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# UNIT 1 RADIO DOCUMENTARY

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## Structure

- 1.0 Aims and Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Nature of Documentary
- 1.3 Research for the Documentary
- 1.4 The Documentary Narration
- 1.5 Organizing the Documentary
  - 1.5.1 The Organizing Function
  - 1.5.2 Developing the Idea
- 1.6 The Feature
  - 1.6.1 Feature Production
  - 1.6.2 Types of Scripts and Methods
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 Aids to Answers

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## 1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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After a study of this unit, you will be able to:

- **state** the nature of a radio documentary and radio **feature/magazine**
- **organise** a radio documentary
- **learn** to script a radio documentary
- **state** the rules of writing a radio **feature**.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the last unit of Block 1 we discussed scriptwriting for Radio talk and Profile. Yet another way of reaching the public through **Radio** is by means of documentaries, features and interviews. This unit will introduce you to scripting for a **documentary** and a **feature**. The Radio documentary is the most difficult and complex of **all factual** forms. **Factual** forms are directed towards presenting facts about people, things and events that are around us, the others being features and magazines. You should remember that the norms for scriptwriting that we discussed in Unit 3 Block 1, are fundamental. In this unit, you will find how these norms apply to specific forms like the radio documentary and feature while the next unit will tell you how to apply the norms to radio interviews and discussions.

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## 1.2 THE NATURE OF DOCUMENTARY

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We should begin by conceding that the term '**documentary**' is not easy to define. In the broadcast sense, documentary is any feature or programme that is based on 'documents'. Defined this way, it is a form directed towards presenting a factual record about real people, things and events. It sets out not just to '**entertain**' but to **explore**. However, any programme that deals with factual information is not documentary. A documentary goes a step further or several steps **further**. **What** does a documentary do? It may attempt to persuade. This indeed was seen to be the **function** of documentary earlier on, till communication studies revealed that it was not so easy to persuade. A documentary could therefore, be **seen** to persuade, **communicate** a message or just provide insight. It may either **advocate** a solution to a **problem** or, simply, articulate a problem. Whatever its intent, the **social relevance of** documentary is immense.

Because documentary strives to influence people's thoughts and actions, it differs from other factual programmes and is consequently charged with a strong emotional quality. Its purpose is not merely to report facts and events but focus on the most moving examples. It is this compelling factor that gives documentary a sense of the DRAMATIC. It is not the drama of the make-believe but one that stems from real life, or "drama at your doorstep", so to speak. It is dramatic also in that it adds an artistic purpose to journalistic and sociological aims.

Noted filmmaker John Grierson was the first to use the word 'documentary' to describe "creative treatment of actuality". Producers of documentary, whether on radio, television or film, generally learn to expect (and confront) a lot of violent criticism. That is because documentary goes beyond a news broadcast and deals with not just what is happening but also why it is happening. Thus documentary can be seen to raise controversies and encourage debate.

In documentaries, the role of the writer and the role of the producer merge. The writer must know the process of production well and preferably be involved with it. Only rarely does a documentary script represent everything appearing on the programme. The writer-producer of documentary has to depend greatly on spontaneous developments and improvisation in the field. Completely written documentaries were very common after World War II but over the years they have been largely replaced by programs made on actual location, featuring actual happenings. If rigidly scripted, radio documentary tends to sound staged and is hardly ever very exciting.

### Exercise 1

Listen carefully to a few radio documentaries. Can you come up with a few proposals that would serve to highlight the 'drama at your doorstep'? After you've finished, check with aids-to-answers in section 1.8 for some more ideas.

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You have seen before that documentary concentrates on the most moving examples. You'll notice that topics such as child labour, misuse of public property and power, labour in the unorganized sector, etc. are actually part of a greater issue. You are, therefore, not just concentrating on a petty local issue but selecting part of a greater whole. Therefore, these themes are significant and as you can see, some are controversial too. However, it should be clarified that drama at your doorstep doesn't always have to be a controversial or topical subject. It could be on personalities, ways of life, different cultures, art, history, science, medicine and every other thing. You will remember that Satyajit Ray made some very good documentaries on non-topical and non-controversial subjects—on the great literary figure Rabindranath Tagore, the dancer Bala Saraswathy and the artist Benod Behari Mukherjee.

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## 13 RESEARCH FOR THE DOCUMENTARY

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Since writers and producers of documentary deal with facts, they must develop techniques for discovering what the facts are. Research depends a great deal on the resources that are available. Research may either be conducted by an individual or by a large organization, depending on the resources available. In India, writers for documentary are usually left to their own devices for research. S/he has to access her/himself to all information that can possibly be got or is required for the programme production. In documentary production there are very few things worse than weak research.

Before going out with the tape-recorder, some basic research must be completed. There are three main sources for research:



Always remember **that** the narration is meant to be 'spoken' and **not read as** literature. What is **important** is that it should sound natural, easy, **flowing**, spontaneous or **extempore**. Moreover, the **narration** should be well integrated into the programme and **probably** written at the very last when one has collected everything else that **would** be part of the programme.

### Exercise 3

Your assignment is to listen to a few radio **documentaries**. These are usually broadcast on **Saturdays** at 9.30 p.m. and repeated on Sundays at 7.00 p.m. This time, take special note of the narration. What function **does** the **narration serve**? If you hear one that you **particularly** like, try and identify why you like it. **Some aids given** in section 1.8 might **help** you.

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## 15 ORGANIZING THE DOCUMENTARY

The **documentary**, since it usually **has** a specific **message** to communicate, must be **organized** in order to be clear and effective. Structure, **i.e.**, the **sequence** of presentation, is **very important**. There are no hard and fast **rules** about **structure**, and **media** professionals **constantly** experiment with it. In the early days of **documentaries** (**both** in film and radio), structures were rigid and standardized. A **common** one **was** the problem-solution structure. In **this case**, a **certain** problem would be **taken up**, propounded, **discussed** and then a **solution** would be proposed. Since **then structures** have undergone a **change**. **Producers** and **writers** are no longer compelled to **'solve'** problems. Some **documentaries** are simply articulation of **problems**. So you can see that structures are not formalized.

Nevertheless, a writer **cannot** neglect structure, because **content** is **conveyed** not just through 'words' but **the structure** as well. Take the novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by **Gabriel Garcia Marquez** **uses** the **device** of an unnamed, shadowy narrator, **visiting** the scene of the **killing** many years later, and **beginning** an investigation into the **past.....** the book and its narrator **probe slowly, painfully** through the **mists** of half **accurate** memories, equivocations, **contradictory versions**, trying to establish what happened and why, and achieve only provisional answers'.

### 1.51 The Organizing Function

Structure plays an **important** part in documentary writing. The material **should** be organized in such a way that it indicates the various relationships **between facts** and ideas of the **programme**. This pattern, **linking** facts and ideas, is the **outline** of the structure. It **lists the ideas** of the documentary and **separates** the major ideas **from** the subordinate ones. **This outline** provides the structural **foundation** on which you base the programme plan.

Very often, people **find the making** of an **outline** a **tedious** and **difficult task** and are tempted to **skip this part** of the **process**. Neglecting **this very crucial process** can lead to a programme that is, at best, fuzzy, and at **worst, completely formless**. Writing an outline not only **helps the** writer to get everything sorted out in his/her head but also **helps to stress and establish** the important **points**. An outline, furthermore, **helps to** avoid **overstressing** or **understressing** supporting **points**. It directs the programme towards its objectives and at the same time **leads** to the exclusion of **irrelevancies**.

The organizational plan of a documentary should have several qualities—simplicity, logical **connection** and clarity. (Here, we should **add a note** of caution **about** logical structuring. Exceptions **are** always made for **exceptional** documentaries.) A major **step** to creating a plan with **these** qualities is to make sure **that** the **script is dominated** by

one **overriding** thought to which all the other ideas in the programme are related. These supporting ideas, in turn, should be arranged to show their relationship to the main thought and one another.

Your outline is not likely to remain intact throughout the research and production process. You should look upon the outline as a tentative plan till all your facts are in. A documentary writer-producer should have an attitude that accommodates revisions in **order** to improve the programme. Similarly, s/**he** should be flexible enough to revise and tighten the structural outline.

**1.5.2 Developing the Ideas**

The first step in outlining your material is to determine the basic purpose of your script. You may want to arouse concern about a specific social problem or political **issue**: convince people to accept an idea or develop a certain attitude; reinforce an existing attitude or motivate your audience to **carry** out a specific course of action.

The next step is to develop a preliminary statement of the central idea of the programme. It should be a one-sentence expression of what your programme wants to communicate. This statement may also include the basic purpose of the programme. Thus the purpose and central idea can be expressed as follows: To **convince the audience that capital punishment is wrong**. Next, you should write down the main ideas and the supporting ideas and make their relationship very clear. As you write down this material you should ask: What are the **main** points of my programme? What are the subordinate points? What is clearly the supporting material? The responses to these questions will guide you in setting down the outline.

**Once all** your points are down, you'll find a pattern emerging. The pattern can be in **chronological** order, a problem-solution order or any other order. To establish an **organizational** plan, you should keep the following in mind:

- 1) Write the outline in complete sentences. Incomplete sentences or single words are usually manifestations of vague ideas and muddled feelings. Nor will it reveal whether the various **ideas** in the script are **related** at all.
- ii) Restrict the number of main points to a reasonable number. Most good programmes have no fewer than two main points and no more than five.
- iii) You must check to see that the transitions are done well. The ideas must lead to one another and not randomly jump from one to the other.
- iv) Avoid the use of compound or multiple idea sentences, and
- v) Express points as positive statements and not as questions.

**Exercise 4**

Why is structure important in a Radio documentary?

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**Exercise 5**

What are the various steps in developing an idea?

After writing down your answers, check with the study material on which these exercises are based. (1.5)

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years, thoroughly exploited this field. Mobile recording **techniques** have frequently **helped** to garner exciting and priceless sound for the feature producer, whose **business** is with reality—real men and women, in their natural habitat—at home, at work or at play. **It** is no longer necessary for the feature producer to **imitate** reality. He can now go direct to the sources—photographs in sound-edit and shape them. It is a capacity unique to the feature programme—the stuff of reality—shaped in a disciplined way and patterned into a **form**, controlled by a single, creative mind. The feature programme marked the birth of **creative** broadcasting.

Every feature **calls** for an idea, research and a script. Some features need actors, sound effects and music. Many call for extensive recordings of sound and voices. All call or three main processes: a) Research, **b) Writing, and c) Production.**

### 1.6.2 Types of Scripts and Methods

**There** are two types of scripts **involved** in feature-writing:

- a) The script commissioned from the writer, and
- b) The **script** written by the producer himself.

How does the **writer/producer** go to work?

He will throw himself into his research **e.g.** the slums of **Delhi**, the coal mines of **Bihar**, or the back streets of **Calcutta**. He **will talk** by the hour, to anyone who has **even** a passing **acquaintance** with the subject. He will prepare lists of likely experts **and actuality sounds**. He will audition narrators and voices. He **will** undertake long journeys, if the budget permits, to secure authentic first-hand information. **Finally** he will write his basic **script**.

When the script is **commissioned** from the writer, it has the advantage of bringing two minds and two skills to **bear** on the subject in hand. The writer has expert **knowledge**. He is the one who knows. The producer is the one who transforms, into **radio form**, the **script**. He, by his **command of** techniques, sense of timing and sound-values, makes the author's conception come alive at the microphone and on the **air**. As radio features have developed, the tendency has been for the scriptwriter to **be** his own producer.

In the second **case**, where the **writer** and producer are one, he 'hears' the programme as he writes his script, quite often with specific voices and effects in mind.

But common to both methods are three main processes by which a feature is **produced**: a) Research, b) Writing, and c) Production. All **successful** feature writing is a distillation of personal experience. The search for material—the living contact **with** what one is writing about—is really the heart of the matter. This keeps the vision fresh and renews the inspiration. This is no mechanical word-spinning.

**Good** documentary brushes aside **secondary** sources and dismisses the hearsay **witness**, whether its medium is radio, **film** or TV. It **can** take the inquiring mind, the alert **ear** and the selective eye and the recording microphones or cameras, into every **corner** of the contemporary world and penetrates into the deepest recesses of human experience. Its task (and destiny) is to mirror the true inwardness of a subject.

#### Exercise 7

**Consider** the relative advantages and disadvantages of the two types of scripts used in Features.

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After writing down **your** answers, check with the study material **on** which this exercise is based. (1.6)

### Exercise 8

Try to script a radio profile of 5 minutes duration of the **famous** Indian Film-maker **Satyajit** Ray. You can use all **resources** at your disposal for research. (**Check** with aids to answers · 1.8)

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## 1.7 SUMMING UP

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- Documentary is a **factual form** that could attempt to influence, persuade or provide insight.
- Because it attempts to influence people's thoughts, it's often **charged** with a strong emotional quality. A documentary however, is broad in **its, definition** with its, boundaries **everexpanding**.
- Documentary, **unlike** other factual forms, asks 'why'. This often makes it controversial.
- Research is of fundamental importance to documentary.
- A **documentary** scriptwriter should **be** fluent with the art of writing narration.
- Organization lies at **the** base of documentary **scriptwriting**.
- The first step to **organizing** a documentary is to draw up **an outline**.
- An organizational **plan** should be simple, logical and clear.
- **Feature/Magazine** programmes are other factual forms that **seek** to entertain, inform and sometimes even influence thought and action.

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## 1.8' AIDS TO ANSWERS

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### Exercise 1

The following are some random ideas for writing **proposals** for radio documentaries:

- i) Vested interests in your **neighbourhood** are not allowing a school for the handicapped to **be** constructed so that they can build a park.
- ii) Your local **municipal** authorities are **turning** a blind **eye** to **unauthorized** buildings.
- iii) Parks and public spaces are being misused for private functions.
- iv) Street vendors are forced to pay money to the police.
- v) The little boy who **sells** peanuts **near** your house earns money to support his younger brothers.

- vi) A worker at a construction site nearly loses his leg in an accident and consequently his livelihood.
- vii) Your local ration shop seems to have supplies for very selected people.
- viii) The local kindergarten school is being run by people who (you **get** to know) haven't **the** required qualifications.

## Exercise 2

To make sure you have covered all possible sources of research, check with the checklist below:

- i) **Libraries:** Have there been books published on the issue or similar issues?
- 2) Has any **magazine/newspaper** carried an article on it, or something similar or related?
- iii) Who wrote the articles? Can you meet **him/her**? Who were **his/her** resource people? Is it possible to meet them?
- iv) Do voluntary organisations have any fugitive literature on the issue?
- v) Who are the people **who** are most familiar with the subject? You must contact them at all costs.
- 6) Who are the people linked with the issue? Who stands to **gain**? Who stands to lose? Who are the people who could have helped matters? Why haven't they?
- vii) As you can see, **writing/producing** documentary involves a lot of original research and legwork: once you have made a satisfactory list of possible sources, you can begin your research. You will find that once you start collecting information, the going gets better and better and one **thing** leads to another.

## Exercise 3

What does the narration do?

- Link ideas
- Provide information
- Reinforce arguments
- Clarify
- Interpret
- Emphasize

Also note whether the narration follows the norms of scriptwriting. Is it brief or **excessive**? Meandering or incisive? Formal or informal? Emotional or unemotional?

## Exercise 6

**Some more ideas** for **features/magazines:**

- The **men** who **paint** cinema **hoardings**
- The **famous painter and architect Satish Gujral**
- Street plays **and** their **contemporary** relevance
- The **chipko movement** to **save** trees
- A **discussion on** media autonomy
- A **commentary on** the French **Impressionist painters**
- **Sexism and the** media
  - A debate **on** growing **eucalyptus** trees
- Calcutta's metro **railway**.

You can see that the **options** are really vast. You will also notice that many of the **topics above** are **good** also for **documentaries**. **As** far as topics are concerned there **are** no **barriers really**. It depends **entirely** on the **handling** of the subject.

## Exercise 8

- i) Your research **deeds** to be absolutely complete. Your draft should be **written** only after you have exhausted all possible sources of **information** like libraries, news agencies, **newspaper** and **magazine** offices (archives) and **meeting** people who may be **acquainted with** Ray. **You** may also have discovered that Ray also features in **the Encyclopedia Britannica**.
- ii) Remember that you have a **specified** time slot. Your script has to be for 5 mins. Since **we** can speak roughly 100 words a minute, your script should not exceed 500 words.
- iii) Check to **see** whether you have all the **important** landmarks and **significant** information about Ray's career. Tally with the list below:
- Ray's meeting with **Renoir** in Calcutta
  - The **release** of **Pather Panchali** (Song of the Little **Road**) in 1955
  - **Completion** of the Apu Trilogy. **Aparajito wins** the Golden Lion of St. **Mark** in **Venice**
  - Ray **begins composing** his own music
  - **Charulata** in 1964. Ray considers this to be his best **film**
  - The **Urbna Trilogy** — 1970s
  - Ray's **films** for children
  - **Ray**, the **writer**, artist and musician.
- iv) Avoid **too** many dates, numbers and specific information. Only significant dates should be **included**, like **Pather Panchali** being released in 1955 and setting a new trend in Indian Cinema, or **Charulata** in 1965, a **film** that Ray considers to **be** his best and is undoubtedly, one of the greatest **films** to **be** made in India.
- v) Selection should play an essential role. With a multifaceted personality like Ray, you will be **strongly** tempted to say more than what **your** audience would care to hear. You will **have** to select and present information very carefully.
- vi) Anecdotes are excellent devices **signposting**, i.e. making it easy for the audience to remember. **Anecdotes** make abstract ideas concrete. How, for instance, could one make a **statement** about Ray's **enormous** reserves of knowledge and information? Bengali writer, **Purnendu Pattrea** once wrote: "One day **Allen Giberg**, Poet of the angry-hungry generation, come to **see** Ray. **All** through the evening **Ginsberg** spoke about the **Cinema**, Ray spoke about American poetry."