
UNIT 7 WRITING FOR RADIO

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7.0 INTRODUCTION

You have already understood the medium of radio and its basic characteristics. You have also acquainted yourself with the constraints and strengths of this medium. Radio writing simply means writing in the language of radio, so now we shall try to understand what is meant by the language of radio.

Radio writing is different from any other kind of writing. It is also true that radio writing is more difficult and challenging than other kinds of writing. This is so because radio is an aural medium. Further, even if we know the fundamentals of the appropriate language for radio, the creative challenges for writing still persist. The language for a children's programme cannot be the same as that of a youth programme. The language for a rural programme will be entirely different from the language of any literary programme. Another issue is the absolute necessity to remain within the time duration allotted for the programme.

Moreover, you have to deliver a powerful message or convince the audience about a product through spoken words only. The writing also varies according to the format. The craft of writing a talk will be entirely different from writing a radio play. Keeping all these things in mind, we shall try to learn some basic characteristics of radio writing in this Unit.

7.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- differentiate between the languages of print and radio;
- recall the main elements that constitute the language of radio;
- identify different forms of radio programmes;
- distinguish between different formats of radio programmes; and
- describe different stages of radio writing.

7.2 RADIO WRITING – CHALLENGES OF THE MEDIUM

Although you have understood the basic nature of radio as a medium, it is necessary to know certain essential facts before we venture into radio writing.

If you watch a movie in a cinema hall, you purchase a ticket and keep sitting in the darkness, not doing anything else except watching the movie. Similarly, while reading a book, it is essential to devote your whole attention to the reading process. But, just imagine how many of us listen to the radio while doing nothing else. Most of the radio listeners are engaged in some other simultaneous activities as well.

While listening to the radio, someone may be driving a car, and a homemaker may be cooking in the kitchen, a student may be solving a mathematics problem, a farmer may be tilling his land, a shopkeeper may be attending to his customers so on. Therefore, the radio writer has to shoulder a double responsibility. Firstly, from the very beginning of the programme, by the sheer magic of his/her words, he/ she has to attract the listeners towards the programme, and, after that, keep them engaged in it till the end. Further, the content of a radio programme has to be understood by the listeners then and there, in real-time, during the process of listening to itself. While reading a book or a magazine, the meaning of a difficult word can be looked up in a dictionary, and to clarify a point of doubt, one can go back to the earlier passage. But, this is not possible while listening to the radio. Hence in radio writing, there is no scope for difficult words, long sentences, unknown references etc. A radio script has to be in a language we use to speak or talk to each other. That is why the language of radio script is called 'Spoken Word'. It should be friendly and informal. Another challenge for a radio writer is the wide diversity of listeners – from scholarly intellectuals to illiterates - so a radio writer has to find a balance in his writing to appeal to a wide spectrum of society.

7.3 BASIC ELEMENTS OF RADIO

Every Radio programme is, in fact, a message to the listeners. If this message is communicated to and understood by the listeners and appreciated, then radio writing can be considered effective and fruitful. A message through radio or any other medium has certain codes from the sender, and one who receives the message decodes them. Let us understand this by some simple examples.

When we talk to each other, then the codes which work to deliver the message are:

- Spoken words
- Facial expressions
- Body gestures such as hand movements

The person to whom we are talking decodes i.e. understands these. For instance, just by staring sternly, a father can convey his anger or disapproval to his child. A professor can stop a student from coming late to the class just by a movement of his hand.

In the print medium, i.e. books, magazines, newspapers etc., written words, pictures, tables, graphs etc., work as 'codes' to take the message to the readers. Now, let us try to understand the codes which work for a radio message, i.e. the basic elements which create the 'language of radio'. As you have learnt in Unit 1, there are four basic elements which constitute radio programmes, i.e. whenever we listen to any programme of any radio station from any part of the world, and we shall hear only these four:

- Spoken words
- Sound effects
- Music
- Pause or Silence

Words are the most important part of any radio programme. These words are different from printed words because they reach a listener through a 'human voice' and thus are 'spoken words. Words of radio form a double code. Their meaning is embellished by the beauty of language and, second, the voice in which these are rendered. Thus, the quality of voice and the delivery of words can make the language of radio more effective, depending on the style of presentation. In brief, we may say that:

- Words used in a radio programme are spoken words.
- These give a feel of human presence.
- These also reflect some aspects of the speaker's personality.
- These may tell us about the 'broadcast stations' or even the country where the broadcast is coming.

Because radio is a blind medium with no visuals, appropriate sound effects

enrich the visuals created by spoken words in listeners' minds. Radio plays, and documentaries take immense help from suitable sound effects. Music also helps in developing the language of radio. For example, a musical piece of just 30 seconds, played as a 'signature tune', identifies the broadcast institution and the individual programme. Similarly, the effect of an opening or dropping curtain in a theatre is achieved by 'fade in' and 'fade out' of music in a radio drama. The background music in a radio drama helps make a scene lively.

Radio is a sound medium, but the absence of any sound is also an important part of the language of radio. The most interesting contradiction is that no radio programme can be imagined without natural and even deliberate pauses or silences. Pause is an integral part of the grammar of radio. A pause in radio replaces the use of a comma or full stop in print.

7.4 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LANGUAGE OF PRINT AND RADIO

Having understood the basics of radio language as a spoken language, we can now very well understand the difference between the languages of print and radio. Sometimes experts invited for broadcast don't understand the radio requirements and bring a script designed more for the print media, i.e. using the characteristics of 'written word' and not 'spoken word'. Let us try to understand the subtle difference through some examples.

If we read an article in a newspaper, we may find – 'we should take the precautions mentioned below. Likewise, we may say 'the above facts are important in an article. However, there is no 'below' or 'above' in spoken language; using similar phrases in a radio talk will sound ridiculous. Again, instead of mentioning dates on radio, the use of 'yesterday', 'the day before yesterday' or 'last week' or 'last month' etc. may be better suited as spoken language.

In radio, we try to paint a picture through spoken words as radio is a blind medium. Hence, if we say that the height of Bhakra Dam is 740 feet, it may not conjure a picture. But, if we say that Bhakra Dam is as high as three Qutub Minars put one above the other, it will make a visual impact in a listener's mind. We may also say that the height of Qutub Minar is the same as 125 people standing on one above the other. It again creates a visual.

Similarly, in print, we may say that the capitals of Japan, Malaysia and Indonesia are Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta, respectively. Still, on the radio, it will be appropriate to say that Tokyo is the capital of Japan, Kuala Lumpur is Malaysia's capital, and Jakarta is Indonesia's capital, thus avoiding using the word 'respectively'. We avoid using complex and complicated sentences in radio language. Simple words and short sentences are the requirements of radio communication.

Likewise, while talking about history, instead of saying '1520 AD', it might be better to say approximately 500 years ago. Long figures such as 'Rupees 15 lakhs 53 thousands 9 hundred 74' may be better said as 'about 15 and a

half lakhs' or 'more than 15 lakhs'.

To summarise what we learned in this part of the Unit, we can say that radio listeners may be engaged in other activities while listening to the radio; therefore, we should keep our words simple and friendly as in our normal conversation. Long and complicated sentences need to be avoided. Short sentences and simple words are essential requirements of radio language.

7.5 RADIO WRITING FOR DIFFERENT RADIO FORMATS

Just as poetry, short stories, novels, drama, essays, travelogues etc. are different formats of literature, similarly, there are many formats of radio programmes, and these formats are created by combinations of the four elements of radio, i.e. spoken word, sound effect, music and pause. Pause is a compulsory element for all the formats. If we take only spoken words (no sound effect, no music), we get the following formats:

- 1) Radio Talk
- 2) Dialogue
- 3) Interview
- 4) Discussion
- 5) News Bulletin

If we combine spoken words with sound effects, we have the following formats:

1. Quiz
2. Radio Report
3. Live Commentary

If we combine spoken words, sound effects and music, then we have:

1. Radio Feature/Documentary
2. Radio Drama
3. Radio Spots (Advertisements/commercials)
4. Radio Serial
5. Docudrama
6. Newsreel

Every Radio format has its attraction and requirements. We choose a format as per available airtime, subject or theme, target audience, etc. Thus, while a radio advertisement may be of just 30 seconds duration, a radio play maybe 15 minutes to 1 hour long, and a talk may usually be of 4 to 9 minutes. We have to understand a particular radio format before writing a script for it.

It has to be understood here that certain formats of radio programmes have to be unscripted by their very nature. For instance, running commentary of a sports

or non-sports event cannot be pre-scripted as it is essentially a live description of what is happening on the spur of the moment. However, proper preparation and having detailed background material are indispensable for running commentaries also. Similarly, interviews and discussions are also extempore formats but systemically preparing talking points is essential so that invaluable radio time is put to optimum use.

Activity – 1

Listen to different scripted radio formats like talks, plays, documentaries, etc. and then compare them with non-scripted formats like interviews or commentary.

7.6 RADIO WRITING – BROAD CATEGORIES OF PROGRAMMES

After understanding the language of radio, we should also be aware of the various fields for which radio writing can be done. We have a vast range of subjects for people of all age groups having varied interests. Broadcasting touches many areas of our life, and so the scope for radio writing becomes almost unlimited. It is, however, worth mentioning that, unlike AIR stations, private FM channels should not be taken as the representative model of a radio station. The main purpose of private radio channels is to earn commercial revenue through mostly entertainment-oriented programmes. They use not more than 3 to 4 programme formats out of more than 25 programme formats available to programme producers. Let us know what kinds of programmes are broadcast from a radio station dedicated to public service broadcasting. That would make you familiar with the whole scenario of broadcasting. But, first, we should know the three major functions or objectives of broadcasting, which result in three broad categories of programmes.

7.6.1 Information Based Programmes

From the very beginning, the first and foremost purpose has been to provide information to the listeners. Many informative programmes are broadcast every day from a majority of radio stations. News bulletins and programmes on current affairs are prime examples of this role played by radio. Although now there are hundreds of television channels and social media platforms from where one gets all sorts of information, the role of radio as the primary information disseminator to a wide spectrum of society continues to be relevant.

7.6.2 Awareness Based Programmes

To educate is the second most important function of the radio. This is particularly true of broadcasting in India. Radio serves people by informing them about the latest happenings and imparting education to them in a non-formal manner. Radio stations broadcast educational programmes for the listeners to supplement their knowledge.

There are millions of visually challenged people who cannot avail the benefits of print and visual media. Radio provides great service to these people by giving information and education, thus enabling them to lead a productive and dignified life. Radio has also done a great service by educating the farmers about the improved techniques and opportunities for better marketing of their produce. It also helps the students' community by imparting them education of high quality.

7.6.3 Entertainment Based Programmes

Entertainment is the third most important activity of broadcasting. While there are multiple means of entertainment available for affluent people in larger cities, many people still get a lot of their entertainment from radio programmes. A special service named 'Vividh Bharati' with a mix of film music and other light-hearted programmes was created in 1957 by All India Radio to cater to the entertainment needs of millions of people all over the country. Now, FM channels of AIR, namely FM Rainbow and FM Gold, also serve the infotainment needs of the people. Private FM Channels focus on entertainment, whereas AIR FM channels also devote airtime for information and education.

Check Your Progress: 1

Note: 1) Use the space provided below for your Answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. How is Radio writing different from other media?

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2. What are the three broad categories of radio programmes?

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7.7 IDENTIFYING THE LISTENERS

After learning about the broad categories of programmes, radio writers should also know about the programmes for special audiences.

Whenever we plan a programme and write a script for it, we have to keep that programme's listeners in mind. Certain programmes are for all the listeners, but many are targeted at special groups of audiences. When writing for a

particular audience group, we also need to identify various sub-groups and their particular requirements. For example, radio stations have programmes for women, but all women may not have identical interests. A homemaker may have some requirements, but a working woman may have different requirements. Similarly, the needs of unemployed youth would be different from those of a young person holding a good job.

7.8 RESEARCH FOR A SCRIPT

Any radio script can be effective based on its content, which depends on the research about the subject. Let us take an example. Suppose a talk on the historic Red Fort in Delhi mentions that the road opposite Red Fort going to Chandni Chowk used to be a ‘Canal’ during the Mughal period. In that case, it will certainly attract the attention of the listener. Listeners may like this information, which might be hitherto unknown to them that the road that is now brimming with heavy traffic is where people used to enjoy boating in the moonlight. To find out unknown, rare facts on a given subject, we should consult books on the subject, go through magazines for relevant articles, consult subject matter specialists, visit a particular place or tourist spot or historical building concerning the subject and so on. Formats like documentaries require deep and detailed research. But, even for writing a radio talk of 5 minutes, the importance of research can’t be ignored. If we write for radio without proper knowledge of facts, it will only be a ‘play of words, which would be unethical and almost mean cheating the listeners.

7.8.1 Example of a Documentary

Let us take a practical example to understand the need for in-depth research for a format like a radio documentary. Suppose you have to write a script for a documentary on ‘Suicides in India’. You will have to find out the average annual number of suicides in the country along with the data and information on various aspects such as the tendency for suicide in different age groups, reasons for suicide, government efforts to prevent suicides, the role of NGOs, society, family members, friends, etc. Information about the trends in other countries and preventive efforts made is also relevant.

For a documentary on ‘Suicides in India’ broadcast by All India Radio, the writer researched by consulting psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, writers, social workers and government officials on various known and unknown aspects of suicide. He also consulted books, research papers, magazines and the internet. The writer also talked to those who had tried to commit suicide but survived. Legal experts and family members of those who committed suicide were also consulted. Several lesser-known facts emerged from the research like:

India is among the countries of the world where a large number of suicides take place. In India, every 6 minutes, someone commits suicide and 100 people attempt suicide every hour. The tendency to commit suicide is not confined to cities only; it has reached smaller cities, towns, and villages.

Many children commit suicide due to increased pressure and expectations

from family and schools. Many older adults are also committing suicide due to depression and loneliness.

Suicides indicate mental illness, but mental health has not been given due attention in our country. People hesitate to go to a psychiatrist or counsellor due to the perceived stigma of being called insane.

About 95% of the people contemplating suicide can be saved if timely help can be offered to them and that 'vulnerable' moment can be avoided. The attempt to commit suicide is a 'cry for help'.

Now, you must have understood the importance of the research for a particular subject.

7.9 ATTRACTIVE BEGINNING

After you have done proper research on a subject and get down to write a script for radio, the most important aspect is an attractive beginning. You must have observed that newspapers often give very catchy, interesting and attention-seeking headlines to their news stories. For instance, there was a headline "Pak PM throws a no ball", making dramatic use of the fact that the Pakistani Prime Minister has been a well-known cricket bowler.

The attractive beginning is important for all the mass media. Still, in a radio programme, it is crucial as this medium has no visual dimension like television or cinema. Hence, the opening few lines of a radio programme often decide the fate of the entire programme. In the case of television, someone may keep watching the programme because of a favourite actor or actress or a beautiful visual, but the same is not true for the radio. A very formal beginning of the radio programme has very little chance of being attractive. Whatever be the subject, the beginning should be such that it connects immediately with the listener, creates curiosity, touches emotions and forces the listener to pay attention and start listening to the programme.

7.9.1 Examples of Attractive Beginning

Suppose you have to write the script for a radio talk on environmental pollution. A traditional formal beginning for this could be:

"Pollution is a serious problem in India. There are mainly three kinds of pollution – air pollution, water pollution and sound pollution....."

Such a beginning may not attract many listeners because of its formal tone. However, if you start the script in the following manner:

"Taj Mahal is the symbol of eternal love and one of the Seven Wonders of the World. But, are you aware that this gleaming white monument may become black one day? No, it is not just a horrible imagination; the increasing environmental pollution can make this a reality one day, if we don't wake up now and start protecting our environment"...

Such a beginning is much more likely to catch the attention of the listeners because the Taj Mahal touches a chord with every Indian, as it is a symbol of

glory and one of India's prominent identities.

Similarly, if you have to write a talk or documentary on the Bheel tribe, a formal beginning might be like this:

“In India there are many tribes. Bheels are one such prominent tribe. They live mainly in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.....” Again such a formal opening may not appeal to many listeners. But to make the programme connect better with listeners, we have a number of other informal opening options.

1. We may begin with the story of ‘Eklavya’ who gave his ‘thumb’ to his ‘Guru’ (teacher) as ‘Gurudakshina’ or fee.
2. Story of ‘Shabri’ in Ramayan offered fruits to Lord Ram after tasting them to check whether they were sweet enough.
3. Story of great warrior Maharana Pratap, who was given shelter by ‘Bheels’ in the forests when he was fighting the army of Akbar.

7.9.2 Maintaining the Flow of Script

An attractive beginning catches the audience's attention and makes them listen to our programme, but that is not all. We have to ensure that our listener continues to listen to the whole programme with maximum possible attention. If, after a good beginning, the writer cannot maintain the flow and the progression of the script does not arouse any curiosity, then the programme will not achieve its objective. Hence, a radio writer must ensure that along with informal and friendly language, relevant and interesting facts on the subject continue to be presented attractively so that the listener remains engrossed in the broadcast.

The talker may be a very renowned and knowledgeable person. Still, while broadcasting, he/she should use interactive phrases such as ‘let us see why it happens’ and ‘you must be wondering why it is so just to establish a friendly rapport with the listener and make them a partner in discussing the subject.

Basic rules of a Radio script:

- **Use simple words:** Easier, simple and common words should be used. We need to remember how we talk, not how we write. Radio is a medium whose least common denominator audience are the laymen; using simple words is important. A list of a few radio appropriate words in English is provided below. I am sure you can find such equivalents in your mother tongue too:

Written	Spoken
Adequate	Enough
Anticipate	Expert
Commence	Begin, start
Conclude	End
Manufacture	Make

Purchase	Buy
Underprivileged	Poor

- b) **Use short sentences:** Sentences should avoid conjunctions as much as possible. The sentences should ideally be of a length appropriate for talking. Remember, unlike print, we cannot go back to the sentence and re-hear it.
- c) **One idea per sentence:** One sentence should carry one idea. Never clutter one sentence with too many ideas.
- d) **Avoid sound clashes:** Read your copy aloud for awkward sounds. Be sparing in the use of ‘s’ ‘th’ and ‘ing’ sounds. Avoid words like ‘thrust’, ‘wrists’ and ‘frisked’, all of which are difficult to pronounce.
- e) **Use present tense:** This is especially relevant for news bulletins, particularly the headlines. For conveying the immediacy and to drive home the urgency of news, the use of present tense is a cardinal rule. For example:
 - The Monsoon Session has commenced (commences)
 - We have responsibility for quality..... (are responsible)
 - The Prime Minister has inaugurated the project (inaugurates)
- f) **Use active voice:** Scripts should be written in active voice, for example: -
 - A new governor was appointed by the President (President appointed)
 - Ten shops were destroyed by a fire ... (A fire destroyed)
 - A meeting will be held by the teachers.... (Teachers will hold a)
- g) Avoid stock phrases, superfluous words and clichés. Below is a tentative list of each word that we tend to use every day while writing in English (which is not exhaustive):

Stock Phrases:

“Lead from the front” – Where else?

“Follow in x’s foot steps”- just follow “Ground rules”- just rules

Superfluous words:

Set a *new* record

Died in a *fatal* accident *Holiday period*

Future plans

It is a *true* fact in a *week* priority history

7.9.3 Precautions for Final Draft

Once you have written and evaluated your script for a radio programme and found it suitable for broadcast, keep the following precautions in mind while preparing a final draft:

- The script should be typed or written only on one side of a sheet so that no noise is recorded while turning the pages.

1. It is better to finish a paragraph on the same page. If that is not possible, at least the sentence should be completed. Carrying an incomplete sentence onto the next page should be avoided because it will create a break in the flow of reading at the time of recording. A new page should always begin with a new sentence.
2. Nothing should be written which is against the code of conduct of the concerned broadcast organisation.
3. The decency of language should always be maintained.
4. Nothing should be written that can hurt any community's sentiments or ridicule any disabled person, even if it is a programme of humour or satire.

Check Your Progress: 2

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. What are the basic rules of writing a radio script?

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.....

7.10 LET US SUM UP

Radio writing is different from writing for a magazine or a newspaper. While listening to a programme, a listener can't go back and forth; therefore, a radio broadcast has to be followed and understood by the listeners simultaneously in real-time. Short sentences and simple language are essential for a radio script. For effective radio writing, the writer has to be mindful of the programme's duration and format and be aware of the target listener for whom the programme script is being written. The beginning of the programme should be very attractive. The flow of language and content should be maintained until the end of the programme to sustain the listeners' interest. Intelligent research about the subject is very important to make the programme rich in content.

7.11 FURTHER READINGS

1. Grove, C., & Wyatt, S. (2013). *So you want to write a radio drama*. London: Nick Hern Books.
2. Horstmann, R. (1997). *Writing for radio*. London: A & C Black.
3. MacLoughlin, S. (2001). *Writing for radio*. Oxford: How to Books.

7.12 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress: 1

1. Radio is an audio medium, and hence a radio script has to be written for the ear. It should be written in a conversant manner while using simple words and short sentences. Unlike the print, a listener cannot go back to re-hear an unclear portion. Also, there are no supporting visuals on the radio like that on television. So, care needs to be taken to make a script easily comprehensible.
2. The formats of radio programmes are as follows:
 - Programmes that inform – These provide information and news to the listeners.
 - Programmes that educate – This help educate. Several different educational programmes are broadcast for different segments of people – students, farmers, etc.
 - Programmes that entertain – This has increasingly become one of the key radio functions. No one wants to hear anything boring and thus the increasing need for entertaining programmes.

Check Your Progress: 2

1. While writing a Radio script, you should:
 - Use simple words and short sentences.
 - Unlike print, a listener cannot go back and re-hear what's been said. So it is important to use words and sentences that will be easily understood in one go.
 - Present one idea per sentence so as not to confuse the audience.
 - Use active voice and present tense, as these make for simpler language that is easily understood.