
WRITING FOR RADIO

WRITING FOR RADIO IS DIFFERENT

Radio is a person to person medium. It is a one to one relationship - I, the presenter, am talking to you, the listener. When we talk to one another we use a different style of speech and different words to that used in literature. At school we learnt good grammar and a literary style of writing - the emphasis was much more on expressing ourselves on paper than verbally. If we are to write for radio we need to forget some of those things we've been taught, and learn instead to write in a colloquial, conversational style. The secret is to remember at all times that you are talking to one person, so you write as you would talk. Imagine one listener sitting with you and think of what you might say to him or her. Then speak to your listener. If possible say it before you write it down. Listen to yourself. If what you've said doesn't sound right, then try changing it until it sounds right.

If you can talk then you can write for radio.

Some of us are better at making conversation than others, but the fact is that we can all talk therefore we should all be able to write for radio. Some of us, however, will need more help than others if we are to become good writers.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD WRITER?

A good writer will have an interest in people, an interest in life, an ability to express himself well, and will know what he wants to say.

AN INTEREST IN PEOPLE

The best writers are those who are interested in people. Because a good writer is interested in people, he knows how they feel. He identifies with their joys and their struggles. He knows how they will react to things. He identifies with their emotions and he wants to share his own feelings. For example, a good writer doesn't simply say, he laughed. He will describe whatever caused his subject to laugh in such a way that the listener laughs too! Similarly with fear, anger or love. The good writer makes his listener respond emotionally to what he has to say. He is able by what he writes to produce a response in the listener. As Christians our aim is to see people turn to Christ and put their trust in Him. If we are to see this happen we must be interested in our listeners - we need to know what concerns them, what they feel strongly about, what they enjoy ... Only then can we communicate with them in a way which causes them to respond to what we have to say. In other words, we must know our listeners. And this may mean taking time to find out about them.

An interest in people is particularly important when writing for radio, because the very nature of radio is personal. It is a one to one medium. You, the presenter, are talking to one listener. You are not giving a public address, nor a sermon, nor a lecture... You are holding a conversation with one other person - your listener. You are a guest in the listener's home, and if you use radio well you may through time become a friend.

AN INTEREST IN LIFE

A good writer will be interested in life. He may be a visionary, with ideas and dreams about what he will write, but he is not a visionary with his head in the clouds. He has his feet firmly on the ground. He knows the problems that real people are facing, and he addresses his writing to them. He speaks to his listener about real situations and real issues that trouble him, and he seeks to help him towards finding answers to his problems.

Because a good writer is interested in life, he is a good observer. He watches what goes on in the world around him. He sees how people act and react. He is conscious of world events and is aware of how they affect people's lives and thinking. He is therefore able to talk to people in their situation. When he writes, he also describes things so that the listener can picture them, and it gives life to his writing.

An enquiring mind is a normal characteristic of one who is interested in life. He is always looking for more - for new information. He reads widely. He does not merely repeat what others have said. He asks questions. He thinks through problems. He suggests answers. However he does not give the impression that he knows it all.

AN ABILITY TO EXPRESS ONESELF WELL

Some people think that the most important quality in a writer is the ability to express himself or herself accurately by using exactly the right words. It is certainly true that a writer needs to be able to use words in the right way, but if you have only an ability with words you are much more likely to be an editor than a writer. A writer needs, above all, an interest in people.

KNOWS HIS MESSAGE

A good writer also needs to know his message. The scriptwriter must be able to think clearly and logically if he is going to communicate that message in a way which is easily understood. Radio is unlike paper in that it does not allow the opportunity to go over something again. If your listener does not understand the first time, he cannot ask you to repeat that sentence for him. Therefore before you start writing you need to decide exactly what it is you want to say and how you are going to say it. Remember too that a good writer always starts with something that is familiar to the listener. This is especially important if you're going to talk about something he or she may not be familiar with, for if he doesn't know what you're talking about to start with, he will probably switch off.

A FEW GUIDELINES FOR CONVERSATIONAL WRITING

As a preface to this section it is worth pointing out too that these guidelines have been written for the English language. When you come to write a script in another language you will probably need to adjust some of the guidelines to suit the way in which that language is spoken. Remember too that most of these are guidelines rather than fixed rules. When writing for radio the only rule is:

SPEAK TO YOUR LISTENER

The rule is: Always remember that you are speaking to your listener, not writing to him. Say it before you write it down, and listen to yourself. If it sounds wrong then change it for something that sounds right. If it sounds right then it probably is right, even though it may not look correct.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

We have already said that Radio is a person to person medium - you the presenter are talking to one listener. Your ultimate aim is not just to make good radio programmes, but to become a friend who is respected and listened to. Only then will what you say be taken seriously - and you want your listener to take seriously what you tell him .

HOW CAN WE MAKE IT PERSONAL?

First of all, get into the habit of using I and you when talking to the listener. This is how we speak in everyday conversation, and even though you can't see your listener you should still talk as if you could. This will help to make him or her feel that you are a real person conversing with them.

Remember too that people are generally interested in other people - in their thoughts and experiences. The listener needs to get to know you, your character and personality, if he is going to treat you as a friend. Draw on other people's experiences too.

Don't just talk theory when you're trying to share christian truth. You need to apply what you say to the issues that people meet in real life. Don't be afraid to tackle the problems - you may not solve some of them, but at least you are acknowledging that this is what your listener is facing. Share too some of the good things - he may need a little bit of joy in his life! But do remember that if you give him something to laugh about, you need to also allow him time to laugh before you move onto the next thing.

MAKE PICTURES

It's said that the best radio creates pictures in the listener's mind. What you say needs to give the listener enough information to get him thinking and imagining the scene that you are painting.

ACTIVE

The best way to make pictures is by keeping your script active. The story needs to keep moving. Don't spend a lot of time on describing the setting - concentrate instead on the action, the events themselves. Make the characters do things. Keep the language active too. Words which themselves create pictures are good - e.g. idled, swarming, alive with ants, crash... Strong colourful verbs are better than adjectives. And verbs need to be in the active voice - i.e. telling of actions that produce change, not of changes that occurred as a result of actions.

NUMBERS AND SIZES

When writing for radio numbers and sizes need to be easy to relate to, otherwise they will be missed. Thus it's normally better to round off figures - e.g. 4965 becomes nearly 5000. This is easier to grasp. Compare sizes with a known quantity - as high as a double decker bus or as tall as a giraffe. Make the comparison relevant to your listener. This helps to lend colour and create a picture. It is also better to write out numbers as this is often easier to read - four hundred instead of 400.

Try to use words that you can see.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

GRAMMAR

Don't insist on perfect grammar. It can sound strange to the listener. You need to speak naturally, so feel free to do things like:

1) Use contractions as in speech -

can't instead of can not

we're instead of we are, etc.

2) Start sentences with and or but

3) Use incomplete sentences

e.g. I turned the radio on. Not a sound.. It was dead.

4) In English that is often omitted in speech.

Remember, if it sounds right, it probably is right.

VOCABULARY

Watch your language. Keep the vocabulary simple. The vocabulary of the spoken word is 20% of that of the written word. Therefore use only words which you know the meaning of and would naturally use in speech.

Destroy not obliterate

Put out not extinguish

Poverty not penury

Make sure too that you say what you mean - some words sound the same or have more than one meaning - e.g. bear and bare; semolina and salmonella!

PUNCTUATION

Punctuation needs to be for sound. Use plenty of fullstops, dots and dashes. This makes it more natural by adding pauses, and it will also be easier to read.

There we were trapped by the sea - no way out of the cave. Peter knew we were here ... but would he get to us in time?

... can indicate a longer pause than --

Adopt a method, then stick to it - it saves confusion.

SENTENCE LENGTH

Examine your sentence length. Don't use any more words in a sentence than you can say without breathing, but do vary the length and the pattern or word order. Look at the sentence: its length, its sound. It shouldn't be too complicated, nor should it be too simple.

THINGS TO AVOID

There are a number of particular things that need to be avoided when writing for speech;

REPETITION

Avoid repetition of words where possible. Keep it only if it sounds right or if emphasising a point. Look out too for assonance (repetition of the same sound) - e.g. Mr Brown went down town. This can be difficult to say. The same is true of alliteration - e.g. quite quickly. ps and ss are even more likely to cause problems. Read what you've written and if you stumble over it then change it.

FAVOURITE WORDS

We all have favourite words - words which we use frequently without even being aware of them. Among the most common are actually, really, more or less, well... Find out what yours is (or are!) and beware of using it too often.

CLICHES AND JARGON

Clichés, or well-worn phrases, can sound trite or meaningless. The occasional one in the right place may be very good, but too many will soon become noticeable to the listener. Jargon is also to be avoided. This is in group language, and will not be understood by outsiders, so should not be used.

LINK WORDS

The use of link words can help your script to flow along. Words such as that reminds me, so, and, for instance, well... There are many of these in everyday use, so use them as you would naturally in speech. Sometimes a question can act as a link too. It is also important that thoughts and ideas should flow logically. For instance, always establish the context before the action, and don't jump from one scene to another without making it clear to the listener in some way.

BE SINCERE

Above all be sincere, for your listener will know whether or not you are being honest with him. Insincerity in whatever form can lead to losing the respect and friendship of your listener, so a little care here can be of great value. Here are a few things to look out for:

You need to involve yourself in what you're saying otherwise it will sound insincere - as if you don't really care or believe it yourself. Try to identify with him or her as far as possible. Beware especially of correcting your listener - You may wish to change his way of thinking, but you cannot do that by telling him he's wrong. Nor should you give the impression that you know it all and he doesn't. Condescension goes hand in hand with insincerity.

Linked with sincerity is truth. Any facts given ought to be checked. If you get something wrong, someone is bound to notice. You may get away with it once, but too often and you will not be trusted... Yet another aspect of this is love. Don't be negative about others, even if you disagree with them. Present your point of view by all means, but don't criticise others, whether Christians or non-Christians

GIVING SHAPE TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Every programme should have a beginning, a middle and an end.

TELL THEM WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO TELL THEM

The most important part of any programme is the beginning or the opening. You need to tell the listener why he has to stay with you. This means you have to get his attention within the first few seconds. Persuade him he wants to hear more. You can try starting with one of the following:

- A statement of fact which will make him sit up
- A concrete example of what you're going to talk about
- A teaser to create intrigue or suspense
- A brief story which illustrates your point

The opening should always lead the listener on to the main body of the programme. It should indicate what it's all about.

THEN TELL THEM

Then you can say whatever it is you really want to say. There are different methods of doing this, and you can choose whichever you think fits the message best. e.g. drama, documentary, talk, magazine...

AND THEN TELL THEM WHAT YOU'VE TOLD THEM

As much care should be taken in preparing the end or closing as was taken with the opening. What is most likely to be remembered is the last thing you said - so you will probably in some way repeat what you've just said. Your closing needs to be concise. A brief statement is enough but it must be relevant. Beware of just finishing by talking about nothing in particular - end on a positive note.

Above all, do end before the end - you don't want to be cut off in mid-sentence because you've run out of time!

GETTING THE CORRECT LENGTH

Work out the length first so that you know how much to write. As a guide allow for 150 - 160 words per minute. (The speed will vary according to the format and the station you are using.) Don't forget to include any time taken up by music or inserts - e.g. opening or closing music; disc played; pre-recorded interview; etc.

SCRIPT EDITING

You may sometimes need to edit or check a script written by someone else. This involves applying the same guidelines as you would use when writing for yourself. The main difference is that you need to remember who is to present the script. It is their personality that must come through, not yours. You need to know the presenter if at all possible, so that you can if necessary adjust the script to their normal style of speech. For instance, a lively presenter should not be expected to present a script that is very relaxed and slow moving; nor vice versa!

Check that:

- Timing is right. Content is relevant and accurate
- It is suited to the target audience and also to the presenter
- Information is not too technical and Material is not negative
- Spiritual point is well treated and fits in with rest of programme
- Any important information is given clearly
- All the guidelines for writing for radio have been observed

WRITING AND OBSERVATION

It helps a great deal to explain things if you are able to describe them using the observation technique. As we said earlier that radio is a pictorial medium and we should show our listeners and not just tell them. The following will be very useful in describing a script when you write.

WAYS OF SEEING

- Colour
- Texture
- Shape
- How many?
- How much?
- Position/Location - Surrounding
- Gesture/Action
- Intention/Purpose: Why?
- Character - What it looks like/Impression it gives?

WAYS OF HEARING

- Foreground noise: constant/occasional
- Unusual
- Texture (thud, piercing, hard, soft, cold, sharp, metallic etc.)

WAYS OF FEELING

- Temperature
- Texture (Smooth, silky, rough)
- Hardness/Softness
- Purpose (to soothe, frighten)

WAYS OF SMELLING & TASTING

- Good/bad
- What does it smell like?
- What memories does it evoke?
- Sweet Bitter
- Taste
- Strength
- Texture (sharp,dusty etc.)

When you include information about these senses the picture comes alive and your script will create an atmosphere in listener's mind and in imagination the listener will be there where your script is.