

# *Audio Theater*

Tips and Tricks

Compiled from various sources

**by**

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## I. Script Format.

Radio scripts are written in a variety of formats. There is no single absolute standard pattern. However, all good radio scripts must accomplish certain things:

1. Be **easy to read** in any situation.
2. Clearly **distinguish between words that are to be spoken, and words that are not to be spoken** (directions, effects or music cues, instructions, and so forth). - During a performance, actors, technicians, and directors must be able to see clearly, at a glance, what is going on at any given moment.
3. Make clear at all times **who is speaking**. It must be clear to the audience as well as to the performers and the crew. This seems elementary, but it is most important.
4. Have plenty of **space available for notes** and additional information, often added in margins during rehearsals.

The best way to do these things is to follow a few simple rules:

1. ALWAYS **type or machine-print** a script. Handwriting or hand lettering is not acceptable.
2. ALWAYS **double-space** everything. Always.
3. Leave **generous margins** at top, bottom, and sides.
4. **Number each page** at the top. Putting page numbers at the bottom of the page as well can be useful. Scripts are often clipped together at the upper left corner, so put the page numbers in the center or over on the right, and make sure that there is no chance they will be mistaken for something else.

Here are some other common practices which are also helpful:

5. **Number the cues.** Some scripts are seen with each line numbered, in a column on the far left-hand margin. Numbering each line is not really necessary, and tends to make the page look more crowded. A "cue" is the start of one of the elements of the story--a speech, a sound effect, an instruction for music, etc. Again, they are numbered at the extreme left margin. Cue numbers run sequentially through the script, while line numbers start afresh at the top of each page.
6. **Use indentations** to distinguish cues. At the left margin, a word will label

each line to identify the speaker or the type of cue. Dialog copy will be indented 15 to 20 spaces. Sound effect and Music cues are often indented even more, or else not at all, so the eye can distinguish them by their position on the page.

7. **Use ALL CAPS to distinguish cues.** Words which are not to be spoken are often put in all capitals, while dialog lines are done in caps and lower case. Or reversed, with only spoken words done in all-caps.
8. **Use (parentheses) to distinguish cues.** Words to be spoken are never put in parentheses, but other cues often are. If there is a parenthetical expression within the dialog, other punctuation should be substituted (such as -- dashes -- or ... ellipses ...)
9. **Use underlining. to distinguish cues.** Some people underline all non-spoken words, but this is by no means a universal practice.
10. Use **boldface print** or *italics* to distinguish cues. Electronic typewriters and computer printers offer more options than radio writers have had before--be creative!

Some scriptwriters use all of these techniques, others use only certain ones.

Something else to keep in mind: **consistency**. If you want a typographical method of indicating emphasis in dialog:

"...but Charlie, you've got to come HERE"

"...but Charlie, you've GOT to come here"

Make sure you use that method for dialog-emphasis only. Whatever typography you adopt, use it the same way throughout. The whole point is to make your intentions immediately clear to the reader/performer, and avoid any chance of confusion.

## II. Creative Considerations

The radio medium uses four elements:

- **Speech** -- the possibilities of language.
- **Sound Effects** -- the possibilities of imagination.
- **MUSIC** -- emotional content and structural device.

- **Silence** -- contrast and timing.

It is possible to render any visual scene in the medium of sound, and you can create scenes on radio that are impossible in any other medium. The best scripts are often those which make use of the unique possibilities of radio.

**Read the script aloud** as it progresses, and feel the weight and rhythm of the words before judging them. You may even want to read into an audio recorder, and listen to the tape.

**Pacing and timing** are very important. The audience must not be left behind by a flood of information, and their imaginations must have **time to work**. But nobody likes a story that plods and drags on. The best pace in this medium is often slower than other media, which have visual aspects; but it IS possible to go too slowly. The key question: how fast is the audience thinking?

Most radio shows today are in **stereo**, but don't worry about indicating stereo effects, or about placing people left and right on the sound stage. That is easy enough to work out in production.

**Distance from the microphone** is much more important! Contrast between a distant voice and a speaker right "on mike," or voices and sounds that approach or recede, provide much greater dramatic contrast than left-right movement, and the distance effect is not lost when the program is heard in mono.

**How will your program be heard?** Over a big stereo system in a living room? A clock radio? A boombox? A car stereo system? A portable audio player with headphones? The answer is probably "all of the above." There is no such thing as a "standard listening environment," even in professional studios. A good program ought to sound acceptable even on the poorest equipment, but reveal even more depth and detail on good systems. Try listening to your tracks and mixes over several systems -- take a recording out to your car, for instance.

Good writing is a lot more important than flashy technical effects or clever use of the medium. A good script is one with an interesting story. Interesting stories are about interesting people.

And one more generalization: rules are made to be broken. These are useful guidelines, but don't let them put your imagination in a straitjacket.

## FOUR LIMITATIONS OF RADIO

1. Radio is a public medium and it is institutional by nature. The circumstances of production and the nature of the audience are real and positive limitations. "Limitation" therefore means "what is possible."
2. Radio involves only one sense. It offers only sound and silence. Sound, particularly as it approaches the abstraction of music, appeals directly to the heart. The first question a radio writer or producer must ask, and answer, is "What will this program sound like?"
3. Radio is so linear! But, at any point at which a listener tunes into a radio program, the program should be capable of catching and holding that listener. Radio naturally moves quickly. Pauses are boring. However, linearity is even more boring. The art of radio is in "going non-linear" and finding the freedom of Radio Time.
4. Few people seem to care about radio as art. Yet the Art of Radio is simply the production of aural illusions - illusions of time and space through the use of voice, sound, and music, without limitation. That is Radio, and it is also Theater. The artist is a magical manipulator of materials, and his or her first duty, according to playwright Tom Stoppard, is "to capture the radio station."

## FIVE PRINCIPLES OF RADIO/AUDIO PERFORMANCE

"No, no, no, no! You don't understand how radio works.  
All I have to do to return us to the present is fade my  
voice out like this and cue the organist . . . "

- George Tirebiter

### 1. NATURALNESS, COMBINED WITH TIMING

The best radio performance is achieved through the use of the actor's natural voice and vocal range. The best vocal performers may have dozens of character voices available, but all proceed from a single, natural voice. Most different characterizations can be achieved through differences in speed and timing. How a specific character listens to others, and what non-verbal punctuation he or she uses is often more useful to an actor than the attempt at a variety of accents or

regional dialects. Untrained, "real people" can frequently make wonderful radio characters because their voices are genuine. (This is also true of children.)

## **2. BEING IN A PLACE**

In a radio play, each actor must visualize the details of the environment in which the action takes place and communicate this information, often non-verbally, to the listener. Since radio action takes place in the present tense, everything in the scene has an immediate impact on the character and the listener as it is happening. Reaction is equal in importance to action.

## **3. ENERGY FOCUSED THROUGH THE MICROPHONE**

In this medium, sound proceeds electronically from the performer's vocal apparatus to the listener's mind. The performer must remain aware of this unusually intimate connection. Everything about a radio performance should be cleanly and clearly done, with no wasted movement, and with great concentration and physical focus. The listener should always remain unaware of amplification or other intervening technology because such awareness is distracting.

## **4. LIGHTNESS, TIGHTNESS AND SPEED**

When a radio performance is going well, there is a sensation akin to "surfing on the radio waves." Dialogue and action are carried along effortlessly as the actors interplay with each other, with sound and with music. The "surface tension" is maintained, and so is the listener's suspension of disbelief.

## **5. CLARITY AND EVOCATIVE POWER**

These are the goals of a radio performance. Relying on a single sense can produce confusions of place, character, and action; it can also create the most vivid of mental images. Without clarity, imagination is restricted, the moment is muddled, and the listener's attention may be lost.

# **SEVEN ELEMENTS OF RADIO WRITING AND PRODUCTION**

## **1. AMBIENCE**

Ambience means the continuing background of sound which identifies the location and/or setting for a scene. An interior ambience is suggested in part by the size of the room. and thus by the amount of reflected or reverberant sound. An exterior

setting is usually constructed by layering several elements of sound in a non-reverberant space, or by actual location recording. Actors' voices, live or recorded, should never sound "boxy." Whether it happens inside or out, action should create three-dimensional space. Writers should indicate a specific ambience for each scene of a play.

## 2. SOUND EFFECTS

Abbreviated "SFX" or "Sound" in a script, these are specifically placed individual or "spot" effects which are done live or pre-recorded. Gunshots, chainsaws or rocket launches, for example, might be difficult to produce live at the proper audio levels. Pre-recorded effects would also include continuing background ambiences like automobile interiors or busy street corners. It is always best to use effects recorded in a location similar to the one in which the action takes place. **Effects from CD libraries should be carefully auditioned - many are manufactured and unrealistic.** Remember, SFX can be sped up, slowed down and edited.

## 3. FOLEY SOUND

A term borrowed from film production, "Foley" means naturalistic sounds of movement and "business." Footsteps, doors, and dishes are good examples of Foley sound. In a live radio production the sound effects crew generally produces these sounds to match the spoken dialogue, using a rich variety of hand-held or specially constructed objects.

## 4. MUSIC

There are several different kinds of music cues which appear in radio plays. Each has a specific purpose. "Realistic" uses of music include those in which music is actually present in the ambience of a scene - a radio playing, for example, or a live musician in a park or muzak in an elevator. Underscoring means music which unobtrusively amplifies or sets the mood of a scene, or which helps make a transition. Often specific characters or settings will have their own "themes," composed or chosen to help the listener follow the action. Music which is not realistically or psychologically connected to the play or the characters is known as "format." This category includes program or series theme music. Music cues are generally very short in duration - usually a matter of a few seconds.

## 5. MICROPHONE POINT-OF-VIEW

Abbreviated "POV" in the script, this means the position of the listener relative to the action. Usually, the POV is with the leading character in a scene. The listener is presumed to be hearing exactly what this character is hearing. The POV can remain

stationary (relative to the listener) with characters moving "on" and "off," or the POV can travel along with a character. It is essential in realistic drama that the POV not be changed in such a way as to confuse the listener.

## 6. TRANSITIONS

As in real **life**, transitions are the hardest part. Transitions from one scene to the next can be accomplished using one or more of the **five** devices listed above. For example, ambiences can "cross-fade" from one to the next. Cross-fading implies a gradual time-lapse or movement through space. A "fade-to-black" or a brief moment where there is no sound, suggests a definite conclusion or a significant change of time or location. A "hard cut" takes advantage of an instant shift of location, with its effect of brief disorientation or illogic. Musical transitions are the most conventional radio devices.

## 7. DIALOGUE

Finally! These are the actual words spoken by the actors. Trust your actors! When putting dialogue down in script form, avoid line readings like "angrily" or "with a smile." The words themselves must create the mood. If a pause is wanted, write (A BEAT). Indications of non-verbal responses or ad lib dialogue tend to clutter up a script. Avoid them. If real words are to be spoken, give the actors real lines. (Don't write, for example, "she mumbles a response" or "the judge continues admonishing the witness.") Avoid lengthy interpolations of non-spoken material (staging directions, sound or music descriptions) inside blocks of dialogue. They're hard on actors and make for increased page-turning. Remember that the listener is apt to be easily confused about who is speaking to whom, so keep voices distinct, mention names often, and do not over-populate scenes.

# EIGHT PRACTICAL POINTS FROM THE BBC

BILL: This Is the BBC.  
HARRY: Gad. It sounds as young as ever, even more so.  
The Goon Show, 1959

In Europe, radio theatre, from the most conventional of soap operas to the wildest sort of sonic experiments, is still available nearly every day. The BBC's Radio 4, for example, transmits half-a-dozen original plays or adaptations weekly. Drama is also a staple on Canadian and Australian radio networks. The following notes are excerpted from advice sent to potential contributors from the Script Editor, Broadcasting House, London W1A 1AA.

Radio is a deceptive medium. On the surface it has obvious attractions for the writer in its very simplicity and freedom from technical restrictions. It is the medium of the word - where

anything that can be described can be imagined. It can span centuries and continents and can present extremes of action and movement without the limitations imposed by the cost of sets and costumes. It can explore the recesses of a person's mind without the problem of how to fill the rest of a stage or screen. In short, it is a medium of almost unlimited possibilities - even in times of economic stringency.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that this freedom makes radio easier to write for than other media. On the contrary, it calls for a greater discipline of structure and a more precise awareness of the nuances of language than most other forms of dramatic writing. Given that the listener must be attracted and held by means of sound alone, then that sound must be constantly stimulating.

In radio, the writer must provide everything in his dialogue. The producer can underline, heighten or embroider by skillful casting, timing and use of effects and music, but he can seldom, if ever, create from scratch an idea which is not originally planted in the dialogue. So the dialogue in a radio play will actually contain more information than is normal in everyday speech, but it should still be able to sound completely natural. It follows that radio dialogue and construction make the highest possible demands on the writer's skill. A radio play that was simply "all talk" in a conventional conversational sense would be very boring.

## **SOME PRACTICAL POINTS ON CONSTRUCTION**

1. In radio, one abandons the conventions of theatre or film in deciding on the length or number of "scenes." A sequence in a radio play may be several pages long or it may be simply one line. It depends on the complexity of the idea or the mental image you wish to create - and should never go beyond its natural length. Of all media, radio can most easily create boredom - and is fatally easy to switch off.
2. When nearing the end of a sequence, it is important to prepare the listeners, as subtly as possible, for the next one. It is easy enough to make a rapid change of scene from a technical point of view but the listeners need help. They have no program and they can't see. When the scene or viewpoint has changed, an equally subtle signpost should confirm it.
3. "Stage directions" for the producer's benefit are a temptation that should be avoided. If it's important, it should be in the dialogue. If it's not, then nobody need ever know.
4. It should be remembered that the listeners will always (quite involuntarily) supply their own mental images in response to what they hear. They should be given enough ideas to work on but never so many that they become restricted or confused. Radio is not a definitive medium. At all levels, it should stimulate only, so that each listener can adjust the basic idea to his or her individual experience.
5. When deciding the number of characters in a scene it should be borne in mind that the only ways of establishing someone's presence unequivocally are either to have

them speak or for them to be spoken to by name. If there are too many characters in a scene, the listeners will lose track or become confused.

6. Sound effects, either singly or in sequence, should certainly be part of the writer's concept but it is worth remembering that they need to be integrated in, and usually identified by, the dialogue.
7. Since radio involves only one of the senses, it is important to construct each individual sequence and the play as a whole. to provide a variety of sound which will hold the listeners' attention. This variety can be achieved in lengths of sequences, number of people speaking, pace of dialogue, volume of sound, background acoustics and location of action.
8. There is no formula for writing a successful radio play. It requires all the basic techniques of good dramatic writing plus an imaginative awareness of the restrictions and advantages of a medium where nothing is seen. It is only by listening as often as possible to radio plays that a writer can begin to judge what works and what doesn't.

## **NINE THOUGHTS ABOUT SCRIPT FORMATTING**

"Hold your thumb next to your line. That way you won't get confused and can't lose your place."

Nick Danger's Rule

1. There is no one way to prepare a script for production. What all directors and actors need are script pages which are cleanly reproduced and which can be read easily, two or three in hand or on a music stand, under actual production conditions.
2. Each page of script should average one (1) minute in total air time.
3. Speeches should not continue over from one page to the next. The page can break a few lines early.
4. Double-spacing isn't necessary, but 12- or 13-point (pica) type is. I double-space between speeches, not between lines. Indent the dialogue.
5. Character names shouldn't be overly abbreviated. They should lead the eye to the character's line.
6. I like a script written so that WORDS IN ALL CAPS are NEVER READ ALOUD!

7. What about numbers? I've never liked looking at the row 1-thru-28 down the left edge. I prefer the modified Brit system. Each individual speech or direction is numbered in sequence from beginning to end.
8. I usually break my scripts into scenes - a "shooting script" - which helps me with the logistics of pre-production and gives me a more graphic look at the textures and timing of the entire play. I like new ambiences and new casts to begin on new pages.
9. Begin every script with a page listing all the characters with a brief description of each. An up-front list of music, SFX and ambiences is also very helpful to the reader.

Following are the first scene and the beginning of the second of an imaginary play, prepared in one author's personal word-processing style.

"WE WERE ALL SINGING" (ONE PAGE OF A RADIO SCRIPT)

- 1 AMBIENCE: FADE UP A BASEBALL STADIUM, GAME IN PROGRESS
- 2 SOUND: DISTANT CRACK OF BAT
- 3 EDDIE: (SHOUTING OVER CROWD) I speak in a block of type between 4 and 5 inches wide, leaving enough white space around the margins for notes or rewrites!
- 4 MUSIC: (IN AMBI) STADIUM ORGAN "CHARGE!" RIFF
- 5 WOMAN'S VOICE: That's right, Eddie. Let the director worry about those sound and music cues.
- 6 YELLING CROWD: "I agree!"  
"Me too!"  
"This helps us with our improvisation!"

(CONTINUE AD LIB IMPROV, GETTING ANGRIER)

- 7 AMBIENCE: X-FADE YELLING CROWD WITH BAR BACKGROUND. A SUBDUED PLACE.
- 8 DRUNK (WOMAN): I remember ... ! Just a minute ... I'll find it ...

- 9 SOUND:. JUKEBOX BUSINESS - QUARTER DROPS
- 10 MUSIC: (IN AMBI) JUKEBOX RECORD START'S - "ABBA DABBA HONEYMOON"
- 11 DRUNK (MAN): (SINGING ALONG) "Abba-dabba-dabba-dabba, said the monkey to the chimp . . . "
- 12 EDDIE: (NARRATING, VOICE OVER AMBI) We were all singing that night ... except me. Wilmer took a chance, leaned over and asked me a question ...
- 13 WILMER: (SOTTO) What if I want to emphasize something?
- 14 EDDIE: (A BEAT - LISTENING) Like what?
- 15 WILMER: Like this! See, I just read an underlined word.
- 15a \_\_\_\_\_ (SFX:FOOTSTEPS, ONE HUMAN, ONE ALIEN)
- 15b. CHAUNCEY: Mot nutch to owe seever there. That hig ford bence goes all aplound the race, and tare's a thunch of barps covering everything up.
16. RETIEF: The Groaci ARE a secretive group, but maybe we can get a peek anyway.
17. CHAUNCEY: That's bisky, ross. There's a gunch of bards around--with yuns, get. (FOOTSTEPS STOP) Well, ear we har. Sike I lezz, you san't kee a thing.
18. RETIEF: Wait till I pry this panel loose ...
19. \_\_\_\_ (CRYING, CREAKING, OPENING SOUND)
20. CHAUNCEY: K.O.-- but we petter beep an eye keeled ...
21. RETIEF: There we go ... now let's take a look ...
22. (SFX: LOSE NIGHT SOUNDS, GO INTO REVERB)
23. CHAUNCEY: Moley Hoses! They've really been chaking some manges!
24. RETIEF: You're referring to that big shape over there?
25. CHAUNCEY: Yeah! Tunder that arp! So that's what wave been thirking on all lay dong.
26. RETIEF: Just about the size of our Bolshoi-type ballet theatre.
27. ANNO: (NO REVERB) And then, suddenly--

28. (SFX: BLASTER BOLT)

29. CHAUNCEY: Giggers, the Joaci!

30. (MUSIC STINGER)

## Episode 2: The Kiwi Triumphant!

270. MARGOT It's not a chicken. It's a KIWI!

271. GRAMS FADE UP KIWI THEME.

272. NARRATOR: And so the book is closed on the Purple Kiwi and Margot's first case. What will the future hold for our heroes? To find out, tune in to the next episode, when you will hear the Purple Kiwi say:

273. PURPLE KIWI: AAAAAAAHHH! (Pan yell across.)

274. SFX SPLASH!

275. NARRATOR On the next thrill-packed episode of the Adventures of the Purple Kiwi!

276. CREDITS.

277. JUSTICE ASSISTANT COMMERCIAL.