UNIT 4  SCRIPTING FOR TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY AND COMMENTARY

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

A script is to the final programme what a blueprint is to the building. It is the basis of any broadcast programme. It assumes great importance especially in the audio visual medium of television. After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the ingredients that go into a TV script,
- state the unique characteristics of scripts for TV documentary and TV commentary,
- discuss the role of research in the preparation of a script for TV documentary or commentary,
- explain the process of developing scripts for TV documentary and commentary, and
- compare the preparation of a TV script with the preparation of a radio script and a newspaper article.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this block on 'Writing for Radio and TV', we have discussed the style and format required in the presentation of 'Radio News', 'Radio Feature and Commentary' and 'TV News'. We have acquainted ourselves with the basic differences between electronic mass media viz., the programme for broadcast on radio as compared to that for the audio visual medium of television.

In Unit 4 we shall discuss 'Scripting for TV Documentary and Commentary'. The
TV script begins with research on the given topic, followed by ‘treatment’ of the subject similar to the slant of any newspaper article. The script eventually takes final shape after several drafts and improvements. This process of elimination and inclusion involves the separate areas of visualizing the story and writing the voiceover or commentary to match the video. The script is the genesis of the ultimate programme. We shall study more about the inputs that go into the preparation of TV scripts in this unit. You may refer to the glossary to help you understand the various terms as you read the unit.

In Block 5 we shall study the area of ‘Editing’ with specific reference to the print and electronic media. We shall begin with ‘Principle of Editing’ in Unit 1, followed by ‘Photo Editing’ in Unit 2, ‘Design, Layout and Typography’ in Unit 3, and finally ‘Electronic Editing’ in Unit 5.

4.2 THE TELEVISION SCRIPT

A TV script differs from a radio script in that it has a visual component in addition to the audio content. Evidently, the video is prominent out although undoubtedly the narration, dialogue, music and sound effects contribute to the overall effect of the programme. Yet the audio and video content require careful blending to make a compact whole right from the script stage. The two should match each other and never be antagonistic. The audio, i.e. the sound content of the TV programme, ought to contribute to the video, i.e. the visual content of the TV programme, by adding a distinct flavour of its own.

The final programme has to be visualized fully on paper first. Only then can the later stages of ‘production’ and ‘post production’ of a programme be planned and carried out successfully.

4.2.1 Preparation for Scripting — the Recce

No Matter how thorough the initial research, generally conducted among books and other print material, the exploratory conversations conducted by telephone or even face to face, there is no substitute for visiting the various locations and sites to see and experience the subject at first hand. One needs to obtain some kind of ‘feel’ for the place, its sounds, smell and general atmosphere. This cannot be done by proxy and the writer should not try to dodge or delegate. The actuality of places changes all kinds of previously held ideas and misconceptions which mere reading around the subject may have inspired.
Recces before writing

How much time is taken and the degree of thoroughness with which the on-the-spot survey is carried out will vary. If the writer has had to travel over a long distance and is lodged in an expensive hotel his employer will not want him to overextend his stay. However, the justification of detailed recces is financial and organisational as well as artistic. It needs pointing out eloquently to accountants and administrators that one man roaming around with a notebook exploring a location-costs far less in money and man-hours than an entire production crew shooting in all directions, or eating its head off in frustrated and expensive idleness because the location has not been adequately 'recced' in advance.

The prime purpose of the recce is to enable the writer to clothe the skeleton of the outline with the flesh of practical scenes which can be recorded in picture and sound. The phases through which the writer passes on his way from recce to script are similar to the ones which lead from original research to outline. In the initial research, the information-gathering stage was followed by a short fallow period to allow the memory to forget the dross and retain only the significant. Then came the imaginative leap to formulating the outline.

Similarly, the recce starts with absorbing impressions and noting scenes and characters and their pithy sayings. At this stage all should remain tentative and no firm commitments to possible participants should be made. After the information has been gathered and the notebook and head of the writer are both bursting with facts and notions, when he has talked to everyone and seen everything remotely relevant, he should retire, back to base. There he should again give himself a day or two to forget the chaff. When his memory has winnowed away the inessentials he will be in a position to make the second imaginative leap to shaping and ordering his material into the most telling and effective script. He should not refer to his notes until the broad sweep of the script has been committed to paper. Then, and only then, should he check the accuracy of his recollection. Nor should he worry over much if he experiences a few false dawns before he hits on the final shape. He should console himself with the scriptwriters' friendly platitude; 'Paper is cheap—cheaper than either video-tape or film'. The time to experiment, to discard and start again, is on paper. It is prohibitively expensive to suffer a change of heart or mind midway during production. In the shaping of his script, the writer has the template of the outline to guide him.

On the basis of the research material, it will be recalled, the tripartite structure of the outline had been formulated: Beginning statement of theme; Middle — development of the theme with its conflicts and contradictions; End — climax, resolution and recapitulation.

However, difficult as it was to shape the outline, it will probably be more complex to fit all the additional information acquired as a result of the recce into a coherent shape. Even though the writer may be almost overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of the material, adherence to the outline is vital if the structure and clarity of the programme is to be preserved.

One may have to be strong-minded and exclude all manner of interesting sidelights revealed by the recce if they cannot be contained within the chosen central theme and its development. No single programme can deal exhaustively with any subject, and it is better to confine oneself to one main aspect rather than attempt to ride off in all directions. If one is making an informational programme, it is best to limit oneself within the theme to not more than three new pieces of information as it is unlikely that the viewer can absorb more at one sitting.

The main theme, its statement development and final resolution should run like a backbone through the programme. Just as in the animal kingdom no vertebrate boasts of more than one backbone, so no programme can cope with more than one main theme.

4.2.2 The TV Script Vs the Newspaper Article

Scripting a topic for a TV programme differs significantly from writing a piece
about the same subject for the newspapers. In the former the words are not too literary, rather they are colloquial and revolve around the terms used in everyday speech. The audio content of the script has to facilitate easy registration in the viewers even as they absorb all the visual information. The audio must not be long-winding nor detract from the overall effect of the video. It must come in one go. On television, it is not possible to recheck and go back to the information once again. However, this is now partially possible with the Teletext information on ‘pages’. Each of these pages remains on the screen for a given duration, to enable the viewers to read the information on screen. In any other TV programme, returning to the words once they are uttered is not possible. Whereas in a newspaper, the reader can go back and forth at will and ‘recall’ the information when required.

### 4.2.3 The TV Script Vs the Radio Script

Again, the TV script differs from the radio script in more ways than one. The most obvious difference is the addition of visual input into the TV medium. The visuals contribute to the TV programme substantially. In such instances, the accompanying commentary can be kept to the minimum. The audio medium of radio meanwhile rests entirely on the audio content, be it spoken word, music, sound effects, location sound, etc. Moments of absolute silence in the programme are few and far between. The commentator on radio has to work extra hard to portray the atmosphere of the event in all its actuality. Indeed, the visual component of the TV medium offers tough competition to radio. The description of the same event in words in place of video is truly a task for the radio commentator. Of course, both radio and television aim to transport their audiences to a ringside view of the event. The ‘view’ may be conveyed by means of words or pictures, depending on the medium.

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**Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:**

i) Answer in one or two sentences each.

ii) Compare your answers with the ones given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the basic difference between a treatment and a script?

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2) At which stage of a TV programme is its script written and why?

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### 4.3 DEVELOPING A TV SCRIPT

The methodical process of developing a script is time consuming. Nevertheless, it pays dividends to follow a stepwise procedure.

- The first step is conceptualization or concept formation.
- Then the writing of the treatment of this proposal.
• The skeletal structure of the treatment is fleshed out into drafts of scripts.
• The script is then finalised for shooting.

4.3.1 Concept

Once the research on the topic is carried out, either the TV programme producer writes out a proposal and enlists the services of a scriptwriter to 'flesh out' the structure of the script, or may engage a scriptwriter from the outset to conceptualize the programme, pen the treatment to be given to the topic, and follow it up with a detailed script.

The term conceptualization refers to the threading together of a concept or theme through the programme. It is similar to the leaving of a tale as the narration proceeds.

4.3.2 Treatment and Master Scene

The treatment is an outline of the content and style of a proposed programme. It is the basis for writing the script.

Extensive research has to be carried out initially on every aspect of the proposed programme. For instance, the location, costumes and content. Research conducted in these and other related aspects enhance the quality of the programme. If the programme is a documentary its content will have to be factual. If it is a docu-drama, fictional content too is permitted. Then, based on the extent to which the presentation is fictional or factual, the programme is categorised as drama-documentary or documentary-drama. Further categorization of this documentary medium is possible by referring it to its subject, say 'social', 'sports', 'personality portrait', 'environmental', 'legal', etc.

Several factors influence the final script. Prominent among these are the budget limitations, the specific discussions about the idea and the ease of implementing the decisions taken at the discussion stage.

The treatment is an outline of likely camera shots, important scenes and situations. It is a point of reference when the script is being developed and finalised.

The Master Scene Treatment is a broad description of the visuals and action together with the probable dialogues and narration. It is the intermediate stage between the Treatment and the shooting script.
The Bharats, a young suburban couple, are at table in their sunny breakfast room. Mr. Bharat, a young, thrusting executive is reading The Times. Mrs. Bharat is buttering a piece of toast.

Mrs Bharat: Anything interesting in the paper?
Mr Bharat: (Distractedly) Mmm?
Mrs Bharat: Will you take your nose out of that paper and talk to me ... etc. etc.

The master scene treatment is the last stage at which the story can in any sense be read as a literary work. It resembles the text of a play, except that it carries rather more exact descriptions of the scenery and explicit stage directions. If non-TV people like sponsors, vetting government departments and financiers have to approve the project, it is easier for them to comprehend the master-scene treatment than the more detailed shooting script. Ultimately however, these main or master scenes have to be broken down into their component shots, either by the writer, or if that is the arrangement, by the director.

4.3.3 Draft Scripts

The TV script consists of two distinct components — the break up of the visuals, i.e. the video, is written on the left hand side of the page and the corresponding audio is mentioned on the right hand — sample script side. Many additions and deletions are made before the script takes final shape. These constitute the draft scripts.

Activity 1

Do you make time to watch television at least occasionally? You must henceforth view TV critically and make yourself aware of the input that go into the various TV scripts. Select a 15-second TV clipping of your choice — it may be a commercial, a part of a TV documentary, a TV news report or an episode of a TV serial. View the TV clipping more than once if it is telecast twice or more times in a week.

Then note your observations in the table given below. The first shot is mentioned here as an example of how the script may have begun.

Date of Telecast: .................................................................

Category of chosen clipping: ..................................................

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video</th>
<th>Audio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Opening shot</td>
<td>1. Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration: ......................</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shot size: .....................</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.
3.
4.

4.3.4 Shooting Script or Camera Script

The shooting script is a detailed, shotwise script to guide the shooting of the film. A shot is the basic division of a film into elements within which continuity of time and space is preserved. The camera shots are specified, as are the various scenes and sequences.

A succession of related pictures or scenes comprises a sequence. A sequence may be defined as a section of a film which is more or less complete in itself. A
There are different types of shots based on the content, size of subject and angle from which the subject is shown. A shot that shows one person or thing is called a singleton. A two shot is a shot showing two people.

A close-up (CU) is a shot where the main subject occupies most or all of the picture frame.

A medium shot or mid shot (MS) shows the picture at normal viewing distance, and cuts actors usually at the waistline.

A long shot (LS) is a shot that shows the object of principal interest from a distance. Thus, an MS is a shot midway between LS and CU.

A high angle shot is a shot of a subject taken from above.

A low angle shot is a shot of a subject taken from below.

Every shot has a specific impact by its very composition. The script seeks to enhance this impact by juxtaposing the shots in a meaningful manner. Such a stringing together of shots makes for easy narration too. A low angle shot of a person makes the person appear powerful and frightening. A high angle shot of a person makes the person appear small and weak.

An over the shoulder shot (OS) is a shot taken with the camera positioned behind one of the subjects. The resulting shot is a view of the scene as seen from a position behind the shoulder.

We shall now elaborate the same master scene treatment that we had given earlier, into a shooting script.

Shooting Script

Day 1.

1) Breakfast room. Sunshine coming through window. Mrs. Bharat (reaching for a piece of toast and looking at her husband). Anything interesting in the paper?

   Two-Shot * Mr. and Mrs. Bharat seated at Breakfast table (Two shot = Scene showing 2 people and little else)

2) MCS Mr. Bharat buried behind Times.

   Mr. Bharat
   (DISTRACTEDLY) Mmmmm?

3) CU Mrs. BHARAT at table, buttering toast.

   Mrs. Bharat (PETULANTLY)
   Will you take your nose out of that paper ... and talk to me

4) (*Over the shoulder) Two-shot favouring Mr. Bharat still behind his paper, his wife glaring at him. (*SHOT over Mrs. Bharat’s shoulder, looking towards Mr. Bharat).

Dividing the page into a left-hand picture side and right-hand side allows the elaboration of another convention, namely that what appears on the same horizontal line of the page, happens at the same moment in time. In the above treatment as Mrs. Bharat comes to the words.

   "...that paper", the picture changes (to the over the shoulder two shot.)

For ease of reference in production and editing it is useful to number each shot, to label it INT = Interior, or EXT = Exterior and to indicate whether it is intended to depict daytime, (Day) or nighttime, (NIGHT).

The camera movement, if any, has to be specified in the script for the camera person’s reference. A Pan is a movement of the camera with respect to its vertical axis. Horizontal pan right refers to the movement of the camera from its static position to its right. Pan left is the movement of the camera from its static position toward the left. Tilt is movement of the camera in the vertical plane. Tilt up or tilt down are the instructions to move the camera up or down in the vertical plane, respectively.
Activity 2

Now that you have studied the different types of shots, it is time to assess your skill in identifying a picture frame by its shot size and content. Here is a photograph of a street on a snowy day. Answer the following questions about this photograph, by placing a tick mark against the correct alternative.

1) The picture is a
   [ ] very long shot
   [ ] long shot
   [ ] big close-up

2) The shot is taken from
   [ ] high angle
   [ ] low angle
   [ ] normal eye level

3) It may be said that the shot is a
   [ ] many-shot
   [ ] two-shot
   [ ] singleton

4.3.5 The Need for Multiplicity of Camera Positions

Does one really need so many shots just to show a man sawing a plank in half? Who needs all these different camera angles? The answer has to be—the viewer.

Changing the shot because writer, director or camera person were bored or wanted to demonstrate their skill cannot be sufficient reason. The only acceptable motivation for varying the shot is because at the precise moment the viewers wanted and needed additional visual information.

During the opening long shot, just as the viewers are wondering about the identity of the person in the back garden, the scene cuts to show a medium shot of the man approaching a plank. Just as the viewers wonder what the man is doing, they see the medium close shot of the man beginning to saw. What is he sawing? The close up of shot 4 clearly shows the plank. Is sawing difficult? The viewers wonder. In answer, the close-up of the man’s face in shot 5 shows his look of concentration. At the same time it serves as an economy.
Each new shot appears precisely at the moment when the viewers subconsciously demand the next piece of information. If the timing of the subsequent editing is right, the viewers will not even be aware of the separate shots. Scriptwriter, director and editor, all will be trying to give the viewers the shot they want as and when they want it.

4.3.6 Editing Script

The editing script is written on the basis of the footage one has obtained after shooting for the programme. The transitions from one shot to the next are mentioned in the editing script along with the duration of every shot. The cassette number containing the shot and the counter reading of the cassette at that particular shot is also mentioned.

The transition from one shot to the next may be a Cut, Dissolve, Wipe.

**Dissolve** is a mode of transition wherein there is a progressive superimposition of one picture on another until the second picture replaces the first.

A **Wipe** is a method of changing scene in which one picture seems to slide across the screen, wiping out another.
Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Answer the following questions in one sentence each.
    ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Define a close-up shot.
   ........................................................................................................
   ........................................................................................................
   ........................................................................................................

2) If the subject is a person, what would a long shot imply.
   ........................................................................................................
   ........................................................................................................
   ........................................................................................................

3) What is meant by MS?
   ........................................................................................................
   ........................................................................................................
   ........................................................................................................

Activity 3

We give here a list of steps involved in a TV script preparation. You are required to match each step with its corresponding definition in the second list.

1st List                                   2nd List
Draft scripts                             The genesis of a proposed programme
Editing scripts                           Outline of visuals and style of presentation
Master Scene Treatment                    Basic script
Shooting script                           With shot break up
Treatment of subject                      Includes shot duration and transitions

4.4 THE TV COMMENTARY

A TV commentary may be required in an outdoor event telecast or in a pre-recorded film. As it is delivered out of vision (DDV), the voice quality and the commentary itself take on added importance.

4.4.1 Scripting a TV Commentary

The commentary and video should merge as one whole. The visuals may be self-explanatory or require commentary to accompany them. The commentary must fit the video with great precision. It is for this reason that the commentary must be well-scripted. Of course the quality of the commentary can make or mar the video. The words used to depict ideas and thoughts and perceptions must be apt, clear and contain a natural flow of their own.
Activity 4
We have studied the various characteristics of TV commentary. We now give here a list of possible features of any commentary on Radio and TV. You will have to categorise each item under two separate columns—one for Radio and one for TV.
1) Identification with viewer
2) Commentator wears headphone to receive instructions from studio
3) Match words with picture
4) Identification with listener
5) Commentator is seated in a sound proof cubicle, say at a vantage point, along a processional route or in the stadium
6) Prescriptive, in detail
7) Commentator watches a picture monitor to relate the commentary to the transmitted picture
8) Commentary supports and supplements the picture.

4.4.2 Presenting a TV Commentary
The commentator’s voice, diction, inflection, tone, speed, accent, stress on the right syllables, pauses at the correct junctures, all assume importance. When the face, gesture and other non-verbal expressions are not in view, the voice, its quality and manner of expression take on an added significance. The commentator must also match the visuals on the screen and explain the context of the action being shown. The timing of the commentary should be precise and coincide with the pictures. This is especially the case in a pre-recorded programme. In a running commentary for a direct telecast of an outdoor event, firstly the event is newsworthy and as a consequence, its video coverage is extremely important. Secondly, a lot of preparation goes into ‘scripting’ the commentary. Research and collection of interesting aspects about the event and its precedents ought to be carried out and all information double-checked, as this would be a basis to deliver the commentary. It is best to leave the running commentary unscripted, while at the same time referring to the information you have accumulated for the purpose of your ‘script’. In other words, you write down the information that you collect in the course of your research and memorize most of it, keeping your papers at hand for ready reference. Even so, as you speak your commentary, so sure must you be of the information and its context that you need not read the notes you have made, but instead reel off the points coherently and with ease. Your viewers will then be able to comprehend what you say.

It is an art to recognize the patches when commentary is not necessary. If the picture says it all there is no need to add to it. The purpose of a commentary is to identify and make clear the content and context of the images on the screen. The commentary has to complement the visual information, fulfill the curiosity of the viewer about any item in the picture frame and may also include anecdotes and interesting pieces of information.

The commentator must constantly remind himself that talking down to the viewer is best avoided. It is no singular virtue to be speaking into the microphone to an audience. On the other hand, it would definitely pay dividends to be adopting a stance of sharing one’s knowledge and perceptions with the viewers.

4.5 LET US SUM UP
In this unit, we have discussed the unique characteristics of the TV script. We have described the process of first drafting and then finalising a script for a proposed programme, say a TV documentary. Research is an important part of it.
Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Answer in two sentences each.
   ii) Compare your answers with the ones given at the end of this unit.

1) List the type of TV programme for which commentary is required.

2) What is the role of research in a TV commentary?

the preparations for TV script writing. Decisions are taken about the location, costumes, budget priorities and the treatment of content, among other related matters, during discussions between the script writer and producer. To help decide these issues, they pay visits to one or more locations. The initial visit to the location before production actually commences is called 'recce' short for reconnaissance.

In the course of a recce, one can decide the suitability of the location and perhaps even come up with possible solutions to any obstacles. If a recce is not carried out at the outset, it would prove to be an expensive mistake in the long run. The production has to be planned to the last minor detail, even allowing for snags of all kinds and preparing to meet them. The recce helps one to assess these matters in advance.

The TV commentary ought to be delivered as if one were speaking without a script, although one has notes of important facts and figures at hand for ready reference.

In the TV script, both video and audio content are considered in great detail. The different types of shots obtained from (a) varying camera positions in relation to the subject, (b) changing camera movements, and (c) camera angles, are important for the script writer to understand.

4.6 GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audio</th>
<th>The sound content of a television programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close-up</td>
<td>Any shot in which the main subject occupies most or all of the frame: a head from crown to shoulders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>Correct follow-on of detail and movement between successive shots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame</td>
<td>The picture area as shown in a camera viewfinder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live</td>
<td>Transmitted as it happens rather than recorded or filmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>A place where filming is done or programmes made other than a studio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long shot</td>
<td>A shot taking in the whole of a subject—e.g., to a person's waist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Monitor
A television screen of high quality used in control rooms, commentary cubicles, etc.

Over the shoulder
Describing a camera position

Pan
To move camera on its vertical axis as when following a moving subject

Producer
Chief executive of a programme or series

Sequence
A succession of related pictures

Shooting script
The script which guides the shooting of a film

Singleton
A shot of one person or thing

Tilt
To move a camera backwards or forwards

Treatment
An outline of the content and style of the proposed programme

Two-shot
Shot showing two people

Video
The vision part of television, as distinct from sound.

4.7 FURTHER READING


4.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: MODEL ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1
1) A treatment is a bare outline of the visuals and style of presentation of a proposed programme. A script is a more detailed shot-wise breakup of the treatment, together with the corresponding audio.

2) The shooting script is written in the pre-production stage.

Check Your Progress 2
1) A close-up shot is one in which the subject occupies most or all of the picture frame.

2) The person is framed in the shot from head to toe.

3) 'MS' is shoot for Medium shot or Mid shot.

Check Your Progress 3
1) A pre-recorded video film such as a documentary where the commentary has to be well-timed; an outdoor broadcast for which direct telecast is arranged and running commentary is required.

2) Research into the highlights and interesting details about the event is essential. The information one collects forms the substance of the running commentary.