances of the availability of the written word for the rural audience. Hence, it is also

desirable that they be kept informed of the events taking place in the rest of the country. Your feature could call their attention to the latest developments in politics and current affairs.

### 12.3.3 Fiction

A rural audience has access to very few modes of entertainment of any variety. The written word is transmitted to them not just by being read, but also by its being read aloud to a large audience. One great source of fiction for a rural audience is, of course, the cultural heritage of epics, drama, legend and folk-lore. In telling or retelling these, you will be engaged in not only entertaining your audience, but also helping in keeping alive this heritage. If you choose to write your own fiction, then you might need to keep a few things in mind.

Familiarity and fantasy are two of the main ingredients that you will be using while writing a fiction feature. These have to be used according to your discretion, always taking into account your audience's ability to assimilate things which are outside the horizon of their experience, and their openness to the use of fantasy.

The imagination of any section of people is formed by their environment and exposure to various cultural forms. When employing fantasy, it would be wise to remember that the cultural influences that a rural audience comes under may be quite different from the ones which you, as an urban dweller, may have experienced. For instance, while their imagination may be people by the stories and characters of the Panchtantra, you may be more familiar with Aesop's Fables. You must, therefore, always keep in mind the fact that your use of fantasy should find some common ground with the imagination of your audience.

#### Activity 2

i) What are the major areas in which you can write for a rural audience? (70 words)

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ii) What kinds of issues would you consider most important if you were writing for women? (50 words)

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## 12.4 SELECTION OF TOPIC

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Having broadly outlined the various areas on which you can choose to write, let us see what are the factors that you should take into account while making your choice. Basically, there are three things which you should consider before deciding the kind of feature you would like to write:

- 1) your interest and expertise
- 2) the policies of your publication
- 3) the relevance of your feature for your audience.

### 12.4.1 Interest and expertise

Given the wide range of topics open to you, it is always best to write on a topic that you yourself are interested in. Not only are you likely to know more about a subject that you are already interested in, the interest or disinterest of the writer usually manages to make itself felt to the reader and nothing puts a reader off more than the feeling that the writer is not particularly interested in what he or she is writing. Since

the first rule of feature writing of any kind is the need to communicate, you will find that conveying the impression that you are involved in what you are writing will go a long way in ensuring that your reader is also involved in what is being read.

You may have a specific **area of specialisation**; if so, it obviously makes sense to write a feature dealing with that area. However, this is not always necessary, since as we will discuss later—it is always possible to collect the information that you require for your feature from various sources. Moreover, your area of specialisation can usually provide some interesting and useful information even if the feature is not specifically on that area. For instance, if your training has been in Economics, then even if you are writing a sociological feature, you will find that a knowledge of Economics comes in very handy. This inter-relatability can be found in most subjects.

If you find, however, that you have a talent for writing a particular kind of feature, then it is wise to concentrate on that. For instance, a flair for humour is a rare quality and should be utilised. Similarly, some people are better suited to fiction writing and the use of the imagination than others, just as some people are better able to teach and educate than others.

### 12.4.2 Policy of Publication

The kind of feature that you write will also depend upon the kind of publication that you are writing for. Since journals, magazines and newspapers are the three major kinds of publications carrying feature articles that have a sizable circulation market in rural areas, you should consider the needs and specifications of each.

A newspaper would naturally be more interested in features that are event-oriented, and the requirements would be restricted to good and objective reporting. In some cases, newspapers have a particular political alignment. If so, then your feature may be required to conform to the political affiliations of the paper.

A journal is usually subject-specific in that it concentrates on features focusing on a particular area—say, economics, sociology, literature, etc. Some journals make a policy of carrying only the latest developments in their particular fields. Others prefer to carry more analytical articles. Thus, the focus of your feature will depend upon the kind of features that the journal in question prefers. Since journals are published more frequently than magazines, it is possible to write an extended feature in serial form. This will mean that you can fit in more in your feature, but you will also have to restructure and reorganise it.

Magazine features are the most flexible in terms of content and length. They define themselves more through their target audience than through the subject matter of their articles. Unlike journals, therefore, the policy of the publication will dictate, not so much what you write, but how you present it. That is, an economics-based article will have to be written according to the limitations of the target audience. The magazine may be for women, youth, farmers or children. Your feature will have to be adapted to the needs of whichever group of people the magazine is aimed at.

### 12.4.3 Relevance

In discussing the needs of various kinds of publications, we have, in part, taken into account the practical aspects of the question of relevance. The policy of a publication will see to it that any feature it carries is relevant to the audience it is meant for. That is, a women's magazine will carry a feature on women's rights while a journal of physics may not consider it relevant to its target audience who reads the journal for information on physics. Similarly, a newspaper may not want to carry a fiction feature. You will find, therefore, that the policy of the publication and your own interests and expertise will see to it that your feature is relevant to your target audience.

#### Activity 3

- 1) What kinds of features would you expect to write for the following publications: the *Hindustan Times* (Hindi edition) newspaper; the weekly magazine *Saptahik Hindustan*, the bi-annual journal *Madhumala*? (30 words)

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## 12.5 COLLECTION OF MATERIAL

Depending on the kind of feature you are writing, you will require specific material and data. The process collection of your material can be organised into four broad sections:

- 1) research into the topic
- 2) collection of data
- 3) photographs, and
- 4) interviews.

### 12.5.1 Research into topic

If you are writing an educative or informative feature, this will require the major amount of work on your part. Depending on the nature of the feature, material may be collected from libraries, archives or text-books. For instance, if your article is an informative one on a cultural area like Indian dance-forms, you will need to have a working knowledge of the history and development of dance in India, even if you are only writing on any one aspect or kind of dance. You should remember that even if you do not eventually utilise all the material you have collected, you will need to know more than the immediate requirements of the feature in order to have an appreciable grasp over the subject on which you are writing.

### 12.5.2 Collection of data

Data collection is largely important for newspaper features in which many facts are to be presented, the accuracy of which is essential. Reporter-journalism depends for its



efficacy and impact on the quality and quantity of the data that the writer manages to accumulate. However, it is also very important for historical and educative/informative features. Statistics and figures form the foundation of economic articles and even articles dealing with social issues depend heavily on facts and figures to establish their point. It is always good to keep an account of where you have obtained your data from, as, in these features, reliability of the source of information is usually crucial. The need for its documentation can therefore not be emphasised enough since proof may be demanded of you.

### 12.5.3 Photographs

While pictorial evidence, in the case of a newspaper article, is an irrefutable asset, it is also important to remember that the impact of any feature is strengthened by the use of visual aids. Remember, also, that you are dealing with an audience that is not used to a great deal of reading; in fact, a majority of even the few literate people among your audience, reads slowly and with difficulty. In such cases, photographs can be an invaluable aid in communication. In the case of fiction, illustrations should take the place of actual photographs as far as possible.

When not using fantasy, the limitations of the rural experience in terms of familiarity with urban life can be rectified with the help of relevant photographs. Lastly, it is not so important to have coloured photographs as it is to have large and clear ones. Most publications do not have a budget that will allow for too many colour snaps, so the emphasis should always be on clarity rather than glamour.

### 12.5.4 Interviews

If your feature is concerned with reporting, interviews are an essential part of journalism. They function as verbal photographs as far as presentation of evidence is concerned. Even in features of other kinds, interviews provide an immediacy that no amount of imaginative or objective writing can substitute for. In the case of informative features, for instance, an interview with the relevant person can bring the subject alive for the reader and also make it more accessible to someone who may not know too much about it to begin with. Thus, interviews are an invaluable aid in communication and should be used wherever possible. While conducting interviews, it is wise to keep a tape-recorder instead of taking notes since you will have proof in the form of a recording, and your report will also be more accurate.

The particular nature of your feature may require that you go to other sources for the material you need. Fiction features may require material from the classics or folk-tales or any other aspect of folk cultural unique to the area in which your target audience is located. Similarly, a human-interest story might require that you collect your material from whatever sources are available to you under the circumstances. Thus, the kind of material that you need and the sources that you would have to go to in order to collect it will depend upon the nature of the feature you are doing.

#### Activity 4

- 1) Why do you think that photographs and interviews are important? (50 words)

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## 12.6 EDITING AND ORGANISATION

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Once you have got your material together, it is a good idea to organise all the data in a systematic manner. One system has been suggested to you in the unit on feature writing for children; pick any system that suits you and arrange all the available material according to it. Once this is done, you can begin to select and edit what you will need for the purposes of your feature.

When editing a feature of this kind, you must yourself be clear about the general

theme that you would like to focus on. This single large theme can then be broken up into smaller units which you should then arrange in order of importance, taking care that you organise them in groups of interrelated ideas. To each of these ideas attach the relevant facts and other material that you have collected, along with the necessary photographs/illustrations/interviews etc. If need be, you can then rearrange or re-think your preliminary framework till you are satisfied.

While editing, it is helpful to go over this framework with an eye for unimportant or superfluous facts/details etc. Try and prune your rough framework down to the essentials so that you can better judge the clarity of the points you are making and their cohesiveness as an argument. Extra matter can always be included if space allows.

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## 12.7 WRITING THE FEATURE

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Having collected and organised all your material and decided on the focus of your feature, it then remains to write it out in its final form.

### 12.7.1 Structuring the feature

You would already have arranged all your data in some rough framework according to the argument that you wish to pursue. While writing it out, keep in mind the literacy level of the audience that it will be reaching. That is, you will have to approximate the complexity of the argument to the comprehension level of the readers. Remember also, that often a rural audience does not read itself, but is read to. In such cases, since the word is not accompanied by a visual image, and the listener is not free to backtrack, linger over a difficult passage or pause to think of what he/she has heard, it is important that you write the feature such that, in spite of all these limitations, your feature is easily comprehended. This can be done by simplifying the language and complexity of argument as well as emphasising the connections between points.

However simple or complex the argument may be, a few basic rules should be kept in mind while writing. To begin with, you should always have an introduction that will outline briefly the gist of the feature. In doing so, you are arming the reader with a few basic ideas which he or she can expect to find elaborated and explored within the feature. You are also providing your reader with an overall framework or argument which may not be as apparent to him or her in the course of the feature.

Once this is done, you can begin to unfold your argument. It is sometimes useful to put each separate idea in a separate paragraph in making your ideas easily comprehensible. This enables the less experienced reader to make purely visual distinctions that reinforce the intellectual division between one thought and another. Try and make the inter-connections that link one idea to another as clear as possible. Reiterate and explain in different ways using different examples if need be. The 'middle' of your feature will constitute the bulk of the article.

The conclusion should, normally, touch upon the various inferences and deductions that follow from the preceding argument. At the same time, while 'winding up' your feature it is a good idea to give a quick summary of it. You should try not to introduce any new idea in your conclusion, as this will serve only in blurring the issue and creating confusion in the mind of the reader.

### 12.7.2 Fiction

In the case of fiction, the major considerations will be language and style. Since we shall be coming to these in a moment, there are only a few things you might find helpful to remember. First, organising a story is done along the lines of the plot, just as a discursive article is organised along the lines of the argument. Clearly, the imagination plays the major role in constructing the plot; however, it usually helps to subject the fruits of your imagination to the scrutiny of your rationality. That is, if you are writing in a realistic style, you might need to check the story-line or events for credibility, and see to it that the connections are clear. Similarly, you may need to cross-check the facts you are using in your story. Even when using the mode of fantasy, it is clear that even fantasy has its own unique logic.



### 12.7.3 Language

Language is perhaps the most important issue to be considered while writing for a rural audience. Unlike a cosmopolitan audience, you cannot decide upon a 'blanket language' which will define your readership. For instance, a contemporary Indian writer will find a ready audience if he or she writes in either English or Hindi. The readership for both languages is present in a cross-section of all major Indian cities. You can take it for granted that people of a certain class will be able to read English. In this case, then, the language determines the audience which is large enough and amorphous enough for the writer to be able to take liberties with it. A rural audience, on the other hand, determines the language in which you can write because you are writing specifically for a relatively limited number of people. The fact that all these people are likely to be of the same cultural area, and speak only one language, further restricts your choice of language.

Obviously, then, the language you employ must be one with which your audience is conversant. Often, this will mean not only a specific vernacular language but perhaps its dialect, since your audience will probably not have access to a second language. Moreover, more than a certain degree of fluency, a fair amount of familiarity with the language and its cultural context will be required if you are to express yourself with any appreciable degree of articulation and especially if you are to communicate with an audience that is familiar only with this language and culture. Hence, all these parameters are of the utmost importance in your choice of language and, consequently, the success of your feature.

Having chosen a language, you will then have to determine the average literacy level of your audience, since this will further determine the grammar and complexity of the writing. Again, the complexity of the language will depend on your assessment of the comprehension level of your audience. However, as a ground rule, you should try and keep language as simple as possible avoiding difficult words, phrases, figures of speech etc. A certain amount of colloquialism is also useful for the purpose of communication. Finally, make a conscious effort to see to it that you do not use figures of speech that are foreign to the culture of the target audience. Slang should be particularly avoided since it is, by nature, culture- and time-specific.

In previous units the undesirability of biases of gender, race and class built into each language has been dealt with at some length. It is important that you recognise and discard such biases so that social prejudices that lead to other evil practices are not encouraged, endorsed or engendered.

### 12.7.4 Style

For fiction features, it is important that you evolve your own unique way of writing; this is usually a very personal factor, being dependent on the nature of your imagination and your creative powers. In the case of discursive writing, the style is often dictated by the nature of the feature you are writing. An important factor in determining style is the question of what tone to adopt. Tone can only be determined if you have a constant sense of the nature of the audience you are addressing. For instance, when you speak, your tone changes according to the person you are speaking to—child, adult, well-educated, semi-literate, foreigner or native. Further, the tone will depend upon the kind of article you are writing, whether instructive, informative, informal and humorous or a fictional persona. According to the nature of your feature and audience, your tone could be didactic, formal, chatty, witty, light, serious etc.

The other major component of style is the degree and kind of 'embellishment' or ornamentation that you introduce in your language. Few rules can be 'prescribed' apart from the fact that the more formal the tone and the more discursive the subject, the less 'ornamentation' should be used. If you wish to use only ornamentation in these kinds of features, make sure that the tone remains the same throughout; that is, that the tone of the figure of speech and that of the rest of the feature are the same. Rhetoric, too, should be avoided since it appeals to the non-rational aspect of the reader; such an appeal, when not actually intellectually dishonest, merely serves to obfuscate the issue at hand. In proportion, however, and used wisely, figures of speech and rhetoric can be used for better articulation and communication.

For informal features and fiction it is important, as I have already said, to form your

own personal style, taking care always, to ensure that it is appropriate to both audience and subject.

Activity 5

- i) Write the first three sentences of a hypothetical feature on the educational opportunities for adults, keeping in mind your expected rural audience (with regard to tone and language). (40 words)

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- ii) Give an example of about 50 words illustrating how **not** to write a feature on fertilizers for semi-literate farmers?

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Hints (i) avoid technical jargon (ii) it should have plenty of difficult terms and statistics

12.8 SUMMING UP

To sum up, then, it is important to define what you mean by 'rural' and what are the issues that would concern a rural audience. Some definitions have been provided, but you should work towards your own understanding of both. There are various kinds of features that can be written for a rural audience and you should select your area after a consideration of your own capabilities and the nature of your target audience.

Again, only functional guidelines can be given—you have to evaluate yourself and the needs of your audience yourself. Although some information on the kind of material you will need and where you can find it has been given, you will find that no amount of advice can substitute for the actual experience. Each situation will demand its own material and your resources will increase with every attempt at research. Similarly, given a few basic rules, you will find that systematic organisation and effective editing will come almost naturally to you after a few features. Language is the major issue in this unit and requires much more space than I have been able to give it. I have tried, however, to indicate the main points that need to be taken into consideration. One point which I have tried to emphasise and which I wish to reiterate here, is the value and significance of writing for a rural audience. Increasingly, the rural audience is getting aware and articulate and you would find a ready-made readership for almost all the views presented here.

12.9 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

- 1) No answer provided or needed.
  - i) Refer to section 12.3 for hints.
  - ii) Refer to section 12.3 for hints.
- 3. Examples: i) a feature on the elections; ii) the success of the movie 'Hum'; iii) legal advice for dowry victims.
- 4) i) Refer for hints to section 12.5.3.
  - ii) Refer for hints to section 12.5.4.