

---

# UNIT 4 WRITING FOR MASS MEDIA

---

## Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Writing for Print
  - 4.2.1 The Inverted Pyramid
  - 4.2.2 The Lead Paragraph
  - 4.2.3 Developing the Story
- 4.3 Writing for Broadcast
- 4.4 Writing for Television
- 4.5 Writing for the Web
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

---

## 4.0 OBJECTIVES

---

Our aim through this Unit is to familiarize you with the basic rules for writing for the various media. Our aim will also be to show you how writing for one particular medium differs from writing for another media. After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- discuss how drafting news for radio differs from drafting news for a newspaper,
- distinguish between the news in the print media (newspapers) and television news, and
- discuss the techniques of television news reporting as well as know the rules for writing for the web.

---

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

---

This chapter attempts to introduce you to the concept of “style” and what it means to those who work in the mass media. Conforming to the rules and conventions of the medium in which you are working is the mark of a true professional. Strict adherence to the details of style shows that you care about what you write. Writing for the mass media differs from other forms of writing in several aspects:

**Subject matter:** Writers for the mass media must take on a wide variety of subjects, including news stories, feature stories, advertisements, letters, editorials and so on.

**Purpose:** Writing for the mass media has three major purposes: to inform, to entertain and to persuade.

**Audience:** Mass media writing is often directed to a wide audience and this fact dictates not only the subject matter but the way in which something is written.

**Circumstances of writing:** Writing for the mass media often takes place in the presence of others who are doing the same thing. The writing is frequently done under the pressures of deadlines and many times several people will have a hand in writing and editing a particular item for the mass media.

## 4.2 WRITING FOR PRINT

Writers for the mass media always work at two tasks: gathering information and putting that information into an acceptable form. Having the proper information – all the relevant facts of a story, the proper identification for the people involved, the time and the dates, accurate direct quotations, etc. – is vital to the writing process, but it is only the beginning. There comes a time when the information gathering must cease and the writing must begin.

The ability to write well requires that the writer has a thorough knowledge and understanding of the subject about which he or she is writing. In addition, the writer must understand the basic structure of the news story and the conventions or customs of news writing in order to complete the process.

Many forms of writing – or writing structures – populate the print media, but the most common are the news story and the feature story. These forms are found in newspapers, magazines, newsletters and many other publications. Mastering these two forms will give the person beginning to write for the mass media, a good foundation on which to build on, while learning to write in other forms and for other media.

### 4.2.1 The Inverted Pyramid

Once a writer has gathered the information necessary to begin a story, he or she must decide on the structure of the story. The goal of a proper structure is to get information to the reader quickly and to allow the reader to move through the story easily. The reader must be able to see the relationships between the various pieces of information that the reporter has gathered.

The most common structure for writing news stories is called the inverted pyramid. The daily newspaper contains many stories. Most of the stories must be written so that readers can get more information in less time. The inverted pyramid structure concentrates on the most interesting and important information at the top of the story so that readers can get the information they need or want and then go on to another story if they choose. Headlines and leads should be written to describe what the story contains as succinctly and as interestingly as possible.

### 4.2.2 The Lead Paragraph

The most important part of the news story is the first or lead (pronounced ‘leed’) paragraph. The lead should give the reader the most important information in the story. It should be written in such a way that the reader will be interested in going further into the story.

A good news story, unlike the novel or play, is based on one main idea. That is why it is so important to decide on a focus and stick to it. A well-focused article tells your reader that you worked from a plan. It gives the reader a sense of completeness, a sense that you know what you are doing. In deciding on this focus, you are also working on your lead. By asking yourself about the main theme for your story, you are deciding how to begin, for often the two—a statement of theme and a lead—are one and the same. To help you decide on this theme, sometimes it helps to try the “tell-a-friend” technique. Imagine your friend asking, “What’s your story about?” Answer that question in one sentence that captures the essence of the entire story. Now try to refine your answer so it can do two things: it should capture the essence of your story and do so in a way that encourages the reader to continue. It is your promise to the reader of what is to come. It is your lead.

### 4.2.3 Developing the Story

The inverted pyramid requires that writers make judgments not only about what should be at the beginning of the story but also about the relative importance of all the information they present in the story. In other words, writers must not only decide what the most important information is for the lead, but they must also decide what the second and third most important pieces of information are. Developing the story in a logical and coherent way requires much skill and practice.

If the lead paragraph is the most important part of the news story, the second paragraph is the second most important part of the story. In some ways, it is almost as important as the lead but for different reasons. A lead paragraph cannot contain all of the information in a news story. If it is written well, it will inform the reader but it will also raise certain questions in the reader's mind about the story. The real strength of your story will come from the details that back up the promise of the lead. This is the background material, the examples and quotes, the things you have observed, the explanations and definitions and the sense of history. These parts lend meaning and significance to the event or person you are writing about.

---

## 4.3 WRITING FOR BROADCAST

---

Broadcasting is the world's most pervasive medium of mass communication.. A wide variety of radio stations are available to anyone with a receiver since the early days of the medium. Underdeveloped areas that cannot get access to even a small newspaper will usually have a transistor radio to link it with the rest of the world. Satellite broadcasting has drawn the world closer together by ensuring that we have instant, live coverage of major news events from almost anywhere in the world. Most of the news values discussed apply to news selection for broadcasting. Broadcast journalists are interested in those events that have an impact on many people — people in the news, current issues, events that happen close to home and conflicts or unusual happenings. Because of the opportunities and limitations of their medium, however, broadcasters are likely to view such events in somewhat different ways than their counterparts in print journalism. The following are some of the factors that broadcasters use to select news.

**Timeliness:** Because of the nature of their medium, broadcasters often consider timeliness the most important news value. Broadcasters work on hourly or less than hourly cycles. A news broadcaster may go on the air several times a day. The news must be up-to-the-minute. News that is more than an hour or two old may be too late for the broadcaster. When you listen to a news report on a breaking news story, you expect to hear the very latest news— what happened just a few minutes before.

**Information not explanation:** Broadcasters look for stories that do not need a lot of explanation in order for listeners or viewers to understand them. They prefer stories that are simple and can be told in a straightforward manner. In some larger markets, radio reporters are being told to reduce their story lengths to ten seconds and actualities to five seconds. That amount of time is not enough to explain a complex story in detail. It is enough time to give the listener a few pertinent facts. Of course, some stories are complex and important and explanation cannot be avoided. These are the ones the broadcaster must wrestle with and it takes practice and talent to condense these stories to their essence.

The news on the radio moves fast without the facility of recall which is possible, in the case of newspapers. Therefore, whatever is written must be clear, precise and to the point. Sentences should be short and direct without sub clauses. Brevity is essential as a minute of broadcast time can take about 100 words, thus giving an editor the choice of about 1000 to 1100 words (in a 10-minute news bulletin) to cover world, national and regional news. There is a great constraint of space in radio, hence broadcast news must be big and important and should be put in crisp and easily understood language. Ceremonial items or didactic speeches distract the attention of the listener who can always switch off or change over to some other programme.

There should be no need for a dictionary while listening to a radio bulletin. It should be in words which are common in everyday speech. For example, “The work has started” and not “the work has commenced”. “The play has ended” and not “terminated”. We should acquaint ourselves with the elements of quality radio scripts. Their success rests entirely on the right combination of words and sounds in the narration/commentary. The shorter your sentences and crisper your narration, the greater will be the commentary’s impact. While padding has to be avoided at all costs, repetition of the main points is permitted and may even be necessary. This you can do towards the end of the programme in the form of a summary. This is to ensure that all the points that you want your listeners to remember are, in fact, briefly expressed again.

### **Enliven the Script/Commentary**

The wider your vocabulary, the more visual are your images. And this, in turn, helps you to vary your form and have a firm hold over the listeners/audience. The radio is an audio medium. The secret of the ideal broadcast is the unexpressed will to woo listeners to stay tuned for the entire programme by simply providing the right fare. A good radio feature or running commentary is one that strives to describe the subject or phenomenon cogently and comprehensively. A radio feature or commentary is written in words that create appropriate atmosphere and concrete pictures in the listener’s mind. It is by improving the script and presenting it creatively that a radio feature writer and commentator make even the most complex subject appear simple. It is in their hands to make ‘hearing’ a gainful and lasting pleasure. They have only to wield their power correctly to their audience.

### **Be Completely Natural**

You read aloud your narration/script/commentary as you write, if it is not off-the-cuff broadcast, e.g., running commentary. If it sounds natural, as if you were talking, you are on the right line. If on the other hand, it sounds like formal written language, you will immediately know you are off-the-track. Get your friends and well-wishers to help you with their reactions. This tried and tested method will provide an immense help to you in improving your performance. The broadcaster’s language is indeed easy to understand because only the simplest possible terms are used. It is important to remember that the language be intelligible to the majority of the listeners. You must know that one picturesque phrase will do more to arouse the listener’s interest than a bunch of literary and idiomatic expressions.

### **Keep Clichés Out**

This applies to hackneyed phrases as much as to journalistic ones. The microphone only reinforces their staleness. It is radio journalism at its worst. You should be yourself and not what you would like the listeners to think you are. While the listener

is seldom deceived, you may flounder and reveal your true colours sooner rather than later. Give your listeners the best of listening by being your natural ebullient self. The art of writing a production script for the radio very often lies in the art of knowing what not to say. It is said in the BBC TV circles that a commentator is paid as much to comment as to keep quiet

### **Keep on Looking for the Needs of the Market**

It is well to remember that broadcasting is essentially a family affair. Good taste is what matters and should be the main criterion. The writer's script should be simple and conjure visual rather than oral images in the listeners mind. Remember: short sentences and short words are always more effective than long-winded and pedantic phrases.

### **Do not Talk down to the Audience**

In any programme where the spoken word dominates, as in a running commentary one must take precautions against any slip of the tongue that would offend a listener. Be professional when you have to explain some matter. Do not sound like a teacher talking down to the students. Do not patronize the listeners. At least, for having taken the trouble to listen to you, the listeners ought to be treated with courtesy. The listener is a friend. Would you not treat a friend in a natural and respectful manner? So, address the listeners too on equal terms. Be friendly without being familiar. Do not take the listeners for granted. Do not shout or preach. Speak impressively, confidently and with dignity.

#### **Check Your Progress 1**

- Note:** a) Space given below the question is for writing your answer.  
b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

i) What are some rules to be followed while writing scripts for radio broadcast?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

## **4.4 WRITING FOR TELEVISION**

We do not watch news on TV just to get the latest news. Radio does a better job. We do not prefer television because we want to get all the news: local, national and international. The newspaper does a better job. We as television viewers, benefit from TV newscasts because they transport us to the scene of action. The news is packaged and delivered to us. For this, a reporter must be able to relate words and pictures in a news story. Words fill in the factual details that pictures omit. While the pictures are indeed important, it is the narration behind the film, in most instances, that is responsible for the success of visual news stories on television. Poorly written narration can hurt the effectiveness of visuals but appropriate narration can greatly improve even poorly shot visuals. Writing to background graphics is the same as writing a story to visuals as described above. The trick is to avoid redundancy or repeating what the graphics show.

There are three basic rules which must be followed by the TV reporter writing to visuals:

- a) Do not cram your video narration full with details.
- b) Relate words to the pictures when telling the story. The narration and pictures must go hand in hand.
- c) Carry the viewer into the story by describing the way it happened. Although the narrator may begin with a brief opening summary (without pictures) telling the viewer the main points of the story, when the film rolls on, the story should be told as it happened not necessarily in chronological order.

In short, writing narration to blend with the visuals is one of the most difficult skills in broadcast reporting. The language must be crisp, the timing exact and the words have to click with what appears on the screen.

To be able to comprehensively cover the news, television news reporters generally employ the following techniques.

#### a) **Piece to Camera**

Of all the skills needed for television news reporting, the piece to camera is amongst the most frequently used. The piece to camera, which is essentially in-vision, is recorded on location. It has three advantages: it immediately establishes the reporter's presence on the spot, it is extremely simple to execute and it is fast enough to be considered a kind of contingency sample. These stand-ups are written on the scene, without the benefit of typewriters or the other conveniences of the newsroom. Since the reporter looks straight into the camera, the lines have to be memorized. Sometimes, the reporters read from a note-book or a clip-board after ensuring the opening paragraph. Most stand-ups are short – 10 to 20 seconds. On some occasions they run longer, especially in complex stories that require a lot of explaining, but do not offer many visuals. A stand-up can also be used in the middle of a story to “bridge” two other sections of the report. Bridges work especially well when the report demonstrates something.

#### b) **Studio Spots**

While the piece to camera is an in-vision news presentation by the reporter recorded on location, the studio spot is a news item read in the studio by someone other than the programme's main presenter, as additional information to the visuals. Usually, it is a special correspondent or a reporter who is called upon to draw together the elements of a news story with or without the aid of videotape or illustration.

Because television news is a team effort involving many persons, the chances of human error are great in a studio set-up, particularly as an ‘on-air’ situation. There are some simple rules that the on-camera studio reporter/ correspondent should follow. These are

- i) Maintain self-control. Expect problems and be prepared to cope with them;
- ii) Always prepare file copy. If film or video tape fails to come up, have the file copy close at hand, to carry on the show;
- iii) Be familiar with studio cue-signals.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** a) Space given below the question is for writing your answer.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

i) How is television more effective than other media of Mass Communication?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

## 4.5 WRITING FOR THE WEB

In the last few years, the Internet and its publishing spin-off, the World Wide Web, has grown from a fledgling concept to a medium that offers enormous potential for people and organizations to connect with one another. New possibilities are arising every day for communication through the web and with those possibilities come employment opportunities for those who can use the language and master production techniques.

Is there something different about writing for the web or is it just writing as we have always done it, but now for an electronic form? Unlike any other medium, the web is so egalitarian that the rules or conventions of writing have not yet been established or institutionalized. Consequently, we can make only a few observations about the directions in which the web and its content seem to be heading. Writing for the web does not demand much more than writing for any other medium demands. Some of the rules to be followed could possibly be:

Sensitivity to the needs and expectations of the audience; Mastery by the writer of the subject about which he or she is writing; the ability to meet deadlines, and clarity of expression, and precision and efficiency in the use of the language

All of these demands are common to any form of writing, whether for a book, newspaper or broadcast, and the web is no exception. Much of the writing that you find on the Internet looks and reads exactly like the writing that you would find in other media. In fact, many organizations use the web to display reports and other materials that have originally appeared in some traditional form.

Still, there is a type of writing on the web that is almost peculiarly its own. That type of writing has its base in a concept called **hypertext**. Prose writing is linear, that is, you begin at the beginning and read through to the end. That's the way the writer intended to write and most readers follow that pattern. Hypertext is non-linear. The text is broken into bits and structured so that a reader can begin at any number of points and decide which sequence suits his or her purpose. Writing for a hypertext structure has profound implications for a writer.

### Web Writing Skills

The medium demands that information and ideas be broken into smaller blocks. These blocks should be related to the whole but they also need to stand by themselves

within the context of the entire article or website. They are generally hierarchical that is, they go from the general to the specific. But because the web offers readers the opportunity to move quickly from one item to another, the writer must also look for opportunities to “link” parts of the writing with other parts to make it easier for the reader to move around. This means the writer needs to anticipate how the reader might navigate within a website.

Another demand on writers using the hypertext structure is the ability to write headlines, subheads and summaries. Writing headlines and subheads for the web is far less restrictive than writing them for newspaper or magazines in terms of making them fit into a certain space.

Web writers are likely to have many more options and fewer typographical rules than the headlines writer for newspapers. But their abilities to summarize, whether in headline, subhead or summary form, will be severely tested, just as they are in traditional media. Summaries demand precise and concise use of the language. They also demand that the writer understand the material being summarized so well that he or she can do it accurately. Summarizing is a skill that is essential to the web writer.

Another characteristic of the web is the integration of graphics and text. The best websites are built around graphical elements because from a reader’s point of view, websites are visual before they are textual. Graphics, then, are a vital part of web production and people who are involved in this medium must be fluent in the use of both graphics and text. With proper study and practice, anyone can become a better writer. Writing is not simply an inherent talent that some people have and others do not. There are steps that each of us can take to improve our writing. Writing is a process. That is, the rules, techniques must be mixed in with the individual’s style, thoughts and methods and with the subject and form of the writing. They all should work together to produce writing that is good. Writing requires discipline. Most people give up writing as soon as they can because it is such hard work. It is physically, mentally and emotionally demanding. The person who commits to writing must marshal all of his or her resources for the task. Writing is building. Good writing doesn’t happen all at once. It is formed, word by word, sentence by sentence and thought by thought. The writing process is often slow, tedious and frustrating. But the product of this process of good writing is well worth the effort.

Finally, reading good writing is the next step. If you are interested in learning to write well, in any form, you should read as much as possible— newspapers, magazines, books, and anything else you can get your hands on. Then there is the writing itself, one has to “sit down and write.” That is the only way to become a good writer.

---

## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

---

In this Unit we talked about some rules that one needs to follow to write for the print media, radio, television and the web. Language for radio scripts needs to be simple and the sentences need to be short and crisp. So brevity and clarity is important. TV language should be written in the active voice and in the present tense. Similarly the print and web writing have to be well researched and well presented.

---

## 4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

---

### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Language for radio broadcasts should be simple and sentences should be short and crisp.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) Television with its visuals, cuts across all barriers. The visuals make a more instant and powerful impression than the black and white newspapers. The visual images supplement as well as complement the sound and make it more effective than radio.

