

Notes on Media Writing by Shibani Phukan

We have already discussed writing/reporting for the newspaper quite extensively. So let's move on to writing for the radio and television now.

With any kind of scripting, or writing for a mass media, one needs to constantly remember that one is writing for a target audience or viewership. So one needs to know certain details about one's audience, the demography, the age bracket, whether it's a rural or urban audience, or a mix of both, if the programme is targeted at a specific gender, and of course the topic itself. Certain topics, say, for example, if you are going to discuss crimes against women, would automatically demand a more serious tone and approach. On the other hand, if, for example, one was discussing fashion for the summer season, a more casual and fun approach would be appropriate. The time-slot of the programme also is of much importance. By the time-slot, I mean whether a programme is meant to be an early morning one, an afternoon one or a late evening one. This is because, the time-slot, to some extent, organically generates a certain kind of audience or viewership. A programme meant to be aired in the afternoon automatically cancels out the working population. Similarly, one slotted for 4 in the evening could possibly be targeted towards a school-going audience who would be back home at this time and possibly relaxing in front of the television or listening to the radio. So once we figure out the essentials, it is time to move on to the other details.

To a great extent, there are quite a few things in common with regard to writing for the radio and television. The most important one is time, that is, writing according to a time-limit, similar to writing with a word-limit in mind when writing for the print media. The first thing to do when scripting for either the radio or television is to find out the time-span for the programme. But while doing so, you also need to find out the actual time which excludes time for advertisement breaks. You also need to know the frequency of these breaks so that you know the exact span of each segment. This is critical not only to determine the length of your script but also to ensure that the beginning and ending of each segment is smooth and not abrupt or awkward. The scripting, as already mentioned, depends on the structure of the programme. Is it a discussion, an interview, one in which audience/viewers could call-in? All this information is necessary towards writing a good and workable script.

Both the television and the radio are media in which the style of writing needs to be conversational. It is important that the script should not sound like you are simply reading aloud, it should not be stilted. However that does not mean that rules of grammar and decorum do not apply. It does indeed. Research is the key to successful scripting. So begin by finding out all possible details about the programme - time-span, time-slot, target audience, format etc. Do adequate research about the topic to be discussed, or the person you are interviewing, or an issue you are debating. As far as possible, a position of neutrality should be maintained. One can make one's point of view known but it should be an informed one and not one born out of biases. If you're interviewing somebody, have a questionnaire ready. Again, the more you know about the person you are interviewing, or the topic you are discussing with him or her; the better the interview would go. It is also a good idea to discuss the questionnaire prior to actually conducting the interview to take care of questions your guest may not want to answer or be comfortable about. Make sure to factor in the possible time that an interviewee would take to respond to a question. Make sure you have a good mix of short and long questions. In a discussion, make sure that the script is prepared in such a way that all have more or less an equal amount of time to have their say. The most important thing perhaps, when scripting for the radio or television is to be always ready to improvise.

USEFUL TIPS:

SCRIPTING FOR RADIO

1. Scripts usually have 3 elements:

The spoken word.

Music.

Sound effects.

2. Partial scripts:

Shows in which you need to ad-lib or improvise, such as interviews.

3. Full scripts:

The kind of script in which the entire script is read out, such as one for a news bulletin.

4. Scripts for music programmes:

You will need to find out the duration of the songs being played and factor that time into your script.

Also some information about the song or artiste could be added.

5. Rundown script/timeline/fact sheet:

It lists items in the show according to the time-slot available for it. For example, 5 minutes for local news, 10 minutes for national and international news, 5 minutes for sports news and 2 minutes for weather updates, 3 minutes for traffic update in a 35 minute programme with 5 minutes to be factored in for an advertisement break.

SCRIPTING FOR TELEVISION

Scripting for television is a lot more complex.

1. If it is a feature programme, you will need a “spec” script. This is a script which is written to showcase your talent and also to give a sneak-peek into the kind of content you are planning to focus on.

2. You could prepare a “spec” episode if the script is for a show that is already in existence. For an original television show, you will create a “spec pilot.”

3. The above needs to be done keeping in mind whether you are scripting for a show aligned to a particular network. If that is the case, the network or production house is likely to have a more or less standard format. Some flexibility may be available but it would be within limits. Digital platforms like Netflix are more likely to be open to original, creative departures.

4. Choose a topic or a genre (drama, comedy etc). Research as much as possible about the topic you choose. In fact the choosing of the topic may itself need some research to enable you to find out what works and what doesn't.

5. Write a simple outline of the show. Create a story arc - possible ways in which the story will progress. Next, break it down into sequences, acts, episodes. The more contemporary thing to do is to create a “show bible.” This is a document that lays out the history of the characters or the path that will unfold, provides a brief outline of each episode for the first season or at least 5-6 episodes, and also suggests possible ways how the show could expand in the episodes to come.

6. Decide whether you want to create independent episodes or have some continuity.

7. Write the dialogues. Television scripts are dialogue-driven.

8. Always, always, be mindful of the run-time.

That's all for now. Now think of a radio or television show you are fond of, think of changes you would bring in, improvements you would make, go ahead and write a 30 minute script! Enjoy!

