

WRITING FOR RADIO

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by

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Before a writer can attempt to write for radio he must accept the fact that radio writing is basically different from any other type. Radio requires what is known as an aural style of writing, which is quite different from the well known visual style. Writing for the ear has its own peculiar conventions with certain special conditions which must be followed if any degree of perfection is to be attained. Since radio is the only medium of expression that depends entirely upon the ear for comprehension, delivery cannot be supplemented by movement, gestures, or facial expression, as in the theater or upon the public platform.

Good radio writing, no different in these respects from any other kind, must have a strong structure with the relation of each of its parts to the others clearly defined. There should be a natural flow of words and ideas from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, throughout the entire work. Of particular importance in aural writing is the ability to be concise, using specific words and terms to create concrete ideas that can be immediately understood. To achieve this, short, forceful words are used in preference to longer and less emphatic ones. "Food" is a better word than "viands" just as the term "he is dead" is better than "he has passed away". To be more forceful, "give me that book" is preferred to "I demand that you surrender that volume".

More effective diction is also achieved by words with a high sound effect value. The use of words whose sound suggests

their meaning--- onomatopoeia --- is most important as these few samples, "tinkle", "roar", "crunch", and "soothe" demonstrate. Suggestive words that not only have a specific meaning but also are rich in connotation give the writing life and warmth. "He rapidly ascended the stairs" does not give the listener the same feeling received from "he dashed madly up the stairs".

With these general differences in mind, let us now take up some more specific ones. The literary style is more formal and more complex in structure than the aural style because it is written for the eye instead of the ear. If the train of thought in a particularly difficult passage of any written material is lost, the reader need only run his eyes back to the beginning to pick it up again. Words once spoken, however, cannot be reclaimed by those who did not understand them the first time. Thought groups in the literary style are indicated by paragraphs, with special emphases expressed by italics and boldface, whereas aural writing must depend upon voice inflection, stress, and pauses to indicate different ideas.

Another difference which strongly affects writing in radio is the one of vocabulary. That of the literary world is considerably larger than that of the speaking world. The same number of words are available to both but it is a known fact that readers fail to recognize, and use, in speech approximately nine out of every ten words they are familiar with on sight. A word must be instantly familiar to the listener if he is to get the gist of what is being said. There is no time for him to look it up in the dictionary. Also, a word is always the

same in print no matter how many different books use it nor how many different printers set it up in type. But this is not so in radio. Every person who speaks that word gives it a different inflection which, coupled with geographic variances in accent, sometimes arouses doubt in the mind of the listener as to just what he actually did hear. These are the sort of traps that catch the unwary scriptwriter if he is not conscientious about his work. All listeners know that the people they hear over the radio are reading prepared scripts. However, they prefer to believe that all they hear is really spontaneous. So it is up to the scriptwriter to sustain this illusion by using as much colloquial construction and diction as he knows. "Can't" and "won't" are used instead of "can not" and "will not" in the same manner that characters will say "I want to go to bed", not "I wish to retire". In other words, the writer must employ the simpler, more familiar expressions of ordinary speech in the loose constructions used in daily conversation.

All of these differences should help the writer to keep in mind the basic conception of radio writing---that it is a composition in sound. The sound symbols of speech must be coupled with the sounds of music, the roaring of the elements, or any of an infinite number of other sound effects, in order to create a more comprehensive association of ideas. It is a mistaken idea that radio writing is merely the putting of special types of words on paper. That is only a part of the task. Each word, phrase, and sentence may be said in many ways. The writer must indicate how he wishes this to be done. Perhaps he wants a soft, mellow voice to read certain lines, or this phrase must

be loud for special effect, so he indicates this by writing in specific instructions. He might desire a particular kind of music in a certain place in the program to set the mood, or to follow in the background certain lines in order to strengthen the characterization. All this is creative work, which makes it the job of the writer not the producer or director. They have enough to do in interpreting the script and producing it without having to fill in background material that an inexperienced or lazy <sup>writer</sup> did not do himself.

Now that the selection of words, in respect to their meaning, has been considered, the characteristics of sound itself should be explained. These are:

1. Pitch
2. Volume
3. Quality
4. Duration
5. Distance
6. Juxtaposition
7. Acoustical relationship

The writer should know that, in general, low pitches are pleasing, rising and high pitches are irritating up to a certain point and become less so as the sound continues up beyond the limit of human perception. In some cases, with the appropriate accompanying sounds or dialogue, a rising pitch is exciting rather than irritating. Audiences usually are soothed and comforted by low volume, but become more disturbed as the volume becomes greater until a point of actual pain may be reached. The quality of a sound is described as harsh, or mellow, strident or soft, exciting or soothing, and so on. The quality may also be full and vibrant or thin and mechanical. Timing, pace, and rhythm patterns are made possible by extending

or limiting the duration of these sounds. The ability of the ear to recognize the distance to a sound is helpful under certain conditions, particularly because it is so closely linked to the recognition of juxtaposition of sound which means having several different sounds introduced at the same time with the ear determining the distance and peculiar characteristics in pitch, volume, and direction of each sound simultaneously with the others. The ear also can recognize differences in the acoustical relationships of sounds, the quality being radically changed according to the type of space enclosing the sound. A sound outdoors is natural, but originate it in a tightly closed place like a small room and the change in quality is immediately apparent in the booming result.

Knowing that there are different sound characteristics does not aid the writer if he does not know how they can be used. By means of high pitches the writer can place the audience in a receptive mood for a particular program, such as a variety show. For instance, a swing version of "On The Sunny Side Of The Street" coupled with a loud, hearty reading of the following lines prepares the audience for a stimulating half hour:

JOED: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome for the first time to Something On The Lighter Side... a half hour of fun and frolic, mirth and melody, jive and jargon, or what have you. These shows are presented by the students of Rutgers University, here in New Brunswick... you've had breakfast at Sardi's... luncheon with Lopez, and supper at the Chesterfield Club... now we serve you

Something On The Lighter Side!!! Come over here, Bill Faherty. It's time for you to take over and tell the audience exactly what's in store for them tonight.

BILLF: Thanks, Joe Dembo... I know Joe wasn't fooling you folks, because we do have a wonderful show lined up for you tonight. There's comedy... music by George Bache and his Men of Melody... songs by lovely Joan Powers... so stand by, ladies and gentlemen, while the band starts our show with "Swanee Ribber."

MUSIC: BAND PLAYS "SWANNEE RIBBER" IN THEIR OWN FASHION

The quality of the sound is controlled to keep the audience in this frame of mind by continuing with the modern, syncopated arrangement of "Swanee River." Notice also the type of words that are used: "frolic," "jive," "jargon," all relatively short, harsh words with many stimulating consonants which, when combined with the short, stacatto phrases in the second speech, continue the desired effect. The free and easy style is achieved by the use of many contractions and colloquialisms such as "you've," "it's," "what's," and "what have you," "take over," "in store for," and "wind up."

The most obvious method of controlling volume is, of course, to write specific directions into the script. This is done when volume changes are required, coupled with a subtle increase in actors' voices and a different choice of words. In the following selection notice how the mood of the audience is directed from seriousness to a suspense that is built up in a series of

anti-climaxes to the final climax, only to suddenly be changed into relieving laughter.

BILLF: And now, we present to you Professor Horace N. Carriage of our Bureau of Archaeological and Historical Research. Professor Carriage has come here tonight especially to release to the waiting world his authentic account of this historical meeting between Stanley and Dr. Livingston...Professor Carriage.

PROF: Good evening. After having spent the last twenty years in extensive research, I have uncovered sufficient data to reconstruct the actual... authentic...account of this stirring, but almost tragic, moment in history.

Let us picture for a time the interior of d-a-r-k-e-s-t Africa... (SNEAK IN JUNGLE DRUM BEATS, FADE UP TO FULL AND MIX WITH FOUR SLOW FOOTSTEPS WHICH SIMULATE PLODDING THROUGH A MIRE, FOOTSTEPS STOP ,DRUMS UNDER AS) After months of fruitless search Stanley is tirelessly plodding thru the dense... tropical...s-t-e-a-m-i-n-g...jungles (SLIGHT PAUSE) on his seemingly endless trek---his mission...(PAUSE, THEN DRAMATICALLY) to find Dr. Livingston. (DRUMS OUT)

STANLEY: (WEAKLY) Dr. Livingston... (VERY WEAKLY IN A HIGH, UNCERTAIN VOICE WHICH CRACKS) Dr. L-i-v-ingston-n-n???

BIZ: THREE SECONDS OF DEAD AIR AS

PROF: (DRAMATICALLY AND FAST) Suddenly... Stanley stumbles into a native village. In desperation he seeks the

hut of the chieftain(SNEAK IN DRUMS) and from him  
learns the whereabouts of Dr. Livingston...

BIZ: BRING DRUMS UP TO FULL AND OUT AS

CHIEF: Ugga-bugga- boo. Hey bop da ree bop!

BIZ: THREE SECONDS SILENCE FOR LAUGH THEN

PROF: Upon learning this startling information, Stanley  
plunges with renewed vigor into the hot jungles,  
almost within reach of his goal. (SLOWLY, REVERENTLY)  
In a secluded spot...deep in the Congo...(IN A RISING  
TEMPO) Stanley finds Dr. livingston!!!

BIZ: THREE SECONDS OF DEAD AIR AS

PROF: (IN A HUSHED, DEADLY SERIOUS TONE) Ladies and Gentlemen...  
we now bring to you this joyous meeting between these  
two famous men...

BIZ: SNEAK DRUMS IN LOW AND FADE OUT AS

STAN: (IN A BOISTEROUS, HAIL-FELLOW-WELL-MET, VOICE)

Hiya Doc!

DR.LIV. ( IN A SIMILAR "BUGS BUNNY" VOICE)

Hiya Stan!

BIZ: STUDIO LAUGHTER. THEN

BILLF: (WITH A HEARTY LAUGH) Yes...yes. Wonder what the  
Professor has to reveal to the world next week?

BIZ: PIANO BEGINSINTRO BARS TO NEXT NUMBER AS

The script content, plus the use of the drum sounds,  
quickly and easily takes the listener to the scene of the action.  
In this example, the narrator, in the person of the professor,  
must be able to change his voice level, volume, and quality in  
order to obtain the maximum effect from the lines.

Specifically, sound may be <sup>used for</sup> the following purposes:

1. To set a scene or establish a locale.
2. To project action, both real and dramatic.
3. To create mood or atmosphere.
4. To achieve climax, or extend and intensify climax.
5. To establish time.
6. To indicate entrances and exits.
7. To act as theme signature of trademark for a program.
8. To serve as a transition device between scenes.
9. To contribute to the montage effect.

Music, one type of sound available to the writer, serves many purposes similar to the above general list:

1. To serve as a sound effect.
2. To serve as accentuation or as payoff.
3. To provide comedy.
4. To serve as background.

Now that the writer has the knowledge of what to do and how to do it, some tools are necessary before he can begin to work. The mechanics of radio writing are quite simple. First there is the format to be considered. This is a general outline followed by the writer for each program. A series of programs with the same content would follow the same format as to layout, number and type of characters, style of dialogue, and type of music. Although they do vary, a standard title page contains such information as:

1. The advertiser
2. The author
3. The program title
4. The outlet(station over which it is broadcast)

5. The time of the broadcast
6. The date of the broadcast
7. The day
8. The announcer
9. The engineer
10. The production director
11. Remarks

In some cases the complete cast is also listed on the title page along with the list of sound effects and musical selections.

Each inside page should contain the number of the page, the title of the script, the name of the series if one exists, and the number in the series of that particular script.

Only that material to be spoken by the characters is written in lower-case letters. All other material, such as character names, cues, special directions, names of songs, records, and so forth, are put in capital letters. By doing this the characters will not find themselves reading stage directions instead of their regular lines. The names of speakers, characters, and cue indications like BIZ.(business),SOUND, and MUSIC are placed out in the left-hand margin in capital letters for each speech and indication to be made. Stage and sound directions in the middle of a speech are all in capital letters and enclosed in parentheses. All copy is double spaced. For ease in referring to particular lines it is recommended that all lines be numbered from the top to the bottom of the page and, where possible, in a different colored ink from that used in the general script.

A large supply of twenty- or twenty-four pound sulphide paper stock should be at hand as well as plenty of the best carbon

paper, follow sheets for four copies, and many new typewriter ribbons for good, dark copy. Heavy manila envelopes with plenty of postage completes the list except for a good typewriter, which should be kept in good repair all the time.

Subscriptions to Broadcasting Magazine, Radio Daily, Variety, and Advertising Age will be up-to-date supplements to the necessary reference material found in the following:

1. A dictionary, preferably abridged
2. A fairly voluminous encyclopedia
3. An almanac
4. An atlas with maps showing fairly large-scale details of all parts of the world
5. A thesaurus
6. A book of quotations or quotation references
7. A radio yearbook
8. A set of music catalogues obtainable at any record shop

Upon consideration, the prospective radio writer might assume now that with these fundamentals under control, it is relatively easy to write a script. After all, he thinks, radio scripts are all written for the ear regardless of content, but he soon discovers otherwise. There are probably as many different types of radio writing as there are types of literary writing and each has its own particular problems.

Continuity writing is undoubtedly the most-important general type and one which is, unfortunately, the most drudging at times. Continuity consists of the spoken lines which connect songs, records, guests, commercials, and numerous other items in such a way that a steady flow of ideas is put across to the listener. One of the special types of continuity is that written for

music programs using recorded and live talent. Another is that contained in what are called talk programs---those involving radio speeches of individuals and running dialogue for interview programs. Still others are audience-participation shows and those classed as feature programs. The features are called that because they do not fall in any particular category. A glance at these titles will show why: Cooking School, Safety Court, Reading the Funnies, Fashion Flashes, The Answer Man, and Luncheon at the Waldorf.

Probably not so voluminous as continuity writing but certainly noticed more frequently by the listener is the commercial copy, which seems to be getting more flagrant than anyone thought possible. Commercials fall into one of four classes. The hitch-hike, which is the commercial placed at the very beginning or end of the show to advertise a minor product of the advertiser who is selling a major product over the program. Mention of a pipe tobacco at the end of a program selling cigarettes is a hitch-hike. Then there are spot announcements from which the station derives the largest part of its income. It is a commercial, usually one minute in length, which is not connected in any way to a definite program. On the other hand, there are participating spots given between the records of a program, the cost of which is paid for by a number of sponsors of that particular show. And finally there is the regular program commercial which is read at intervals during the show.

The last main type of writing is that of the drama. In radio this class is sub-divided into four sections---serial, episodic, unit, and dramatic narrative. Serials should require no more explanation than that required to differentiate them

from episodic dramas. The former is a continued story with the same characters, while the latter is a series of individual plots, each complete in itself, but using the same characters each time. A unit drama is a single complete program with a plot which is always concluded within that one presentation. Lux Radio Theater is a good example of this type. Used in telling a continuous story containing a variety of information, the dramatic narrative combines the sequence of dramatic scenes with a running commentary. This is the most popular type used for educational programs.

In conclusion, it must be noted that all these various techniques are only pieces that must be logically put together to obtain a single unified whole. Radio reaches the largest audience of any communication medium, and has the ability to deeply move the emotions of that audience. This power to profoundly affect people must be used wisely and well. Whether the writer will ever be able to take full advantage of this opportunity depends upon his ability to create a single skill from the individual talents he gradually acquires.

Radio is still an expanding field, as demonstrated by the five-fold increase in the number of licensed AM, FM, and television stations during the past few years. It contains a stirring challenge to the ambitious, imaginative writer to further develop and expand its already widespread activities.

(Authors note: the listed items in this paper are from Professional Radio Writing by Albert R. Crews)