UNIT 10: WRITING FOR RADIO NEWS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.5.1 Writing for radio features

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- explain the structure of a radio news bulletin.
- discuss the language and style of radio news.
- narrate the process for writing radio features and current affairs programmes.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have discussed reporting for radio. Now, another very important topic to discuss along with reporting is writing – writing radio news as well as radio features and other current affairs programmes.

In this unit we will discuss this essential aspect of radio services– writing for radio programmes. Writing for the radio is quite unique and it requires special skills as it involves the 'writing for the ear'. In this unit you will get some basic idea about how to write radio news, focusing emphasis

on the language and style and the rules for writing the news copy. You will also get an idea about writing for radio features and radio current affairs programmes. But before you can start with writing it is important to know how a radio news bulletin is structured.

So, let us begin this unit with the first section – structure of a radio news bulletin.

10.3 RADIO NEWS BULLETIN STRUCTURE

A number of news items put together make a news bulletin. But a bulletin is not just a string of individual news items broadcast at the scheduled time. The bulletin is more than a sum total of a number of stories. The bulletin is a collective form in which the separate news items are brought into a coherent order and some relationship exists among them.

Every news broadcast is a part of the day's **broadcasting schedule** and there are usually several bulletins in a day's broadcasting output. A newspaper appears only once a day. Although it may have several editions, the reader gets only one edition of a newspaper every day. The radio, however, is much more frequently on the air bringing you the latest news every time.

Bulletins are generally put out in a series or cycle like AIR's 0815, 1400, 1800 and 2100 hours. English bulletins and their Hindi counterparts. Additionally, AIR has hourly news bulletins round the clock in the two languages.

A radio news bulletin is generally divided into *four* parts:

1. **Headlines:** It is also referred to as the main points. Headlines give an introduction to the news stories that make up a news bulletin. The most important news items included in the bulletin are mentioned in the headlines where all the stories are not necessarily mentioned. The headlines are to be written in such a manner that they are compelling to the audiences.
2. The **body of the bulletin**: This part of the bulletin consists of the different news items.



Broadcasting schedule or broadcast schedule is the organized schedule of programmes to be aired by the station during the day, the week or the month and can accordingly be daily broadcast schedule, weekly broadcast schedule or monthly broadcast schedule.

3. **Mid-break:** The break occurs midway, roughly after the first half or bunch of the bulletin, or the first five minutes of a ten minute bulletin. This enables the newsreader to identify the broadcasting station which is a requirement since several stations are on the air on frequencies close to one another. *"This is All India Radio giving you the news"* is the usual form. This also makes it possible for the newsreader to take a deep breath.

4. **Repeat headlines:** The headlines are repeated at the end of the bulletin after which comes the closing announcement *"that is the end of the news"* or *"that is the end of this bulletin".* The announcer of the station then chimes in and tell you: *"You have been listening to a bulletin relayed from Delhi. This is Guwahati station of AIR".*

The arrangement of the items in a bulletin requires considerable skills and editorial ability. We have to keep in mind that the bulletin is more than simply the total of its items. It means that the stories have to be integrated as much as possible. For example, all the stories about a major national development or an important international event have to be taken together, as far as possible. They have to be brought together and made into a compact form, taking care to avoid repetition. This is to be done in such a way that after the main news in the story, the reactions, repercussions, comments, along with any offshoots or sequels, are arranged in a logical and interesting manner.

Let us suppose that there is a story about India winning the last of the three test matches of a series against Australia and thereby winning the home series 2-1. This series win has come after 24 years and obviously there is a lot of excitement among the Indian fans about this win. Now the news of this win would naturally be the lead story of the bulletin wherein the statistics would be provided and the scores would be mentioned and also who was adjudged the man of the match and man of the series. The story might also say that this series win has come after 24 long years. After this story, several related stories will also follow wherein comments of the cricket experts, reactions of the fans, family members of the cricketers reacting to

the win in their respective hometowns etc. will be accommodated. Immediately after this, an analysis of the match might also follow wherein the anchor will discuss the significance of the win with a cricket expert and dissect the match to discuss the turning points of the game. Finally, the anchor will sum up the situation both on and off the field as a result of this historic series win by India.

In newspapers, all these stories would be different items, with separate headings and placed alongside the main story or even separately on different pages. But it is not so in radio (or even in TV). In broadcast media, one has to bring all the related stories together in the form of a roundup, avoiding unnecessary repetitions and reducing the less important stories to the barest minimum so that the overall story is not too long. Yet it should be as comprehensive as possible.

This arrangement is called for when there is a major story to be handled. Even otherwise, related items should be grouped together. But one has to be careful while doing so and should understand the individual significance of each story and examine if stories that are loosely connected can be grouped together or not. If for example, there is a major story about India approaching the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, Austria, to convince the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) of countries about its civil nuclear programme and you have another story of an Austrian cultural delegation arriving in New Delhi to perform at the India Habitat Centre as part of a cultural exchange programme. In such cases, it is not necessary to place the second story alongside the major item. If there is time you can deal with it later in the bulletin.

That also helps us to emphasize that stories must be taken in the order of their importance, with sports coming at the end. There is no set rule on the bifurcation of home and foreign stories. The comparative importance has to be judged in the context of the available news.

If an international story, like say, a stock exchange crisis in the world financial capitals, or the Somalia starvation, pirates hijack Indian ships or the UN troops intervention deserves priority over home stories, so be it.

The producer should go ahead by all means and lead it. But that would not justify some other less important foreign news being played up along with it, just for the sake of taking foreign stories together.

The compilation editor is the one who prepares the final product which goes on air. So the bulletin editor must ensure that he gives each item a proper shape and strings them together like beads in a rosary.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1. What are the different parts of a radio news bulletin?

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Q.2. What is a broadcast schedule?

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10.4 LANGUAGE AND STYLE FOR RADIO NEWS

Radio is a medium of the ear. Whatever effect we might want to achieve, the only possible way is by way of words – words weaved into sentences in such a way that the listener gets a smooth ride, without jerks. And if the journey has to be smooth for the listener, so does it have to be for the news reader or the anchor too. This style which makes it possible is called the radio style.

Writers of broadcast news know that people absorb news through a different sense when they listen to it than when they read it. Be it TV or radio, broadcast news is a spoken word medium. In other words, broadcasters are talking to people, telling them the news. People get their news through their ears. The only way the radio can get its message through to the listeners is by way of what the newscaster says and how he says it. Since there are no visuals to help out, and people cannot see the expression

on the newsreader's face, so they have to understand and follow the news by his voice modulations. The person listening may probably be busy doing something such as driving a car, having a conversation or even doing housework and therefore your task is to make your message perceivable by the listener. Therefore, those who write radio news must write it clearly and succinctly so that the readers or anchors can also clearly and succinctly read out what they have written and so that the listeners can understand what has been spoken without any extra effort. Moreover, the listeners can hear it only once unlike in the case of the newspaper where the reader can return to a sentence that might not have made sense upon first reading. Therefore, simplicity and clarity of expression should be aimed at as the basic stylistic element of any piece written for radio – whether it is news or for some other programme.

Again, the writing for the radio follows the conversational style. It is not literature; it is communicating with the listeners. Therefore, spoken words of everyday speech are used. Jargons are always a strict 'No No'. A good radio copy always sounds natural, not manufactured.



Jargons: Words or expressions used by a particular group that are difficult for other people to understand. Eg, medical jargon, legal jargon.

Another aspect of the style used in radio broadcasting is its immediacy. Radio is the 'now' medium. Therefore, anything that is spoken on radio has to be lent the feel of immediacy.

Writing for the news for radio broadcasts can be difficult, particularly since many writers are accustomed to authoring stories for print. But writing for the ear is very different from writing for the eye. And writing for radio follows a distinct set of rules that must be followed if the broadcast is to be effective and professional. Here are some guidelines which can help you write a good, effective radio copy:

1. **Be natural and use the vocabulary/words the meaning of which you know well.** Consider the following example:

The implementation of the environmental quality promotion and preservation project, which will be launched during the 11th five-year plan, will place emphasis on solutions to problems of pollution, population migration and settlement.

However, when you write this copy for radio it sounds better when you write it as:

The government plans to tackle environment pollution under the eleventh five-year plan. The new project will try to find solutions to the problems of pollution, migration of people from villages to cities and settlement.

2. Avoid being dull, avoid using bureaucratic language.

Care should be taken to avoid the use of bureaucratic language. For example, instead of writing *'the judge issued a habeas corpus' you ought to* write *'the judge ordered the authorities to bring the suspect before court*.' The second sentence obviously is more to the point and without a legal jargon (habeas corpus).

3. Give your copy a sense of immediacy.

Use the present tense and not as you would use the term in newspapers. Things happening on radio should appear to be happening now.

Therefore, instead of writing '*the zilla parishad chief secretary said today a toll tax would be levied on the new bridge constructed outside the village'* write, '*the zilla parishad chief secretary says a toll tax will be levied on the new bridge constructed outside the village.'*

4. Use simple, short, declarative sentences.

When the sentence is too long and winding, split the sentence into two/three sentences. At the same time try not to sound staccato too. The cardinal principle, however, is not to cram too many things into one sentence.

For example, take the following sentence, "*The Guwahati City Corporation and the village panchayat have decided to work together. They will also attempt at increasing people's participation in all developmental works under the 7th five year plan."* This sentence is better than "*the Guwahati City Corporation and the village panchayat have both agreed on the desirability of working together and increasing participation of the people in all developmental works under the 7th five year plan".* The former much plainer and therefore more effective .

5. Avoid sound clashes

Take this sentence *"The building is built by a building contractor".* It sounds more like the tongue twister. *So, a*void such constructions. Also be careful with words that would sound similar: accepted—excepted etc.

6. Check out your punctuation:

Use of wrong punctuation marks can alter the meaning of a sentence. For example, *"The chairman of the association," said Mr. Khader, is a liar."* The entire meaning will change with a slight change in the punctuation mark. On radio, to the listener (since he does not see the punctuation) the meaning this sentence could be totally dofferent if the punctuation marks are removed and the reader reads the sentence as follows:

The chairman of the association said "Mr. Khader is a liar." Therefore, write out your punctuations properly. It would however, sound much better if you write:

Mr. Khader called the chairman of the association a liar.

7. Abbreviation

Do not use unfamiliar abbreviations which can confuse the listener. But do use abbreviations which both the reader and the audience have come to expect. Generally, people know what you mean when you say AIDS. Use familiar acronyms. **Acronyms** spell out words made from initials. Use the familiar ones like NASA, etc. Do not use hyphens between the letters of an acronym. Read them as words.

8. Do not include ages:

Many writers are inclined to include the ages of individuals involved in crimes and other similar stories. But unless there is something highly relevant and remarkable about the individual's age (i.e. *an 11-year-old murderer*), it should be omitted. One exception is in the case of the description of a suspect sought by police. In this instance, the person's age is vital to a citizen's ability to identify the individual.



Acronyms: A word formed from the first letters of the words that make up the name of something. For example, AIDS is an acronym for "acquired immune deficiency syndrome"

9. Numbers

Do not mention “193 students.” Instead, mention, “nearly 200 students.” Exact numbers are not going to be comprehended by the listener. With numbers over ten, they should be entered numerically.

10. Downplay unconfirmed facts or unknown information

Credibility is harmed when an anchor begins a story by mentioning the information that the station doesn’t yet have. Instead of beginning a story by saying, “*Police have not released any information in this case,”* mention what is known. Then conclude with, “*Additional information is expected soon*,” only if it is a vital information that the listeners should know.

Notably, every news organization’s standards are slightly different and each radio network and affiliate has their own “house style.”

News radio writers should familiarize themselves with the network’s standards and with the radio station’s house style before beginning script work. And, anything that is potentially unclear should be addressed with the reporter or anchor who will be reading the script on the air. This extra step will help limit inaccuracies and errors on the air.

11. Avoid “he/she” ambiguity

When referencing more than one individual in a script, always refer to that person by name or title. Utilizing “he” or “she” can be confusing, particularly when there’s multiple individuals referenced in the story.

12. Use proper format

Format requirements vary by radio station, but in general, scripts should be in all caps and double spaced. Date the first page of the script. Indent all paragraphs. Don’t use semicolons and write out abbreviations. Use underlines for emphasis and dashes for long pauses.

13. Provide pronunciation guides

In the case of uncommon or difficult-to-pronounce names, provide a notation on pronunciation following every instance of the name.

14. Write a good introduction or cue.

- The 'cue' being the first part of the programme, it should attract the listener to make him want to keep listening to the rest of the programme.
- It should create interest to the people for listening.
- It should make the listeners feel that the broadcast item is relevant or important for them.
- It should provide any information that the listener will need in order to understand the programme or put the programme in context.
- It should set the scene without giving away the whole story. If the whole story is being told in the first 30 seconds then the listeners would lose their interest to listen the rest of the programme.
- It should fit the tone or mood of the piece it introduces.



Cue: The introduction to a programme, interview or feature is known as 'cue'.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.3. Radio is a medium of the.....

Q.4. Therefore .....and ease of understanding are the basic stylistic elements of any piece written for radio.

Q.5. Mention 5 basic guidelines for writing a good, effective radio copy.

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Q.6. What are the things that need to be remembered when writing abbreviation?

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ACTIVITY 10.1

1. Read the lead story of any newspaper of your choice. Rewrite the story into a news story for radio.
2. Listen to any news bulletin on AIR. Note the kind of language they use.

10.5 WRITING FOR RADIO FEATURES AND CURRENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMMES

In the previous sections we have a discussion on the writing for radio news. Let us now discuss writing for radio features and current affairs programmes.

10.5.1 Writing for radio features

Writing for radio features is normally more difficult than writing news. This is basically because there are rules that govern the writing of hard news, but feature stories depend upon the reporter's storytelling ability. Nevertheless, keeping a few things in mind and following a few steps can help you write good features for radio.



USP: Abbreviation of Unique Selling Point

Step 1

Identify the USP of the feature story — why should the viewer find the story interesting? This one question should concern you first and you should look for a theme that will appeal to most people. This could be anything like a struggle against adversity, selfless work for a good cause, or even something that is really funny or unique.

Step 2

Remember that Radio is all about 'sound'. There are no visuals that can attract people to your programme. So, this has to be made up for with the help of appropriate words. A news story can be driven by facts, but a feature story must have compelling words, or there is no reason to have a feature in the first place. Consider the mood

you want to build with the feature, and use words accordingly to build the story around them.

Step 3

Interview people with the good sound bites in mind. Ask your interviewees specific questions that relate to what you need for the feature and encourage them to speak openly. Create dynamic and active interviews. Talk to the subjects while walking around an environment providing sounds that have significance to the story.

Step 4

Let the feature story tell itself. Allowing the interviewees to talk in their natural setting is also a great device. The idea is to use plenty of natural sound in a feature story. Listening to people going about their lives tells a great story without the reporter doing a thing.

Step 5

It is essential to craft the feature story to build curiosity. Lead the viewers gently through the story using as few words as possible. Introduce the main subjects of the feature story in such a way that the viewers are compelled to care about them. Present the challenges they face, then reveal the resolution or what is left to be done. The reporter's job is to get the audience engrossed in the story.

10.5.2 Writing for Radio Current Affairs Programmes

Current affairs programmes are programmes like talks, discussions, interviews that are arranged on some current or contemporary issue or event. They provide a forum for all shades of opinion on outstanding national and international issues. Current affairs programmes also include popular formats like quiz shows and opinion polls etc.

Writing for current affairs programmes is very different from writing a radio play or a documentary or a radio news bulletin. There is difference in the approach to writing for the different programme formats on radio.

During a discussion programme, generally, three to four specialists discuss a given topic with one of them moderating. Since all of them will be talking on the same subject, they should be carefully chosen so as to cover properly all aspects of the topic. The selection of the moderator is very important because it is he who is concerned with the real job of conducting the discussion by passing the topic from one speaker to another. He is also responsible for cutting short a participant who deviates from the main topic. Generally, it is the moderator who writes the script for the programme. The script is a very simple one. Usually the following points are covered in the script:

a. The introduction, normally containing the significance of the topic which will be discussed

b. An introduction of the experts taking part in the discussion.

c. A general outline of the aspects of the topic which will be discussed

d. The possible questions which will be put to the experts

e. A brief summary.

In case of such a programme, the written script cannot be followed accurately since it cannot be foretold exactly on what lines the discussion will advance. Therefore, the moderator is also generally an expert on the topic who can put in questions and comments spontaneously as the discussion progresses. The introduction is followed from the script, but as for the summary, only a tentative summary can be prepared in advance. But the summary that is finally worded depends on the course and outcome of the actual discussion.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.7. Mention five guidelines for writing a good radio feature.

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Q.8. What are the points that are contained in a radio discussion script

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10.6LET US SUM UP

- A number of news items put together make a news bulletin. It is a collective form in which the separate news items are brought into a coherent order and some relationship exists.
- A Radio news bulletin has the following main parts — Headlines, body of the bulletin, Mid-break and Repeat headlines.
- Radio is a medium of the ear. Whatever effect we might want to achieve, the only possible way is by way of words.
- Again, Radio follows the conversational style. Radio is the 'now' medium. Therefore, anything that is spoken on Radio has to lent the feel of immediacy.
- Simplicity and ease of understanding are the basic stylistic elements of any piece written for the Radio – whether it is news or some other programme.
- Unlike Radio news, Radio feature stories depend upon the reporter's storytelling ability rather than rules.



10.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q.No 1: The different parts of a radio news bulletin are — Headlines, body of the bulletin, Mid-break and Repeat headlines.

Ans to Q.No 2: Broadcasting schedule or broadcast schedule is the organized schedule of programmes to be aired by the station during the day, the week or the month. Broadcast schedule can be daily, weekly or monthly.

Ans to Q.No 3: Ear

Ans to Q. No 4: Simplicity

Ans to Q.No 5 : 5 basic guidelines which can help you write good and effective radio copy are:

a. Be natural and use vocabulary/words of which you know the meaning.

b. Avoid being dull; avoid using bureaucratic language.

c. Give your copy a sense of immediacy.

d. Use simple, short, declarative sentences.

e. Avoid sound clashes

Ans to Q.No 6 : Do not use unfamiliar abbreviations which can confuse the listener. But do use abbreviations which both the reader and the audience have come to expect. Generally, people know what you mean when you say AIDS. Use familiar acronyms. Acronyms spell out words made from initials. Use the familiar ones like NASA, etc. Do not use hyphens between the letters of an acronym. Read them as words.

Ans to Q.No 7: Guidelines for writing Radio feature are:

a. Identify the USP of the feature story.

b. Remember that radio is all about 'sound'.

c. Interview people with the good soundbites in mind.

d. Let the feature story tell itself.

e. Craft the feature story to build curiosity.

Ans to Q No 8 : Usually the following points are covered in a radio discussion script:

a. The introduction, normally containing the significance of the topic to be discussed

b. An introduction of the experts who will take part in the discussion.

c. A general outline of the aspects of the topic to be discussed

d. The possible questions which will be put to the experts

e. A brief summary.



10.8 FURTHER READING

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2. Kumar, Keval J (2012) Mass Communication in India. Mumbai : Jaico Publishing House
3. Ghosh, Subir (1991) Mass Media India : In the Indian context . Profile Publishers
4. Kundra, Shipra (2005) Basic Audio-Visual Media. Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd.



10.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q.1. Discuss the basic principles of writing news for radio.

Q.2. Radio news is concise. Elaborate.

Q.3. When writing for radio, one should remember that it is for the ear and not the eye. Comment.

Q.4. Creating a radio news bulletin is not as simple as it appears. Discuss the steps involved in preparing a news bulletin for radio.

Q.5. How do you prepare a radio feature? Discuss the steps involved in making a radio feature.

Q.6. Write a note on current affairs programmes on radio.

Q.7. Radio news is conversational. Elaborate.