
UNIT 12 WRITING FOR TELEVISION NEWS

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12.0 INTRODUCTION

Television (TV) has become an integral part of our lives these days as most of us depend on it for our daily dose of entertainment, news and information. Besides that often TV programmes in general, and TV news, in particular tend to influence our views thus indicating its possible impact on the society at large. Hence, the responsibility of TV news programme makers increases manifold. TV news writing is a critical part of those programmes and in this Unit, we shall try to understand various aspects of it. TV news programmes generally include news bulletins, news features, documentaries based on news, interviews, panel discussions and so on. So, writing for TV generally means writing scripts for news bulletins, features and documentaries as other formats such as interviews and panel discussions are not required to be scripted.

12.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading through this Unit, you will be able to:

- describe the various stages of television news;
- discuss the basic principles of television news writing;
- describe the fundamental rules for writing a good television news script; and
- understand the writing for different formats of television news.

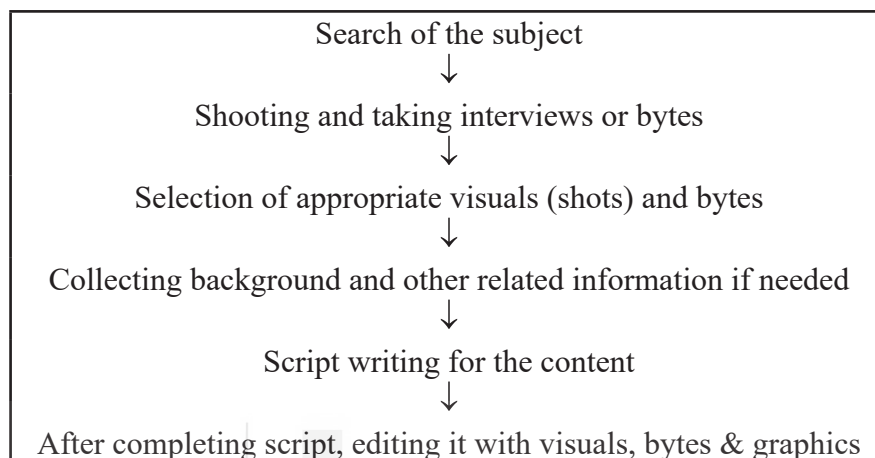
12.2 TELEVISION NEWS STORIES

Television channels broadcast news and current affairs related content in different programme formats. In this Unit, we shall focus mainly on the news stories. Before going directly to the writing part, it is necessary to discuss the basic steps of production of a television news story. We shall also discuss the journey of a TV

news story from its birth as breaking news to its matured stage of anchor-package. All these discussions will finally help us to improve our writing capabilities.

12.2.1 Chronology of Television News Content Creation

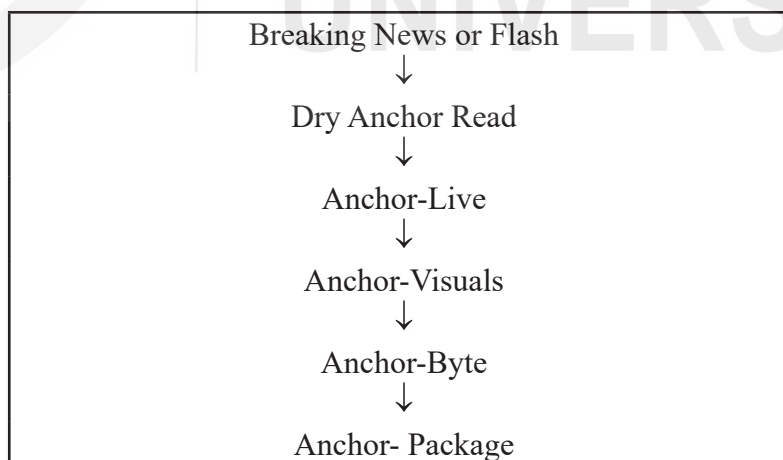
Television news content creation has a standard chronology. For writing an effective TV news script, you should understand it. The following chart shows this chronology:



This is the normal chronology which is followed to create news contents but in some cases the order may be changed. For example, in hardcore news segments, you get the raw information and may be asked to telecast the news as early as possible and therefore, you cannot plan your story according to the standard chronology.

12.2.2 Stages of Television News

There are various stages of a TV news and you should be aware of all of them. Writing is involved in almost all these stages at different levels. Many news pieces may not pass all the stages but unless you know all of them, you would not be able to decide which stage is fit for which news piece. Following are the stages of a TV news:



Obviously for each stage, the process of writing will be different. For becoming a good TV journalist, it is necessary for you to know about all of them. We are going to give you a brief information about these stages of a television news.

Breaking News or Flash: When you receive an information from your source which has news value for your audience, you decide to present it as soon as possible. At this stage, the news will be of one or two lines. The purpose of the breaking news is to make your viewers aware of the latest happenings immediately. If you get

some more information of the happening, you can break the news into small lines to present it.

Dry Anchor Read: Dry anchor read means that the anchor or news presenter reads the news only without any visuals. This normally happens in the case of breaking news situation. It can also be presented with graphics plates where the information is written on the screen.

Anchor-Live: If the news is in developing stage, the news bulletin producer may decide to take the live or telephonic interview of the reporter after anchor read. If visuals are available, they can be used along with 'live' or 'phone link' of the reporter.

Anchor-Visuals: When the news related visuals come into the newsroom, the anchor reads the news and the appropriate visuals are played over that. Here the purpose is to present the news in a concise manner.

Anchor-Byte: If there are some bytes relevant to the news item, it is also often attached with the anchor read. The bytes may be of the persons involved in the event or reaction of prominent personalities on that event.

Anchor-Package: The culmination of all the above stages is the package. In this, there are voice overs, appropriate visuals, relevant bytes and PTC. The package is supposed to present a full picture of the event.

So far as writing the news scripts of the above stages is concerned, the basic underlying principles remain the same. You must have read about the inverted pyramid style of news writing. Always remember to follow that. It is very important to understand the newsworthiness of the raw information before starting the writing. All news stories should have answers of the 5Ws & 1H. Each of these questions may have several parts which depend on the nature of the news. But you should not try to answer all these questions in the anchor read only. This will depend on the time which you are getting for that news. If you are making an anchor-package, you will have the liberty to answer all the 5Ws & 1H.

12.3 WRITING FOR TELEVISION NEWS

Writing depends on two major things: first, type of medium and second, nature of the content. Here, our medium is television and content is news. Television is an audio-visual medium which requires a certain type of writing suitable to the nature of this medium. In this section, we shall discuss the different principles and rules of television news writing.

12.3.1 Basic Principles

Writing for TV news is different from literary writing. In the case of literature, the writer has the liberty to use words to beautify the subject and concept, but in Writing for Television news you should make your selection of words as simple as possible. In the case of literature, the writer has the liberty to express his/her feelings and narrate the story accordingly, but in journalistic writing one has to be objective. It is believed that the target audience of TV news is the general people so a news writer, especially TV news writer, must not use the complex and difficult words.

If you see the nature of television as a medium, it is dynamic. The story is flowing continuously. Unlike print, for a TV news viewer, it is quite difficult to stop or go back to the previous content to understand that. The process of understanding should match the speed of content flow. So, simple language is must. A simple

principle is that no one should be in the need of a dictionary while consuming the TV news. Always remember the golden rule of news writing i.e. K.I.S.S. -Keep It Short and Simple. And you can keep your news writing short and simple by using the words used in daily conversation amongst us.

Always remember that the primary objective of news writing is to communicate the desired information in simple words so that it can be understood easily. At the same time, it should also be remembered that the news piece should answer the 5W & 1H (Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?) in the order of their importance. It is not necessary to explain all the aspects of the news equally, but it is a normal practice to emphasise the 'What' aspect first and foremost. After that, according to the nature of the information, you can decide which other aspects (Who or Where or How, etc.) are needed to be explained.

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. What is the golden rule of news writing?

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2. In the news writing which aspect gets the most prominence?

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12.3.2 Fundamental Rules

There are a few fundamental rules of writing which have been laid down to assist in creating effective content for TV news. We shall discuss them one by one:

Write for the eyes and ears of the viewers: Yes, you got it right. A TV news viewer must be hooked in the beginning of the story and therefore the script should be emphatic enough to garner his/her attention to the TV screen. You should read your script out loud after completing it. Because there are many words which sound alike but have different meanings and these may create confusion for the viewers. Once your script reaches your own ears, you can decide about the changes required in it and improve. For example, words such as 'Quiet' and 'Quite' or 'See' and 'Sea' can create confusion, if not properly supported by visuals. Therefore, it is better to avoid such words. Use short and punchy sentences and refrain from long and complicated sentences.

Write as much as possible in active voice: In a good TV news script, passive voice has no place as the passive voice writing jumbles up the normal sequence of subject, verb and object. Due to this, the viewer's brain has to work more than the normal to understand what is being said in the news. A basic thumb rule is to avoid the use of "by" in a sentence.

Example: The district magistrate has ordered to impose curfew in certain areas of the city. (Active voice)

In certain areas of the city, the curfew has been imposed by the order of the district magistrate. (Passive voice)

Naturally, the sentence said in the active voice uses less words as well as communicates the message easily. So, you should remember this rule that your news script should be 'Active'.

Use present tense as much as possible: TV news should sound like "now." Even the evening news bulletin needs to sound fresh because no one is interested to know about the old and stale news. The natural tendency is to write the news in past tense which should be avoided.

For example: "The Court declared XYZ firm bankrupt in a decision pronounced in the afternoon today. The court also suspended the payments of the jewellery firm according to the bankruptcy law."

But you can write the above sentences in the following manner as well:

"The court declares XYZ firm bankrupt. Today afternoon, the court suspended the payments and declared the jewellery firm bankrupt according to the law of the land."

In this example, you just start the news in present tense for the hook, then shifts to past tense. It is always good to put the sentence in present tense to give it extra punch but remember not to force the present tense into every sentence you write.

Stories should be people-centric: It is a smart idea to weave the stories around people as viewers tend to connect with such stories. If viewers sense that your stories do not directly affect them, they would not show much interest. For example, if any big infrastructure project gets the government approval, do not present it with simple facts and figures. It should be presented as a news item which is going to impact the lives of the people where the project will be based.

You can start your story with sentences like "Now you can cover the distance between Delhi and Agra in less than four hours. The State government has given its nod for a new expressway between these two cities."

By merely presenting the information in people-friendly way, you can evoke the viewers' interest in your story multiple times. Therefore, it is advised to all the news scriptwriters to study press releases and raw information carefully before writing the story.

P to G Style: There are mainly two styles of the news script which are followed all over the world. The first one is P to G i.e. particular to general. In this style, the script starts with a case study of any person who represents the larger community which is affected by the event being discussed. Normally the first voice over (VO) of the script talks about the case study and in further VO, the script tells us the details of the story. The purpose here is to make a connect with the viewers. As we have mentioned above that stories should be people-centric, this P to G style endorses this theory. Remember that wherever human emotions are involved in the news script, it has a greater chance to leave an impact on the viewers.

P-P-F Style: The second style of news script writing is P-P-F, i.e. Present-Past-Future. It implies that the initial VO of the story should talk about the main news (present), the middle VO should talk about the background of the news (past) and at the end the VO talks about possible impact of the news (future). This style of writing is considered to present the story with all the aspects of the news and hence, it is very popular. An example of such script is given in this Unit in later section.

Use action verbs in your story: In news writing, you cannot do much to the subject or object of your sentences, but you can use action verbs to make the story more interesting. These words give urgency to the story and thus create more interest among the viewers.

For example, use of “is, are, was, were, etc.” weakens the impact of the story. “Residents started shouting” sounds much better and impactful than “Residents are shouting.”

Be careful with facts and figures: We all know that mathematical numbers are hard to understand for many and especially when these are stuffed in a news story. So always think twice before using too many numbers in your script. Try to make your point clear with rounded or approximate numbers.

Consider this sentence, “The company’s profit was Rs.11,470,543, which fell to Rs.5,695,765 a year later.”

Now read this, “The company’s profit was about eleven and-a-half million rupees, which fell to about half of that the next year.”

Which one gives you the better understanding? The second one. Yes, in the second sentence, the viewer gets the point which you want to make and he or she need not to go through many digits. Similarly, if you present numbers as something simple and meaningful information for viewers, the news piece will have better connect. You can understand it with following example:

Sentence- 1: “The car company has raised rates up to 3 percent.”

Sentence – 2: “The car prices will be hiked up to thirty thousand.”

In the second sentence, numbers have been presented as simple and more meaningful information and thus it has added capacity to connect with the viewers.

Try to draw viewers’ attention towards screen: Your words should be catchy enough to get the attention of the passive viewers to the television screen. Sometimes, you can restrain yourself from giving too much details and just leave the viewers with a little suspense.

Consider this sentence, “The Khans of Bollywood - Shah Rukh and Salman met and hugged each other.”

Now read this, “What happens when King Khan and Bhai of Bollywood meet, let us watch.”

In the second sentence, you are forcing the viewers to watch the television screen as you are not telling them what the two celebrities did. The mention of these two celebrities is enough to grab the viewers’ attention. You can use this style in a soft news.

Present your story as something special: Do not forget that this is the era of competition and TV news channels are no exception. They have to compete with many other news channels which may show the same story which you are going to present. So, what will make your story more interesting? The ability to present your story as something different and superior. These days you must have heard the use of words “exclusive”, “never before”, “first time on television”. It is to show your promptness and dedication towards the viewers. But apart from this, you can structure your sentence in such a way that it shows your dedication and promptness.

Example: -

“When the education minister said there was no money for mid-day meals in the schools, we decided to dig for answers.” A sentence like this shows that you are serious about finding the truth.

“We are the only channel with exclusive visuals of the accident that took place at the highway.” By using such writing, you can build the perception of a prompt and fighter news channel amongst your viewers.

Take the story forward: “The End” caption works for the movies, not for the TV news stories. Remember that the end of your news script should encourage the audience to come back to your channel. They should have the interest to know what will happen next.

Example: -

Consider this sentence, “The union cabinet will take a call on the ‘one rank, one pension’ scheme in its next meeting.”

Now read this, “We will update you about the outcome of the next meeting of union cabinet on the ‘one rank, one pension’ scheme.”

While the first sentence leaves the viewers in suspense, the second generates curiosity as well as reinforces that your reporter will follow the story further. It is always good to promise to your viewers that you will return with updated information. It helps to build a sense of loyalty amongst TV news viewers.

Check Your Progress 2

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

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

1. When it is said that your news script should be ‘active’, what does it mean?

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2. How can you make your script people-centric?

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3. What care should one take while using figures in a news script?

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4. Why is it advisable to write a script which takes the story forward?

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12.3.3 How to Write an Anchor-Package

The Anchor-package has two parts. The first part is the anchor-link or intro of the news. Here you inform your viewers about the main news and give the basic information. You should not infuse too much information in the intro because it may confuse the viewer. You should just include one or two key points in the sentence. Normally, the intro consists of two or three sentences. The second part is the body of the package. Here, the visuals and bytes are used and the complete story is presented for the viewers. There are some VOs (voice over) over which visuals are laid and bytes are inserted between two VOs to move the story forward. You should start with the best of the visuals you have, and your story should flow naturally. It is ideal to write TV news script according to visuals. An example of the script of anchor-package is given below:

(ANCHOR LINK)

The number of Indians getting EB-5 visas has jumped almost four-fold in the last 2 years. EB-5 visas promise foreigners a faster route to Permanent Residency in the United States of America. According to statistics issued by the US Department of State, at least 585 EB-5 visas were issued to Indians during the 12-month period ending September 2018. India is just behind China and Vietnam in getting the green card through this route.

PACKAGE

VO 1- United States of America or USA has been always a preferred living destination for rich Indians. That is why it is not surprising that in the last couple of years, the tendency to get the US citizenship by making investment there has surged. (GFX IN) According to the data released by US Department of State, 585 EB-5 visas were issued to the Indian citizens during the 12-month period ending September 2018. This number was mere 174 in the 12-month period ending September 2017. When compared with the same period ending September 2016, the number of 2018 is almost 4 times, as in 2016 the US Government has issued only 149 EB-5 visas to Indians. (GFX OUT) But what is the reason behind the renewed interest of rich Indians in getting US green card?

Byte- Rohit Pawar, MD, Bridge Overseas, Mumbai

(By September 2019, the applications for getting EB-5 visas can be increased to 1000. For the last 3 years, this number has seen only an upward growth and this trend is expected to grow further. The real estate community of the country has shown more interest in this as they want to take its benefit for securing the future of their children.)

VO 2- EB-5 visa promises a green card, if the applicant invests a minimum one-time stipulated amount of 5 lakh US dollars in certain specified areas. At the same time, the investment amount should be enough to provide fulltime employment to at least 10 persons there. This rule allows the person making investment to have green cards for two people. Wealthy Indians consider EB-5 visas a good and easy route to secure their future.

Byte- Mohit Pate, EB-5 Visa Applicant, Mumbai

(We can do business in USA as we are doing in India. But there we can get good higher education for our children as well as social security for us. We can spend our life comfortably there.)

VO 3- In USA, a total of 10,000 EB-5 visas can be issued to foreigners every year, but no country is allowed more than 7 percent of it. It means that no country will

be issued more than 700 EB-5 visas per year. The time taken to get the Permanent Residential status approval is normally 18 to 24 months. The number of Indian applicants currently rank behind China and Vietnam only. And it seems that the rich Indians are ready to wait for this period, or perhaps longer, for becoming green card holders. In Mumbai, XYZ (imaginary name of the reporter) reporting for ABC (imaginary name of the news channel).

In the above script, you can see that the scriptwriter has presented a trend amongst rich Indians to settle in America. This is written in explanatory nature. From the anchor links, it becomes clear that the content of the story will revolve around the increasing numbers of rich Indians who want to get green card. In the first VO, the numbers are given, and the instructions are also provided to insert and remove graphics (GFX) plate in the package. It helps the video editor to understand from where graphics plate will be inserted and where will it end. Similarly, the transcriptions of byte are also written in the script, so that the VO artist as well as the video editor of the package have full understanding of the story.

In the last VO, the reporter has signed off by mentioning his name. The idea is to register his presence at the place from where he has filed the report. It gives the viewers a feel that the information provided are genuine, original and first hand. Earlier, PTCs (piece to camera) were used to do the same thing but nowadays very few PTCs are being seen in news packages. If you know how to write anchor-package, you can write any script required for different stages of the news.

12.3.4 Writing News Feature and Documentary

Apart from script of a package, TV news writing also includes news features and documentaries. These are longer formats of news content and different in their approaches. You can consider them as the next levels of script writing (for the news content). We are going to discuss these formats briefly here.

News Feature: Writing for news feature is different from hard news scripts. Normally the feature writer has the liberty to show his/her writing skills and creativity. It is built around a news point and it contains those elements which can attract the viewers. As feature writing is more a show of skill, it does not follow any set pattern. Each feature writer can develop his/her own style. Moreover, the style may differ from subject to subject. But there are some points which should be kept in mind while writing the news feature scripts.

- i. **Exploring the angles of the story:** Before writing, it is imperative to find out all the possible angles of the story. But at the same time, you can not include all the angles of the issue in a single story because it will become too long. So you will require to choose a couple of angles which you find more appropriate than others and around which you would like to narrate the story.
- ii. **Proper research about the story:** You must research properly about the subject which is the basis of your script. Research may include talking to the people having expertise in the subject, sourcing as much information about it as possible and trying to find any previous feature story on the same subject by any other news organisation. This will help you to structure your script.
- iii. **Writing script according to the mood of the story:** You should remember that being a feature story, it has not to be written necessarily in the inverted pyramid style. Here you are telling a story to the viewer and your goal is to give them a real feel of the subject. You must stick to the theme and mood of the story in your writing. There is no need to describe those things which are

not relevant to the story. You can add colour, drama and punch in the story but these should fit in your theme.

Documentary: Documentary is also a longer format. New York Film Academy defines documentary as something which is fascinating and which captures the brilliance of humanity when executed thoroughly. A documentary is a result of very hard work and it demands a lot of time, energy and resource to be mobilised. A good documentary is written skilfully, catches people’s attention and touches their feelings and communicates efficiently. A documentary is much more and much different than a news report but just like the news, your documentary should be able to connect with the viewers. New York Film Academy says, “Documentaries are real, with real people and dealing with real issues that are powerful and hit us at our core. Let your writing reflect those deep, moving messages and capture your audience emotionally.” Therefore, before writing documentary script, you should have a clear and precise idea of your subject. You must have the understanding of how the story will be delivered. In fact, before writing a documentary script, you must complete your research, collect the required data and shoot the interviews, etc. Once you have all the materials, you can filter the required ones and start writing the script of the documentary. You must remember that writing is an art and you need to practice regularly in order to improve your artistry. Also, every artist has his/her unique style and creativity, similarly, every news writer has his/her own style of expression. You should study the writing styles of others but try not to copy anyone but to develop your own style.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** 1) Use the space provided below for your answers.
2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. What is the difference between writing for hard news and a news feature in television?

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12.4 LET US SUM UP

As television is one of the most popular and powerful media of mass communication, you need to be doubly sure before telecasting any news item. Every news item must follow the basic principle of answering 5Ws & 1H. Remember the KISS (Keep It Short and Simple) formula for script writing for TV news.

And, because of its audio-visual nature, in TV news writing, you need to focus not only on words but on visuals as well. It must be kept in mind that the words and visuals match as well as complement each other while presenting on screen. People-centric news scripts generate more interest amongst viewers. The aim of the script writer is to present the news in such a way that people feel connected and benefitted by that. Also, the story should move forward so that the viewers can develop a sense of loyalty towards the broadcaster. TV news writing also includes feature as well as documentary writing. The approach of writing these scripts may be different but the basics of script writing remain the same.

12.5 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

Barnas, F. (2018). Broadcast news writing, reporting, and producing. New York: Routledge.

Block, M. (2011). Writing broadcast news: Shorter, sharper, stronger: A professional handbook. Washington, DC: CQ Press.

Broadcast & Online Journalism (MJM-023), IGNOU, Delhi

12.6 KEY WORDS

Byte : A short and relevant part of interview (on camera) of a person related to the news story. 'Byte' and 'Bite' are used interchangeably.

Voice Over : An audio which describes and explains the visuals.

Anchor Link : The content spoken by the news anchor.

GFX : GFX stands for graphics.

12.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. The golden rule of news writing is K.I.S.S. It stands for Keep it short and simple. It means that while writing news, the scriptwriter should use easy to understand words which are part of our daily conversations. The sentences should be short so that the target audience can understand them easily.
2. It is expected from any news item that it will answer the 5Ws & 1H i.e. (Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?). But the most important aspect is 'What' and in most cases, the news answers the 'What' aspect first. It is because the viewers will be interested to know what happened before going into the details of any event.

Check Your Progress 2

1. The news script should be written in active voice sentences as much as possible. The sentences written in passive voice are longer and give unnecessary twist to the structure of the sentence which is not suitable for television.
2. To make the news script people-centric, it is necessary that the same should be presented with facts or information which are going to impact the lives of people. Mere presentation of press releases or raw information in a dry manner will not be attractive for viewers. Viewers will be interested to know whether the aired news has anything to do with their daily lives.
3. It is always advisable to refrain oneself from using too many mathematical figures in news scripts as they may take more time to be understood. So, if there is a need to use figures in a script, it should be made as simple as possible. Scriptwriter should try to connect those figures with some daily life activities so that the viewers can relate to them and their interest is retained.

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4. If a script takes the story forward, it shows that the channel is following the story and will update the viewers as and when the further information are made available. It helps to build a loyal viewer base for the channel.

Check Your Progress 3

1. In hard news script, the writer cannot take any liberty to beautify the script, but in a news feature the writer has the option to present the script in an attractive way. Feature writing does not necessarily follow the pattern set for the hard news. A feature is normally made on soft news or when the hard news needs to be presented along with different perspectives.



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