

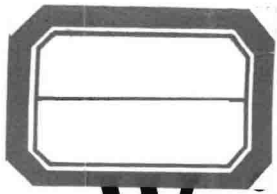
WRITING SCRIPTS

FOR TELEVISION
RADIO AND FILM



Edgar E. Willis

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Writing Scripts

for Television,
Radio, and Film

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Preface

This book has two main objectives: (1) to provide practical instruction for those seeking careers in broadcasting and film; and (2) to help guide students whose goal is a liberal rather than a professional education toward the attainment of fruitful creative experiences. In pursuit of these objectives, we describe the theories and techniques underlying the writing of the principal broadcast and film forms and illustrate professional practice with a wide variety of scripts and script excerpts.

Those familiar with an earlier book, *Writing Television and Radio Programs*, will note that this volume includes a substantial amount of similar material, particularly in the chapters on dramatic and comedy writing, but that in other ways it is markedly different from the earlier version. We believe that the changes we have introduced will substantially enhance the usefulness of the book without eliminating any of the features that previous readers found valuable. To begin with, we have completely rearranged the order in which we consider the writing of various types of scripts. Prompting this reorganization is the thought that focusing first on the over-all purpose of a script may help set writers more quickly on the track toward reaching their goals. We have, therefore, classified writing for broadcasting and film into three categories: writing to persuade, writing to inform, and writing to entertain. Some might question our grouping of a few of the program forms—sports news, for example, could be thought of as entertainment rather than as information—but we believe our categories identify the main objectives of various program forms in a reasonable and helpful way. Recognizing this primary goal at the beginning should help students define their own objectives and point the way toward the appropriate writing techniques. We have preceded these three main sections with a prologue that discusses writing and the writing profession and describes tools and formats, and have followed them with a section that takes up the problems of writing for special audiences such as children and minorities.

A second major change is a substantial expansion in the consideration of non-dramatic writing. We have broadened the discussion of most of the topics dealt with in the previous book and have added new topics. We have done this without significantly reducing the coverage of dramatic writing, though some of the

material presented originally in separate chapters we now combine in a single chapter. The major topics remain intact, however.

We have made another change we think will be helpful to students. Instead of illustrating dramatic principles with excerpts from early television drama, we have generally turned for examples to recent motion pictures. Although we cannot expect these films to remain current, we believe they will be more relevant to the students' experiences than the previous script examples, and we can hope that some students will be able to see the films we mention when cinema societies bring them back to campuses. The application of dramatic principles to the writing of film scripts is the reason we have put "film" in the book's title. Though our main emphasis is on writing drama for television and film, we have not ignored the writing of radio drama, which can be a valuable exercise and a satisfying creative experience for students even though it now receives little attention in the professional world.

We have tried to be as specific as possible in defining theories and techniques. We believe, for instance, that it does little good simply to ask students in a general way to arouse the audience's interest at the beginning of a script. If we are to be helpful, we must also describe specific techniques for arousing interest. To cite another example, belaboring students with vague statements about plotting principles is not likely to lead them to the construction of effective dramas. Instead, we have tried to provide meaningful guidance by describing the specific steps to follow in plotting, illustrating them with a detailed analysis of two films that students can apply in working out their own plots.

The use of a wide variety of scripts and script excerpts is a further step toward making the instruction concrete. In addition to exemplifying the practice of professionals in the field, we link these scripts to the discussion of particular techniques and principles, thus showing how to use them in actual writing. In identifying the various works, we use italics to signify the titles of films, plays, books, radio and television series, and one-time specials. We use quotation marks to indicate the titles of short stories and the programs within a radio or television series.

Readers will note that we use footnotes sparingly. This arises partly from choice, for we believe that our emphasis should be mainly on instruction rather than on documentation. However, it also arises from the fact that we collected some of the quotations we use long before we contemplated writing this book and we do not now know their origin. We have included them, believing that their substance is valuable even though their exact source is unknown.

Suggested projects and questions follow each chapter. We expect that the main activities of students using this book will be writing scripts and reading them in class. The questions and projects may suggest some worthwhile variations on these activities. We have placed the bibliography at the end of the book and have organized it to direct attention to works dealing with the various types of writing we cover.

Joining as a co-author in the preparation of this second book is Camille D'Arienzo, R.S.M. of Brooklyn College and a frequent visiting faculty member at the University of Michigan. Besides helping in the organization of the book

and obtaining script material, she is also the main writer of the chapters on News; Interview, Talk, and Call-In Shows; and Daytime Programs. We have each served as a critic of one another's work, and all of the chapters to some degree are a product of this collaborative approach.

This book did not come into being from our effort alone, however. A great many people in the broadcasting and film industry graciously provided us with material. Our specific acknowledgments for their cooperation appear either in the text or in the list of scripts at the front of the book. We feel particularly fortunate that we could call on so many friends in the broadcasting field for help in finding and obtaining the scripts we needed. Chief among them are a number of former students now pursuing careers as professional broadcasters and film makers. We are especially grateful for their generous assistance.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
Brooklyn, New York
January, 1981

E.E.W.
C.D.

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Prologue



The Writer and the Media

1

Writing involves a craft that you have to learn and a talent that you must possess. Neither is common and both are essential.

GOETHE

People looking forward to careers as scriptwriters for the broadcasting and film media need to know the answers to a number of significant questions. Do these media confront writers with any unusual problems or demand of them any special talents? Which of these talents must writers possess as innate gifts and which can be acquired through training or experience? What are the conditions under which the television, radio, and film industries operate, and do these conditions impose any restrictions on the writer's creativity? What type of employment is available to writers and how is it found? How does the task of writing actually take place? These are the questions we address as we consider the general situation of the writer in the broadcasting and film industries.

THE MEDIA'S DEMANDS ON THE WRITER

The experience of a number of writers who have made successful transitions into the broadcasting and film fields from other types of writing suggests that the techniques demanded by television, radio, and film can be mastered by those whose general writing skills are fully developed. Walter Cronkite and Harry Reasoner first established their reputations as newspapermen before going on to distinguished careers in broadcast journalism. Archibald MacLeish's poetry brought him his first national notice; when he turned to radio, such poetic dramas as *The Fall of the City* were almost immediately acclaimed as classics. Evan Hunter drew attention originally as a novelist with *The*

Blackboard Jungle and then went on to create television and film scripts as well as many more novels. In one instance, he wrote a police novel, *Fuzz*, under the pseudonym Ed McBain and later adapted it for the screen under his real name. Movement in the other direction has also taken place. Sidney Sheldon earned his living as a scriptwriter for television and film before *The Other Side of Midnight* and *Bloodline* made him one of our best-selling commercial novelists. Their careers indicate that people who have mastered the art of writing can apply it in a number of ways.

Although the broadcasting and film media do not constitute forms that have a unique identity or embody special demands all their own, they encompass a number of different fields which do have separate identities and impose unique requirements. Various skills are needed in broadcasting and film, among them the ability to move people emotionally through drama; the wit to contrive comedy situations; the ingenuity to think up game show ideas; the capacity to influence behavior and opinions with commercials, documentaries, and editorials; and the gift of writing clear exposition in newscasts and in scripts designed to inform. Individuals who are effective in writing one type of material may not necessarily be effective in writing another type. This situation is also true outside the broadcasting and film fields. Charles Dickens and Henry James are among the English-speaking world's most acclaimed novelists; yet, though they both yearned for success as playwrights and sought it by writing for the stage, they were never able to achieve it. To reverse the coin, George Bernard Shaw's novels are now ig-

nored; only when he turned to drama did he find the vehicle that has made his name live.

The career of Paddy Chayefsky provides a good illustration of the point that one does not master a medium such as television or film, but rather that one masters a type of writing that can be expressed effectively through them. Chayefsky achieved fame overnight when his drama *Marty* was broadcast in the early days of television. Later he wrote successful plays for the Broadway stage and then turned to writing for the movies, where his script for *Network* won an Academy Award. Chayefsky mastered the art of creating dramas in television and then applied that skill to writing dramas for the stage and screen. To cite MacLeish again, he was primarily a poet who found radio a natural outlet for his special gifts. What counted for MacLeish was his essential talent as a poet; he found that adapting his talent to the special demands of radio was relatively easy.

One of the things beginning writers must do is to undertake a voyage of exploration to discover the nature of their own resources. The result of that search should lead to some conclusions about the kind of material they are best qualified to write. One step in that process is practice in writing various types of scripts. This book, by providing instruction for writing in the various script categories, can assist you as you explore your own potentialities. But before setting out to learn the special techniques and demands of various media and script forms, you need to think about the characteristics that distinguish all good writing no matter what its nature. In the next section we discuss the talents, both innate and acquired, which you must possess if you are to be a successful writer in any field.

INNATE TALENTS OF THE WRITER

It is commonly said that writers are born, not made, and that writing cannot be taught. This statement rests on the assumption that writers must have within them certain innate talents. It does seem to be true that instruction cannot bring certain necessary talents into being, though it may be able to nurture them if they do exist. Let us begin, then, by considering what capacities aspir-

ing writers must bring with them to their teachers. These capacities will differ, of course, according to the type of writing the student plans to do.

Something to Write About

An obvious necessity for writers is material on which to base their work. The immediate inspiration for beginners is usually their own experience, and an essential is the capacity to live fully. Writers cannot afford to let experience merely wash over them. It must mark them with indelible imprints. But to provide all of the substance required for writing, observation must reach beyond the bounds of immediate reality. Writers need a native curiosity that will lead them to gain a sense of what Taine, the French historian, called the "moral temperature of their times" and an understanding of the world that existed before their own day. Only in this way can they gain the sensitivity to the present and the sense of the past that are necessary to measure the relevance of their own experiences. To put it another way, they must have the capacity to escape the limits of their own backgrounds, for one who relies entirely on personal experience soon exhausts those resources and becomes shallow and monotonous. Moreover, even works that find their main inspiration in the lives of writers must reflect faithfully the personalities and experiences of others involved in the story, people whose passions and ways of life may be utterly alien to their own. For the dramatist, the ability to project into other lives is an absolute requirement.

Language Facility

The tools of writers are words and they must have a special way with them. Clarity and precision in word choice, for example, are essential for the newswriter who must describe events accurately. This skill can be sharpened with instruction, but some innate feel for language is necessary. Another basic requirement for all writers is the ability to see on their own what hangs together and what does not, as well as to recognize whether what they write at any given moment stems from what they have just written and whether it will lead directly into what they are about to write. *Only if they have this capacity for self-criticism*

will their work have unity and coherence, qualities especially important to the documentary writer, who must analyze a problem and handle its treatment with clarity and logic.

Always choose your words carefully so that they will convey precisely the meaning you intend. If a word or expression seems awkward or inexact, a dictionary or thesaurus will suggest alternatives. The commentator, Eric Sevareid, conceding that there are times when a picture may be better than a thousand words, also insisted that there are times when one well-chosen word may be better than a thousand pictures.

Writing for the Ear

The writer for broadcasting and film must be particularly sensitive to the sound of spoken language. "Word deafness" may be a handicap to a novelist, but in a television or film writer it is a fatal flaw. If people lack this sensitivity, no teacher can give it to them. Audience members must be able to absorb the material without having the opportunity to study it; they cannot ask a speaker to repeat a fact or request clarification of a complex point because they do not understand it. This factor has important implications for all those who write material for the ear—among them the writers of newscasts, feature talks, commentaries, continuities, and dramas.

The first fact the writer of radio and television material should understand is that the audience is composed of isolated people who cannot experience the social facilitation operating in a group assembled in one auditorium. Even though millions may be listening, you are writing, not for a mass audience, but for a single person sitting at ease in a home setting. This means that you should employ the direct, informal style characteristic of conversation. To attain a conversational style use contractions ("don't," not "do not"); give your language an informal tone by avoiding inversions and relative clauses; use shorter sentences than you generally would in writing material to be read, though not to the point of becoming monotonous; proceed directly from the subject to the predicate in most instances.

Because you are writing material to be read out loud, you should take special pains to avoid tongue twisters that might trip up the announcer. Nu-

merical figures should be spelled out because words can be converted into language more easily than can numbers. Beware of homonyms, words that sound alike but have different meanings. The following sentence, though clear when read, might perplex a radio listener. "The young man got his girl a ring and thus he got her, too!" The sentence, "She gasped in surprise at the bear keeper" is subject to misinterpretation when only heard. Unless the reader is very skillful, the sentence, "While we were drinking, the river, previously quiet, began to eddy and swirl," might mislead listeners.

The Ability to Create

Experience and knowledge make a major contribution to a writer's work, but most forms require writers to create something that never existed before. If they are to bring new ideas into being, they must be gifted with native inventiveness. The commercial writer needs it to find a new way of presenting an old appeal. The documentary writer needs it to devise a framework for presenting factual material in an interesting way. Television or film dramatists need it to work their way out of plotting cul-de-sacs which might prevent a story from flowing credibly and inevitably to its end. The task of bringing new characters into being requires, in addition, the gift of creative imagination. These characters may reflect real persons but if that is all they do, the dramatist has failed to move beyond the achievement of mere verisimilitude. The most satisfying characters emerge when reality is enriched with imagination. The ability to recombine and modify familiar elements into something that never existed before cannot be created by instruction. It must be there when instruction begins.

The Capacity to Reexperience

Writers must have good memories, and there are some who have displayed a gift of almost total recall, but the mere recollection of events is not enough. If writers are to infuse their work with the vibrations of actual existence, they must be able to live through experiences again. Many people can recite accurately the facts of a past event, but only a few have the ability to bring back those

facts clothed with the emotions and sensations they originally aroused. The writer of comedy must add to this talent the knack of seeing people and events from a unique point of view.

Storytelling

The ability to tell a good story is of crucial importance in creating drama and some types of documentaries. The great dramatists seem to know instinctively how to grip the attention of an audience from the first moment and hold it to the end. Instruction can provide writers with some knowledge of the techniques involved in the art of storytelling, but much of this understanding must come to them naturally.

Self-Evaluation

The practice of writing is a lonely art and loneliness seems particularly to be the fate of broadcast writers—one they share with poets and novelists—who rarely see the reactions of their audiences. In most instances, radio and television writers have access only to the reactions of those who put on the program and their judgments, like the writer's, may be warped by this participation. Broadcast writers need a generous gift of self-criticism to be able independently to measure the reach of their accomplishment. The ability to maintain a fresh and objective eye for something as personal as a piece of writing, into which one's whole being may have been poured, is not a common one. People fired with dedication and commitment may easily confuse the high purpose they set out to achieve with what they have actually written.

ACQUIRED SKILLS OF THE WRITER

The argument that writing cannot be taught seems to imply that it is impossible to acquire any writing skills at all. It is axiomatic, of course, that a teacher cannot give a person the innate gifts we have just considered, but it seems equally clear that certain skills can be acquired through instruction. Though students cannot learn to be inventive, they can learn how to apply what gifts they

do possess. They can learn the lore and disciplines of the medium; they can be taught how to adapt to a particular medium's demands; they can discover the ways in which an idea may be framed for presentation on radio or television. In this way the potentialities they possess can be expanded and developed. Knowledge of the principles involved in such functions as designing dramatic scripts, selecting items for a newscast, persuading people to buy products, or motivating laughter can also provide students with criteria for evaluating their own work. As a result, they may flounder less in error and spend more time in rewarding trial. Most important of all, a teacher can be a first audience for writers, providing the feedback that lets them know that they are either on target or have completely missed the mark.

D. H. Lawrence's statement regarding the novel that "all rules of construction hold good only for novels which are copies of other novels," seems to be true only in part. There is need, at the very least, for criteria that give the various forms of writing their shape and identity. And while the writer's skill is still untested and unproved, it may be dangerous to disregard practices that experience has shown are effective. Some rules are made to be broken, perhaps, but not by beginners.

Still, the study of writing may have its dangers. Young writers desperately seeking guidance may assume that there are certain techniques and formulas that can be used in script after script. Such an assumption may carry them into prescribed channels which repress their imaginative powers and limit their capacity to find new ways of expressing ideas. Principles should not become frozen into detailed procedures which become so inflexible that they enclose and stultify. Beginning writers can use the patterns of the past as reference points, but in the end they must try not to write like someone else but to write in their own individual ways.

THE NATURE OF THE INDUSTRY

Writers, no matter what their medium, must respond to requirements that may, in fact, prevent them from realizing their full creative potentialities. The major influence as far as commercial broadcasting is concerned is that most of the