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Introduction

It seems that a lot of people at some time in their lives have wanted to work in radio. Now, with community broadcasting firmly established in Australia and around the world, aspirants can have their dreams easily fulfilled. Community radio really is for everyone. Age is no restriction. Many people become presenters after their retirement, others contribute to radio while they are still attending school.

This book concentrates on community radio, because that is where there are opportunities to be creative with radio. Most commercial stations, and state-run broadcasters do not present the range of programs they did in the 1950s and the 1960s. But community radio can fill that gap. Community radio can be the starting point for many careers in radio, and your involvement in your community radio can be viewed as just the starting point.

Radio can be fun and exciting. But, for those not properly prepared and trained for the tasks ahead of them, radio work can also be a daunting experience.

While many people would like to write for radio, they do not know how to go about developing their ideas, or, once basic ideas are written down, how to develop them into material suitable for radio. Consequently, most programs on community radio stations are music programs. The aim of this book is to show that there is much, much more to radio than being just another disc jockey.

What's radio all about then? It's about entertaining people. It's about educating them. It's about amusing them. It's a process of enriching the lives of others.

At the same time, it should be a process whereby you, the writer or presenter of programs on radio, are fulfilled by being creative, producing and presenting programs that are fresh and original.

Radio is a medium for the sense of hearing alone. Block out all other senses, and radio is still there in all its richness. Writing for radio demands special consideration—how to achieve that richness through the exclusive use of sound. Radio is demanding, and therein lies the challenge.

Radio is about doing something that enhances your enjoyment of the arts and entertainment. Radio is a way to expand talents which you may not have had the opportunity to use in the past. It may be that you see a gap in existing radio programming and feel that others could benefit from, or appreciate a new and hopefully exciting type of program. Here's your opportunity to do something about filling that gap and providing the audience with something they want to hear.

RADIO IS A UNIQUE MEDIUM

Unlike commercial radio, community radio does not have sponsors dictating program policy and content. It is for everyone—it is there for everyone to listen to, and for everyone to become involved in. Yes, everyone. And that's what makes community radio so exciting.

The open, egalitarian nature of community radio means that you can offer your listeners more than many larger stations with their narrow formats. You can expand the range of your programs to include music (by far the most popular program to present), new dramas and radio comedies, or poetry readings which are seldom heard. Then there are the more serious programs on community radio, such as documentaries and news. All, more carefully tailored to the local audience.

Listen to radio as much as you can—community radio, public broadcasting and commercial stations. Don't just treat the radio as a source of background noise. Listen to programs that you like

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and try to analyse what it is you like about each of them – their formats, the way they are presented, the use of humour. Also listen to programs that you don't like, and similarly try to identify what it is that turns you off.

Many community radio stations run training courses for people who want to get involved. Ring your local station to find out more and establish contact.

A training session will only be a starting point. It will get you started and teach you the basics – which knob on the console does what. But it won't necessarily teach you all there is to know about radio, or give you a picture of its full scope. Training courses are essential, yet limited. It is up to you to make the most of community radio – your station. Time spent learning what can be achieved through radio and what it can offer you, as well as the listeners, will be time spent in a useful, enjoyable and rewarding way.

Whatever area of community radio you eventually decide to specialise in, you must learn the art of writing for radio. And editing. Editing is the art of re-writing, or improving any written work that you intend to present. Radio is not about using a lot of words. Good radio means using only the right words, and the right amount of those words. Try to abandon the belief that every word you write or say on air is sacred – be prepared to sacrifice surplus words. Deleting words, particularly from your own material, is like working in an overgrown garden – remove the weeds so that you can see the remaining gems with full clarity.

So let's start by looking at what goes into a radio script and how to put a script together.

Chapter 1 Writing Your Script For Radio

Some people can speak fluently without the use of notes. They can launch forth, as they put their thoughts together, without ‘uming’ and ‘ahing’ and producing the other meaningless grunts and groans that pepper our everyday speech. If you can do this, then you may feel that it would be a waste of time to meticulously produce a script and read from it, word for word. However, if you are not one of that very rare and fortunate breed, you should – must – write down everything you intend to say when the microphone is open.

Your script will keep you on track throughout your program. It will ensure that you say only what you intend to say, and no more. It will ensure that you say everything clearly, without repeating yourself unnecessarily. It will ensure that each part of your program follows from the previous one as was intended. If you become tongue-tied and find yourself floundering for words, there’s your next sentence, right in front of you, waiting to be read. A script will remove the tension many presenters encounter when the microphone is turned on and they are ‘ON AIR’.

Even with a well-prepared script, you may make some mistakes that will bring smiles to your listeners’ faces. But that is part of the fun of radio.

A prepared script should also ensure that your program runs to the correct length. If you forget a large chunk (perhaps through tension) you will end up having to play a lot of music at the end of your spoken segment just to fill in the allotted time. Your script will help you to keep all the points, or all the segments, of your

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program in the correct, logical, well-prepared and well-considered order.

WRITING STYLE

A radio script should be close to conversational speech in style. Write in a personal, friendly way. This does not mean that ‘ya write any ol’ thin’ and ‘ope she’ll do, will ya?’ By ‘conversational’ writing, I mean a more informal type of writing than you could expect to find in a well-written book, or a journal or magazine that’s been well edited. In writing for radio, you’ll round out the ‘they will’ to ‘they’ll’; the ‘who will’ to ‘who’ll’ and so on. In other words, write it just as you would speak it.

With radio, you can get away with breaking some rules of the English language—but avoid sloppiness. While many a successful radio script would probably be rejected if sent to a magazine for publication, because of ‘poor grammar’, be very careful not to take it too far.

One point in your favour is that, although some colloquial expressions look terrible on paper, at least no one other than yourself will ever see what you’ve written. Just ... be yourself: but, don’t overdo it, or else no one will understand what you mean. The entire script must make sense—not only to you but, more importantly, to your listener.

The idea in radio is to create pictures and to stimulate the imagination of the listener, and this is achieved by the careful selection of words, not by the unlimited use of adjectives.

Every word must be the right word. Every word you use must have the precise meaning that you intend. Every adjective should fit the noun perfectly. Unintentionally humorous phrases will arise for as long as people continue to write or speak.

Make sure that the words you use are real words—don’t make them up. The number of runs required by a cricket team are attainable—they are not ‘gettable’.

Above all, for anything other than a news bulletin where the writing should be more formal—be yourself.

Avoid using clichés. Clichés are those tired, worn-out phrases, such as 'on the back burner', or 'level playing field', that seem to be used in almost every news broadcast. Frequent use has rendered such phrases meaningless. Don't use them. Their use creates an impression of a stale imagination and an inability to think in an original way. Think of new terms, new ways of expressing ideas. Be fresh — don't copy someone else's worn-out language.

Some words, or combinations of words, are very awkward to say. When writing for radio: if you can't say it aloud easily the first time, say it in a different way.

CHOOSING YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY

Before considering how you will say something, you must of course decide exactly what it is you are going to say.

The first rule of scriptwriting is: keep to the point! If it's not relevant, cut it out. You can always file away those less than relevant literary gems for another day, and another program, when they might fit better.

Decide what you want to say. Define the point you want to get across to your listeners. Then decide how you are going to say it—that is, in which order you will assemble all the information you want to convey. What is your listener interested in? What do they want to learn from your program?

Keep your language simple. Don't use complicated sentence structures that might confuse the listener — no long, seemingly endless paragraphs. Keep sentences short and snappy. Keep paragraphs concise and crisp. Always keep meanings clear. Remember your listener. If what you have written is too complicated to understand without hearing it repeated several times, it will be lost on the listener, who does not have the luxury of your script to go back to and re-read. If your listener has to spend time thinking about a sentence, he or she will probably miss the next three or four. You can regard that person as a

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listener that you have just lost—radios are very simple devices to switch off.

Like some magazine articles, radio talks can sometimes take a long time to get to the heart of what they are trying to say. Despite the fact that the subject matter might be very interesting, impact is lost if an article is too waffly and too wordy. The facts end up lost amongst the words. Be precise: your listeners will appreciate it and they'll want more of your programs.

Your first sentence should open the central theme of the program. Your second sentence should carry on with the story you are telling. The next paragraph should contain only information that follows on from the previous one. It should not contain a single word that isn't absolutely necessary to the story.

Ask someone to check the copy you prepare. When you read your own work, you will tend to read what you intended to write, rather than the words that are in front of you.

It's not just the words that make a sentence correct. Punctuation is as important as the words. An incorrectly placed comma can throw out the whole meaning of a sentence. An unnecessary pause, or a pause in the wrong place can make your words mean something quite different from what was intended.

THE AUDIENCE—YOUR LISTENER

I have been referring to 'your listener'. Although broadcasting can reach many people, radio is not about talking to the masses. It is about talking to your listener—one person. You may be talking to an audience of thousands, but you should treat each of your listeners as individuals, so write for one person, one listener. Radio isn't like television where several people watch a program in a room together. It's more personal. Many people enjoy listening to their radios for company as well as for entertainment, interest and enjoyment—the radio is often their friend too.

Just as you would be sincere when you talk to a friend, be sincere when you talk to your listener. If you have something to

say, sound as if you mean it. There's nothing worse than listening to someone who sounds as if what they're reading is the last thing they want to say.

Always keep your listener in mind as you prepare a program. Identify someone who is typical of your audience. Then write as if you were talking to that person.

Your aim is to write your script so that the person you have identified can understand all of what you are saying. Ask yourself: 'Would Joe understand this?' If not, simplify the sentence or the paragraph. If you are giving practical instructions for a home improvement project, keep in your mind someone who could possibly be the world's most unhandy person. This will encourage you to write instructions that are precise and clear. Do not assume that your listener possesses any background knowledge that might be specialised. Yet be careful not to sound too patronising.

If you have any doubts about the general accessibility of your text, pick someone like yourself – a friend, perhaps, or a close relative – and see if they understand it. If they do, leave it; if they don't, fix it.

BUILDING YOUR SCRIPT—THE ART OF WRITING

It's about time we considered the art of writing for radio – that is, putting the words down on paper.

The first sentence is usually the hardest sentence of all to write. If you find yourself sitting and staring at a blank page or an empty screen for minutes on end with nothing happening, don't give up. Just ... write something. Get a sentence, any sentence, down on paper. Follow this with another sentence. If these first sentences seem like rubbish, remember, you can always discard them later. Often just the act of getting your first ideas down on paper will help other thoughts to flow. Edit them later – discard the junk but for now ... just begin.

Something that often prevents the first words from coming is the intimidating thought of the sheer volume of words that

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have to be written. For instance, a one-hour radio program might require around 10,000 words, which amounts to about forty pages of typescript. Do you believe yourself capable of writing this much material? Probably not; and your page will remain blank for a long, long time if you approach the task at hand in its entirety. The enormity of a task is often enough to detract any would-be author, builder, sculptor or scriptwriter from even beginning a project.

Your radio program will not be written all at once, but word by word, paragraph by paragraph, or page by page. Try to build up your story like a house – brick by brick, from the bottom up.

With a program requiring 10,000 words or more, don't think in terms of the finished piece, but in terms of the size of the units or bricks with which you feel most comfortable. This might mean a page, half a page, or a paragraph.

These small units, added one to the other, will soon become a full-length program – a few paragraphs, or a couple of hundred words a day will, in only a matter of weeks, add up to the 10,000 words you have to write. How long have you thought about starting that program you feel so strongly about? A year? More than that?

Seeing yourself making progress with your work as each 'unit' is written, can make the difference between the struggle and the triumph. If you get stuck with one section, don't stop, but work on another section that you feel more confident about. You will be in a better position to smooth any bumps and cracks when the larger part of the structure is in place.

Let's consider the hypothetical task of writing a one-hour program about, say, juvenile delinquency and suppose our own basic writing unit is two pages – that is, we know we can write two pages about almost anything. Our job is to break down the 10,000 words required into manageable writing units of two pages. But remember that a one-hour program (or, rather, a fifty-minute program that allows for station announcements, sponsorship messages and an introduction) won't consist of only

the words you write. It will include interviews, other people's points of view, and, hopefully, much more. All these have to be taken into account.

The first step is a rough division that will form the main segments of your program. Let's say six segments, each one about fifteen hundred words, or six pages, long.

The first segment should outline your topic and define your terms. This in itself may seem intimidating, yet, broken down further, that first segment of the program becomes more manageable.

What is delinquency? My definition may possibly be different from yours, and different again from a social worker's ... or, indeed, that of a high-court judge. So, perhaps ten definitions, each of a couple of paragraphs (adjusted to suit the script, of course) will take care of a major part of Segment One in your proposed program.

WRITING YOUR SCRIPT

Segment Two might consist of a number of paragraphs devoted to the types of minors who commit acts of delinquency. Difficult, but again, broken down into units, we may get ten different groups of people who become involved in anti-social behaviour – discuss these groups on the six pages allocated.

Segment Three might look at the socio-economic factors of known offenders (three or four paragraphs), educational background (a page), the psychological profiles of delinquency (one page), the background to some specific case histories, and family factors (each of a page or two).

Perhaps your units might be larger than two pages. That's great – try to compose a whole segment at a time.

Subsequent segments might look at cross-cultural differences: how is delinquency viewed in North America, in Australia or the islands of the Pacific?

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As you write each segment you may well find that it is running too short or too long. Don't worry, the length of each section can be adjusted with editing.

Dividing a radio program into small writing units that you can concentrate on, one at a time, will also help to prevent it becoming boring, with plenty of action, description, ideas and opinions on every page. You will be able to create a story that will leave the listener unaware that you, the writer, struggled and sweated over each and every paragraph.

We all get annoyed with people who repeat themselves in conversation. But when you write for radio, a limited amount of repetition is alright. Often it is necessary to repeat a point, albeit in a slightly different way, just to make sure that your listener grasps what has been said, or to reinforce a point. With practice, you will soon develop an instinct for what needs to be repeated, and what's best not repeated. And, indeed, what's best left unsaid. Don't repeat whole paragraphs just to pad out a program so that it will fill the time allocated.

If you are writing drama for radio, employ the same technique of breaking the writing task down into small units before you begin to write. In drama, something should happen on every page: different incidents to involve your characters in, different people in different settings, different historical eras. Breaking down the task will help you keep the writing fresh and fast-paced.

It's your house you're building ... use 'bricks' that you can handle comfortably. Don't strain yourself handling bricks manufactured for someone else with capabilities that would outstrip even the most accomplished builder ... or writer.

PRESENTATION OF YOUR SCRIPT

Try to avoid page breaks in the middle of sentences. Similarly, avoid carrying one or two lines from the end of a paragraph over to the next page – there could be a pause, or a rustling of paper as pages are turned and the sentence is picked up.

The presentation of your script is important. Make sure that you use a good, dark ink in your printer. Use double spacing between lines – double-spaced scripts are much easier to read from. Select bond paper that doesn't crinkle loudly as the pages are turned – microphones are very sensitive these days.

LENGTH

How long should your script be? It's not so much a matter of how many pages, but more importantly how much time you have in which to get your points across.

As a rough guide, the average speaking rate is about 150–180 words per minute. So if you have one minute to make your point, you'd better write about two-thirds of a double-spaced page. A ten-minute talk will require about 1500 to 1800 words. Be aware: radio consumes an awful lot of words!

When you've written your script, edited it, and made sure it reads aloud alright, time a reading of it. If you intend reading it yourself, time yourself. If you are asking someone else to read it, time that person reading it. The average speaking rate quoted above should only be viewed as a rough guide. We all read at quite different speeds. Don't think it looks 'about right ... near enough'. It may end up running ten seconds over, or a minute under the allotted time. And that's bad radio production.

Finally, your script is ready for reading on air. It's probably best, if you're a good reader, to present it yourself. If your reading really isn't good enough, do your listeners a favour and get a fluent reader with a good radio voice to read it for you.

CONSIDER THESE HANDY HINTS

So you won't stumble when quoting dates, write them in your script as they are spoken, not as they would appear in print. For example, the New Year begins on January the first, not January 1. The financial year ends on the thirtieth of June, not June 30.

Take care with the use of adjectives. Make sure they mean something if you really have to use them.

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Writing good radio material is like good writing for another medium—it should be a mixture of long and short sentences. Paragraphs too should be varied in length to lend rhythm and colour to your prose.

Check all figures, dates and weights. Units of distances can easily be misinterpreted.

CONSIDER THESE POINTS

Let's look at a talk that was prepared for radio, and see if it works according to the points considered in this chapter. Refer to the script reproduced in Appendix form at the back of the book (page 139). It is a script about declining soil nutrients and its bearing on soil quality. The script is of a type that could be used in a nature program or one on the environment. It contains nearly 2300 words, and would run to a fraction under fifteen minutes. The timing is critical, and planned, as this allows for a short introduction of about ten or twelve seconds, and about eight or ten seconds at the end of the program for the presenter to recap the title of the piece and the author's name. Read the script through a couple of times, taking notes if you feel inclined.

Ask yourself, 'Does this script work?' Consider the following points.

- Is it appropriate for the program?
- Is the timing right? The timing is critical, and planned. The length should allow for a short introduction of about ten or twelve seconds, and about eight or ten seconds at the end of the program for the presenter to recap the title of the piece and the author's name.
- Has the writer decided what he wanted to say, and then said it precisely and succinctly?
- Does each point follow from the previous one in an orderly, logical manner?
- Would it interest a listener to an intended program?

- Are there any phrases or sentences that are likely to cause the reader to stumble?
- Is it in a 'conversational' style – flowing smoothly, and easy to follow and understand?
- Would this talk maintain a listener's interest for the whole of the talk?
- Are the sentences short, or of varying length?
- Are the paragraphs the right length?
- Is the talk personal enough for radio – that is, has the writer directed it at one reader – on a one-to-one basis?
- Is the writer reminding the listeners of the main points by the careful use of repetition?
- Have any unnecessary words been used to pad out the material?