

Writing a Radio Script

Adapted from an article by Dave Gilson

Writing for radio is different than writing for print. You're writing for the ear, not the eye. Listeners have to get it the first time around- they can't go back and hear it again (unlike re-reading a sentence in a magazine). And while a reader may get up and come back to an article, a radio listener who gets up may not come back. So you want to grab their attention and hold onto it for as long as possible. Writing feature stories is also different than writing news copy. You can loosen up a little. You can be more literary, more creative, more personal. This handout is a quick guide to writing a script for a feature radio story.

Getting Started: Logging Audio

After you've finished your research & recording, it's time to log your audio. This means listening to everything you've recorded and writing it up. You should transcribe quotes, note who's saying what, and time how long individual pieces are. Highlight or mark tracks you know you want to come back to. Obviously, don't log the audio you know you won't use.

Choosing Your Acts

After you've logged your tape, you should select the tracks you want to use (tracks are also called cuts, soundbites, or actualities). Cuts generally shouldn't be longer than 30 seconds- you only have a few minutes and besides, most radio listeners have short attention spans. (If you have a great long cut, you can break it up with your narration or edit it down). Don't just choose cuts purely based on what's said- also consider how it's said. Think about how your cuts will fit into your story structure- do they describe something, tell a story, make you laugh, make you scratch your head? Your actualities should advance the story and make it interesting.

Starting to Write

As you start writing your script, you probably already have a good idea what your story's going to sound like. You've listened to all the clips and ambiance, maybe selected some music. You may have talked about the story with a friend or editor. Basically, you already have all the elements floating around in your head. Start writing your script by laying out all your cuts in the order you think you're going to use them. Then start writing your narration around them.

Telling a Story

As you write your narration, try to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Draw listeners into the story by setting a scene, raising a question, playing a weird noise, or introducing a character. Use narrative elements like foreshadowing, suspense, and scene changes to move the story along.