
UNIT 4 WRITING FOR TELEVISION : CHILDREN

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4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will learn about the special requirements for scripting children's Television Programmes.

At the end of your study of this unit, you will be able to:

- state the basic rules for scripting Children's Television Programmes
- organise research before the start of programming for children
- distinguish between the desirable and the undesirable contents in children's programmes
- learn to prepare the television script for children's programmes.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Writing for television needs special skills and writing for children in addition requires even greater skills and understanding. First and foremost, a television scriptwriter needs to know the nomenclature and **terminology** of film and video. It is not enough to just write the content; in addition, it should be presented in a manner that would be easily understood by **producer/directors** and other personnel involved in translating the script into video. Therefore, a TV scriptwriter should be able to present a general script (document that describes the audio-visual content), a shooting script (that describes the production elements involved like camera movements, angles, etc) and a storyboard (that helps visualize the programme exactly).

4.2 TARGET AUDIENCE

A writer for children's programmes needs a much greater understanding of **his/her** target audience than a general scriptwriter. Mira B. Aghi notes that in India, producers who are asked to produce children's programmes are also involved in the production of a million other things. **Small** wonder that children's programming has got **almost** nowhere. Children constitute a special audience and a children's programmer needs special skills and knowledge. While writing skills for television remain much the same for all programmes, it is the support structure in children's programming that is of the greatest importance. This unit deals largely with **the** special needs that children have. Children are not a homogenous category. Between 3 to 12 years children **have** a vastly

varying degree of knowledge, cognition and skills. For purposes of programming, children can be divided into the following groups:

- 3-6 years : Pre-school group
- 7-9 years: younger children
- 10-12 years: older children

The grouping above **represents** different target groups for the programmer with their specific needs and capacities. Therefore, a children's TV programmer must first select his target group and begin **working** in tandem with its special needs. This unit has **neither** scope nor space to explore each target group in great detail. It simply provides scriptwriters for children a direction in which to move.

4.3 BASIC RULES FOR SCRIPTING CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMES

Let us make a summary of ~~some~~ of the general requirements for children's programming.

- i) **Television** programming for children needs first to answer the question: who is a child? It is not enough to **say** that a child is a young adult. Certain differences between the adult and the child need to be understood. A young child obviously lacks the years and experience that an adult has. Children know less about the physical and social world. Subsequently, the vocabulary with which they operate is also very limited. Words like "**idealism**", "liberty", "manipulation", etc may not be understood by the **child**. Therefore, the first ground rule: use words that are simple, commonly used and **easy to** understand.

Exercise 1

Can you find simple words in place of "idealism", "liberty" and "manipulation"? Check with aids to **answers** in 4.8.

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- ii) A child does not **understand** complex **relationships**. The intricacies of human relationships and the **compulsions** of character and motivation would confuse a child. They see **characters** as "good" and "bad". Avoid presenting complex characters and **complex human** relationships in **children's** programmes.
- iii) Children of the age groups (3-6) and (7-9) have problems understanding experience over a long sequence of time. They see events and situations as unconnected and disparate. Television programming for children needs to take note of this. **Sesame Street***, for example, develops episodes that are lively, **colourful** and last only for a few seconds. One **needs** also to take account of the limited attention span of this age group. Short programmes, episodic in nature **and** covering a short time sequence **make good** viewing for children.
- iv) While children **have relatively** limited experience they compensate for this by their ability to take long **imaginative** leaps into fantasy. In his writings Rabindranath **Tagore** has often **mentioned** the flexibility of a child's imagination: one that easily crosses over from reality to fantasy and back. Therefore, it does not seem strange for a dog to speak or cats to wear clothes. In fact, the major characters in **Sesame Street** are animals and **muppets**. (A current **favourite** in the USA now are the four heroic Ninja Turtle **Mutants**: a band of mutant teenage turtles who fight injustice and crime. The turtles **also** explode the myth that children necessarily like 'cute looking' **characters**. It is the characters that children like and not the looks.)

A word of caution needs to be sounded here. Because children see illusion literally, the lines between **reality** and fantasy become blurred. In a world where nothing is impossible, many children feel, for example, that characters in a radio or TV programme **actually live** and sleep in the set behind the screen. (As a child I

remember staring at the radio for hours waiting for little people to walk across). As far as older children are concerned, we need to debate whether we should not occasionally demystify films and television for children and make them aware that what they are watching are indeed make-belief. In the USA once a child threw himself out of a high rise building in an attempt to fly like Superman. While introducing fantasy characters on TV effort should be on to make children aware of reality as distinct from make-belief.

- v) Lastly, small children love repetition. Most children of this age love to read the same story over and over, sing the same song over and over and recite the same rhyme over and over. The child's love for repetition may drive members of the family mad but **s/he** enjoys every minute of it. However, repetition in television programming needs to be done innovatively without being **boring or** tendentious.

Sesame Street makes a point of repeating the same theme (**1,2,3** or **A,B,C** or small, smaller, smallest) using different characters and situations. (For instance, the first episode could be a frog dancing and saying **1,2,3** and this would be followed by a cat counting her litter, **1,2,3.**)

Repetition and variety go hand in hand.

Exercise 2

Can you think of two classic novels which lend themselves to easy adaptation for children? All these above guidelines can be used in presenting these novels. Check with answers given in Aids to Answers (4.8).

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4.4 PRODUCTION PROCESS AND RESEARCH

The importance of research in children's programming cannot be sufficiently emphasised. Programming cannot be done within an abstract, unspecific framework. A programme that attempts to communicate must necessarily be addressed to a specific age group with other variables taken into consideration like socio-economic status, educational background, medium of instruction, etc. Once again, children are not a monolithic category. Different age groups have different degrees of knowledge, cognition and skills. Understanding of these differences should form the framework within which programmes for children can be **planned**.

4.4.1 Production Process

Production processes are complex and there are no sure fire formulae that make ideas **work**. However, it needs to be stressed that those who have made the best programmes ~~for~~ children have always developed strategies for **increasing** their success to failure ratios. Hiring of the right staff is most important. The "right" staff should have ideas, **good** values, understanding of children and a desire to communicate effectively. There should also be room for experts to provide input regarding instructional methods, child **psychology**, use of the media, etc. Such experts provide helpful information before production begins and useful feedback on such preliminary products as script outline, storyboards and rough cuts.

4.4.2 Types of Research

There are three types of research (at least) involved in programming for children:

- 1.) Research dealing with the knowledge, cognition and behaviour of children belonging to specific age groups. In other words, research relating to child psychology and development.
- 2.) Research regarding the content of programmes, and

- 3) Research on media **and communication**. In other words, the use of technology, communication **strategies**, etc.

4.4.3 Formative Research

Over the years, one **strategy** that has proved to be most effective has been the use of a type of applied research **known** as **formative research**. This concept emerged from the cooperation of **programme** producers, scriptwriters and message designers with psychologists and educationalists in the planning and producing of the now famous TV serial for children, *Sesame Street*, at the end of the sixties.

Formative research asks questions that are crucial to the success of the project. Do children like the content? **Do** they attend to the content? Do they understand the intended messages? Do they construct unintended messages from the content? Are these unintended **messages** desirable or undesirable? Do they find the content credible? Is the form (production **variables** like camera placement, cuts, dissolves, etc) getting in the way of the content? How can the programme be changed to reach its goals better?

The questions of formative research are completely practical and tied exclusively to particular television content and its **intended** audience. Formative research is neither theoretical nor ideal in its methods but time and again it has improved television content. For *Magic Lamp Shukla* Das used a formative research approach whereby the content would constantly **be** guided and shaped by feedback from staff and audience.

Unfortunately, India has **not** conducted very much research regarding programming for children and therefore most productions follow a strategy of hit-or-miss. In European countries and the USA, a great body of research has been done regarding children and television. **Research** of this type has dealt not just with content but formal properties (colour, **animation**, hue etc.) and production variables (ellipses, quick cuts, changes in camera angle, **zoom**, etc). One of the first to take interest in **the** formal properties of the television medium has been **Gavriel** Solomon in Israel. He studied the effect of *Sesame Street* on **Israeli** children and the shaping of their mental processes through the influence of visual codes. Solomon reinforced what Marshal McLuhan had stated in *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (**McLuhan**, 1964) that formal attributes of the new electronic media would profoundly influence the cognition and thinking of **[wo]man**. **The Centre for Research on the Influence of Television on Children** (CRITC), founded in 1978 has been systematically conducting studies on the effect of audio-visual, linguistic and representational codes on **children**. There is a great need in India for research to be conducted on similar lines*.

Activity 1

Watch any one **programme** for children telecast during the **Doordarshan** afternoon transmission. Conduct a sample research on the impact of the programme on children. Compare and discuss **your** observations with fellow students and counsellor at the counselling centre.

4.5 THE CONTENT OF CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMES

It should be **clarified at the outset that there** are no hard and fast rules about what the contents of children's **programming** should be. This section merely provides direction. The range of topics **covered by children's** programming in India and abroad can be outlined as follows:

- 1) **Exploration:** Many **W** programmes exploit the child's urge to explore: to find out about **him/herself, his/her** surroundings and the world. Travels, visits to various places (like the zoo, **theatre, fairs, exhibitions** etc), the discoveries of science, etc, all engage the young viewer. Opening up the world to the child can prove to be both entertaining and **educative**.
- 2) **Knowledge and Information:** These programmes help children to learn about the world and themselves, They may or may not be exploratory in nature. For instance a child can get to **know** about the function of electricity in the house or even how a house is built. **Soviet Russia** has been making excellent programmes for children. In one programme they **invited** an admiral from the Navy to speak about his profession and had children in **Naval** Uniform interviewing him. Programmes such as these can

4.5.1 Desirable Content

- 1) **Learning Skills:** The purpose of these programmes is to stimulate children into engaging in useful **activities**. Instead of taking children out of their homes (through television, of course), the programmes bring gifted people to their houses and teach them to do things with their hands. Most of such programmes on Indian television **tend** to be boring as **they** intend to "teach skills" to children. Not surprisingly, the replication of this **school** situation puts most children off. Once again Magic Lamp has been more **innovative**. At Christmas, for example, **Alu** (an imaginative, untidy child) wants to give **Phullu** (a prim and proper **motherly** character) a present. But he discovers he has no money. His friends explain that thought counts more than the gift and finally help **him** make a doll using **old socks** and buttons. Once again "doing" is introduced but with greater sense of involvement and identification.
- 2) **Storytelling:** A large **number** (in India too great a number) of children's programmes deal with telling a story. These programmes may employ simple formats or more complex dramatic **presentations**. However what should be generally avoided (unless the **host/ess** is a **master** story teller) is the use of one person literally telling a story. **Delhi** Doordarshan **specialises** in programmes in which a hostess "tells" stories to a band of bored kids. This is a complete waste because not only could the programme be done on radio (**since** it adds nothing to the visual potential of the medium) and done much cheaper, **but** because the boredom of the children becomes embarrassingly **manifest** on the screen! The child who is watching the programme is not going to be very enthused when his immediate models of identification (the children on TV) are **falling** asleep.
- 3) **Problem-Solving:** The programmes help children to grapple with situations that require reasoning and problem-solving skills such as figuring out the way from home to school **through** a **maze** or choosing the right word from a crossword. **Sesame Street** came up with some **excellent** problem-solving programmes that taught preschoolers to identify, for instance, different objects that served the same function (like glue, stapler, cellotape, etc **that** stuck things together).
- 4) **Multipurpose:** A **number** of programmes are not limited to one type of content **but** fuse several **elements**. **Considering** the limited attention span of children, longer programmes **would** do better to have a variety of short episodes, each with a different goal. **Therefore**, such a programme may present a short story on **Rajasthan** (exploration), a brief discussion on how to adjust to handicapped children (orientation); profile of a cartoonist (knowledge); teach how to make caricatures (learning skills); **matching** heads and bodies of traditionally dressed people (problem-solving) **and** close with a cartoon story. One problem with this format is that it needs **continuity** to be established. One or more central figures (like Alu and Phullu) could **help** the child to both identify and link stories together.

4.5.2 Undesirable Content

A scriptwriter for **children** must also ensure that certain undesirable contents are avoided or marginalized in programmes for children. The following standards need to be followed as closely as possible:

- 1) **Violence:** **Communication** studies have been grappling with this problem in a big way. A vast body of **research** exists on the issue of violence, often with very conflicting points of view. Some **scholars** feel that violence on screen incites more violence while others feel that violence on screen provides an outlet thereby defusing potentially violent behaviour. However, more **scholars** are beginning to agree that excess and unnecessary violence on **screen** has the potential to elicit violent and undesirable behaviour from its viewers. Among the findings that provide a workable guide for writers are the **following**:
 - i) Stylized or **ritual violence** as in cartoon features and Westerns are taken less seriously by children. Bullet wounds disturb them less because the bullets are invisible whereas a knife may **vicariously** hurt.
 - ii) Violence taking place in an unknown, unfamiliar surrounding is less frightening than violence taking place, in a known surrounding (in the home for instance).
 - iii) The magnitude of **disaster** is less important to children than the hurt of someone they know and identify with. Therefore, a view of hundreds of people hurt in an earthquake in Albania is **less** likely to affect them than the hurt to a pet dog in a story. (**This** is true of the **preschool** group of children.)

4.6 PREPARING THE SCRIPT

In writing scripts for **children** some generic guidelines that are common to all **scriptwriting** need to be **followed**. Most importantly, the precise function of the scriptwriter should be **clarified**. Very Often, in India, scriptwriting is entrusted to people who write prose well. The **assumption** being that anyone who writes well should also be able to write scripts well. **One** must **realise** that the art of **scriptwriting** is entirely different. **Scriptwriting is not** writing the narration text or commentary. **A** scriptwriter is first a visualizer. **S/he visualizes** the script of which the verbal content is a part and in some cases may not be a part at all.

4.6.1 A Good Scriptwriter

A good scriptwriter is **able** to:

- 1) **Visualize creatively.** **S/he** is able to think in pictures and not in words. **S/he** knows what the **programme would** look and sound like. **S/he** grapples with the challenge of expressing ideas by **exploiting** the visual potential of the medium. Imaging is **an** integral part of effective **television** scripting.
- 2) **Write for the ear.** In **scripting** the verbal portions, a good scriptwriter writes for the ear. **A** difficult sentence **in** a book can be read twice but words from a script cannot be repeated if the viewer **has** not understood. Therefore, the verbal content of a script needs to be expressed **using** simple colloquial words. Long, **complicated sentences** should be avoided unless they have a particular role to play. Similarly, dialogues should be informal and natural. **They** should sound conversational and not staged.
- 3) **Focus attention.** **A scriptwriter** must be careful not to clutter the **screen** up with too many audio-visual messages. **S/he** should know when to highlight the **audio** and when to highlight the visual and how to effect both. Simultaneous projection of hectic visual activity and important **dialogue** will cause both to be lost.
- 4) **Counterpoint visuals.** **A** good script does not insult the viewer's intelligence by using visuals that directly show what the commentary talks about. The commentary or narration need not show the obvious. Both the audio and visual should enrich and enhance each other.

4.6.2 The Need for Recentering

Scriptwriting for **children** needs a **certain** recentering on the part of the scriptwriter (recentering is the ability to see from many different points of view). It is important for the scriptwriter to be **able to** see from the child's point of view. This requires the scriptwriter to have a **very** good **idea** of production attributes. This means that a scriptwriter should have a **very** good understanding of not **just** the content but **how** children would like to **see it**. The following specific points should be kept in mind:

- 1) Never **talk down to a child**. Not only does condescension **annoy** the child (who wants to be taken **seriously**) but it makes **him/her** feel disempowered. Programmes for children should make **them** feel empowered and confident not passive and powerless. The tone adopted should therefore be one not of 'sweet condescension' but one that is serious in intent and at **the** same time lively and conversational.
- 2) **Keep it simple.** Don't **confuse** a child with too much of information. This is specially relevant for programmes **that** fall under the category of 'knowledge and information'. Only a few important **points** should be made and **all** extraneous information kept out. If the programme is **dramatic** keep the **storyline** direct and **uncomplicated**. Develop a **few scenes** completely and coherently rather than write a **succession** of **staccato scenes**.
- 3) **Attention span.** **The attention** span of the child would depend **on the specific** age-group and this **should** be kept in mind while scripting. Make sure, the child does not switch off.
- 4) **Production elements.** **Communication** scholars and programme designers need to **work** together to **explore the impact of** different production attributes. In the USA.

research findings indicate that certain auditory features attract children more (like loud music, sound-effects, peculiar voice, nonspeech vocalizations, etc; that moderate action better enhances plot advancement than rapid action that is often used purely for sensory excitement. It was also found that while high levels of physical activity hold attention, long zooms consistently hold attention.

- 5) **Cultural** specificity. Communication works best when the message is tailored to suit specific local and cultural needs. Universalism is a noble concept but unfortunately it does not work for communication. The foreign versions of *Sesame Street* took cultural variables into consideration and made specific changes. Big Bird (A huge fluffy muppet), the star of *Sesame Street* and loved by American preschoolers, does not appear in foreign versions. Instead, locally created mythical characters appear. In the Middle East version, for instance, a prickly but sweet porcupine and a shaggy camel-like puppet star. For *Magic Lamp*, Shukla Das was quick to incorporate changes of this nature. Froggy the puppet was renamed "Panna" (meaning emerald) after a child wrote in this suggestion.
- 6) **Avoid** Metaphors. Do not expect children to "catch" metaphors or abstract symbolisms. "The Lord is our shepherd" will mean just that for the child and nothing more.
- 7) **Humour**. This is an essential ingredient for children's programmes. Most children love to see and read "funnies". Slapstick humour (falling, tumbling, turning) usually never fails to evoke laughs. Jokes and nonsense also appeal to them.

4.7 SUMMING UP

- 1) Writing for children calls for a good understanding of the target audience and its specific needs and capacities.
- 2) Among the basic rules for scripting children's programmes special attention has to be given to their simple vocabulary, the limited attention span of children and their capacity for fantasy.
- 3) Formative research as a feedback has to be conducted to improve upon the programme.
- 4) Contents of children's programmes can be both entertaining and informative, **educative** and value oriented. Presenting programmes featuring violence, gender bias and unacceptable behaviour produce a negative impact on children.
- 5) Recentering — especially to see from the child's point of view — of themes is essential while preparing the script.

4.8 AIDS TO ANSWERS

Exercise 1

"Perfection", "freedom".

Exercise 2

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Both these novels, written with an adult audience in mind, need not be treated as satire on human behaviour and political ideologies. But they can be rewritten in simple, non-complex terms towards orienting the children's attention to simple, fundamental values that they can easily follow.

Exercise 3

The story of a wise father giving a bundle of sticks to his four sons and asking them to break it. The sons try hard with no success. When the father asks them to separate the sticks from the bundle and break them in ones and twos, the sons realise that strength lies in togetherness.

Exercise 4

Instead of the woodcutter coming to rescue the girl from the wolf, change the ending with girl using a rolling pin to smash the wolf down. This will be both humorous and show LRRH in a brave light.

4.9 NOTES

1) *Sesame Street* was **started** by *Children's Television Workshop* in **1969**. It was developed on the then revolutionary theory that the same qualities that attracted children to TV **commercials** — repetition, humour, "catchy" tunes and phrases — could be used to teach the **basic** learning skills and concepts. Entertaining production techniques were combined with simple instructional principles to create a show that would both educate and **entertain**. *Sesame Street* began in America but finally reached places like Kuwait, Chile, **Israel** and Philippines. It has been shown in a total of about **90** countries and **territories**, not only in its original English language version but in ten foreign language versions. *Sesame Street* is a landmark not just in children's programming but also in **developing** formative research techniques.

2) **Mira B. Aghi** in a paper on *Children's Television Programme* notes that **TV** producers themselves are unhappy **about** the poor infrastructure with which they work. By and large, producers are **unhappy** with the programmes they make. They have consensually demanded the need for **more** information about target audiences (especially those in rural areas and urban **slums**), content and production attributes.

3) A word of caution **needs** to be sounded here. It may be dangerous to indiscriminately apply research findings from America to programmes in India. Therefore, every programme for children **needs** to be backed by research that is devised and conducted **according** to specific, **local needs**.

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