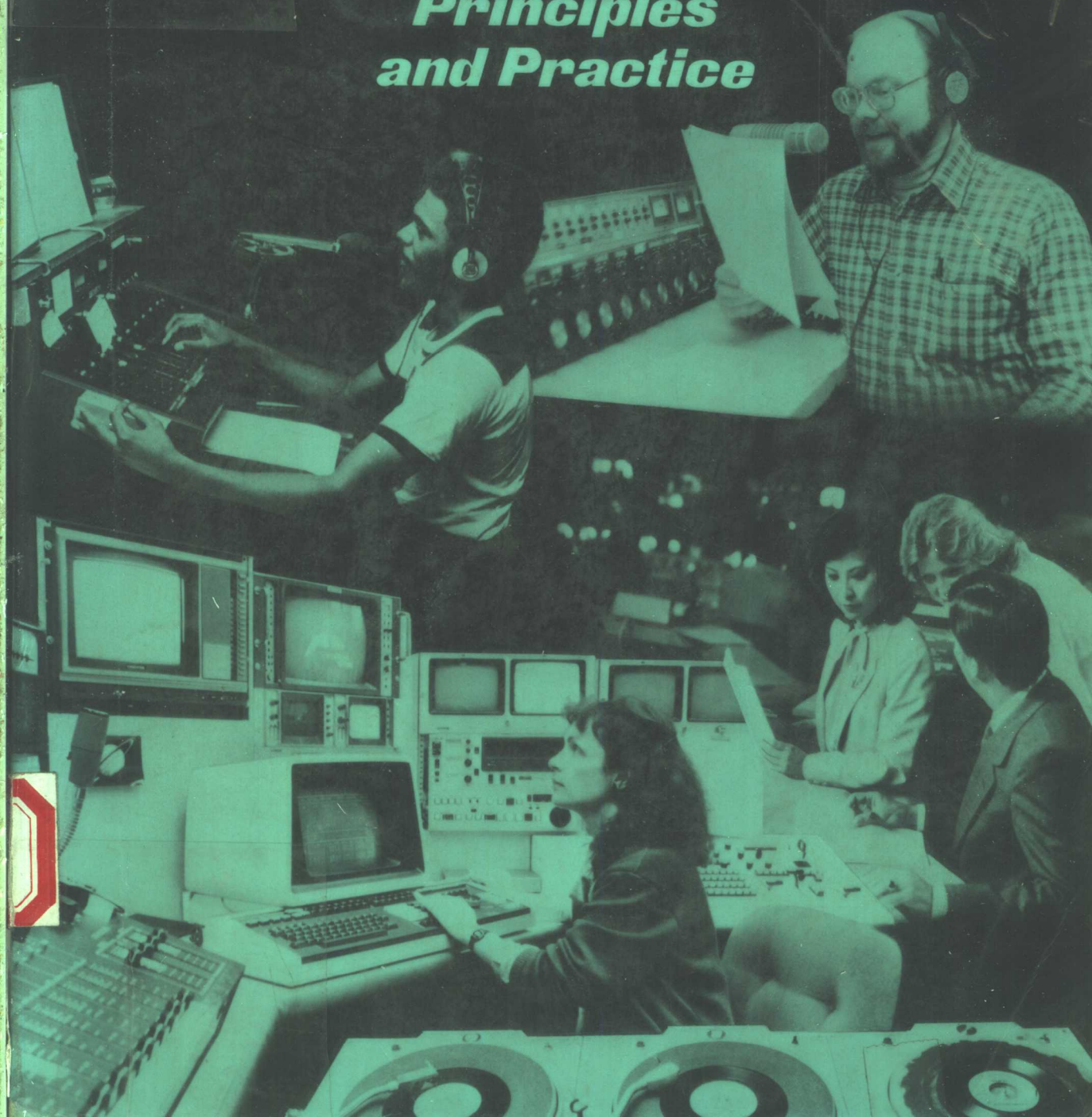# Roger L. Walters

Broadcast Writing

Principles and Practice

Broadcast

Writing

Principles and Practice

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Preface

This book is based on the range of experiences and writing tasks I have faced during more than fifteen years as a program producer, director, writer, and administrator in commercial and educational broadcasting, and an equal span of years teaching, among other courses, an introductory course in broadcast writing. In addition, there are the experiences, and a few of the scripts, of my students woven into the fabric of this text.

It is my firm belief that writing is a craft that can be learned, but not taught. A text can guide, point out pitfalls, suggest things to consider, and establish criteria for evaluation. But you will learn to write only through extensive practice, whether in course assignments or on the job.

Practice will be more valuable, of course, if it is accompanied by some form of feedback. If you are in a course, this feedback will come from an instructor. If you are an intern working in a professional environment, it will come from a supervisor. If you have already begun a professional career, feedback will come from more experienced colleagues.

And feedback will come from this text, which can help you in several ways. It describes principles and practices that are followed in the industry and provides reasons why those principles are important and those practices are followed. Broadcast writing does not take place in a vacuum. It is part of a larger process that involves the preparation of content for programs, and the delivery of those programs to audiences through electronic systems. The writer must have a good, broad understanding of that whole process to prepare copy successfully.

This book also sets forth criteria for good writing that you can use to evaluate your own work. It gives examples of structure, style, and content from actual broadcasts. And it relates the writer's role both to the sponsors of broadcasts and to the interests of the users of broadcasts, the audiences.

In preparing this text I have made certain assumptions. The first is that you, the reader, are interested in a career in broadcasting in which writing will be at least a portion of your job. This book will discuss the problems writers face in real world situations. It will show you how to analyze those situations to produce the best scripts.

A second assumption is that you already have a reasonable command of the English language (that is, of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, etc.). This book is not a grammar text; we do not include text or exercises that review fundamentals of language.

Features of the Text

Several features set this text apart from others in the field. The first and most obvious is its emphasis on principles. My point, on which I will elaborate in the introduction to Part 2 ("Principles") is this: There are principles of writing for radio, TV, and cable that are peculiar to those delivery systems and to the way

their audiences receive and process information. The characteristics of the media and of audience behavior, taken together, dictate broad principles writers must understand and apply if they are to be successful.

I believe these principles are not tied to any one program type or style of copy. That is, there is not one set of principles for dramatic writing and a different set for documentaries, or for news, or for interviews. Certain principles may be more important, or more obvious perhaps, in writing certain types of copy, and each type of program does have certain strengths and weaknesses. But most of the principles of good writing can, and should, be applied to most program types.

A second feature of this text is the strong relationship that has been built between writing and production. This is not a production book; it does not attempt to provide detailed instruction on the use of the facilities of broadcasting, such as microphones, cameras, or recorders. But I have tried to show how the writer's task is affected—perhaps facilitated, perhaps impeded, but always affected—by the production process. For example, different forms of continuity are required for programs that are aired live than for those that are pre-recorded. These distinctions are made throughout.

Similarly, I believe writers must understand how much their jobs are shaped by the business of broadcasting, by the demands of sponsors and the requirements of programmers and managers. I will digress frequently from the specifics of writing to place that task in the larger contexts of programming and advertising. I will also emphasize the purposes intended when programs are aired.

I likewise feel that writers need an equally clear understanding of how programs and announcements are perceived and used by audiences. Broadcast communication is incomplete and ineffective if it doesn't reach, satisfy, and even persuade audiences. Writers must know how to use the tools that accomplish those results.

My emphasis is on *process*. It is not only on what you may be expected to write, and how to do that, but also on how to analyze each task, how to apply the principles that are presented, and why. If you think about what you write, and why you write it, it will be much easier to learn to write in a creative way. This emphasis on process is also a unique feature of this text.

Plan of the Book

Chapter Organization   The book is organized into four parts and eighteen chapters. Part 1 consists of an introductory chapter, an overview of the communication process as it applies to the broadcast media. That overview establishes the relationships among the principles that will be presented in subsequent chapters. It also provides an opportunity to define terms and make distinctions that we will use throughout the remainder of the book.

Part 2—''Principles''—consists of nine chapters. It begins with a discussion of aural style. Most broadcast content, even for visual media like television, is processed by audiences through their sense of hearing. The importance of writing for the audience's ears is therefore emphasized early in the sequence.

Next I examine the relationship between writing and production. Then, since the method of production used to prepare a program has a substantial bearing on the form of scripts and on the detail that may be required in a script, there follows a chapter entitled "Script Mechanics." That chapter covers script layout and other matters such as punctuation and using abbreviations. The organization of programs and their content to attract and maintain audience attention is the subject of Chapter 5—"Program Structure."

The next two chapters examine in detail the ways in which writers manage the two senses—sound and sight—in scripts and in program production. Chapter 6—"Handling Sound"—reviews the uses of sound effects, music, and voice when used for its sound value. Chapter 7—"Handling Visuals"—presents basic principles of visual grammar.

Industry practices are then discussed in two chapters. Chapter 8 covers sponsors and their purposes. It considers how management and programming decisions affect program content and therefore the writer's role. We then reverse the perspective and examine programming and writing from the audience's point of view in Chapter 9—"Audiences and Their Expectations." The final chapter in Part 2 looks at how sponsors attempt to accomplish their purposes, with an overview of the uses of persuasion in broadcast messages.

In Part 3 the chapters are organized using, roughly, the traditional division of communication into persuasive, informational, and entertainment forms. In broadcasting, persuasive content is usually presented in the form of announcements, including commercials, public service announcements, promos, and editorials. Those are the focus of the chapter on persuasive content—Chapter 11.

Informational programs are covered in four chapters. News writing is the subject of Chapter 12, with concentration on the structure and writing of individual news stories.

Talks, interviews, and discussions, in one form or another, make up a significant portion of broadcast station schedules. The research and writing required to prepare these programs successfully are covered in Chapter 13.

Chapter 14 considers documentary programs. Documentaries have significant similarities in content, form, appeal and audience with news, with talk shows, and with dramatic programs, but there are also unique features that justify their separate consideration.

Corporate/instructional scriptwriting is discussed in Chapter 15. These are the scripts written for presentations to corporate clients or employees, to patients or to staffs of hospitals, to customers in a store considering the purchase of a major item, and so on. These scripts may be persuasive, and occasionally, entertaining, but most often they are informational, so we include them in this general group.

By far the largest number of broadcast programs have entertainment as their primary purpose, but many types of entertainment programs do not require formally written scripts. One major type of entertainment program which does require careful scripting is the drama, discussed in Chapter 16. The beginning writer is not likely to have much opportunity to write full dramatic scripts, but

some emphasis is placed on the topic because the techniques of dramatic writing may be used in other program forms. For example, dramatic vignettes are a common and effective way of attracting attention within commercial announcements.

In concluding this part several other types of programs are discussed briefly in Chapter 17, including programs for women, children, and minority audiences, and musical and variety programs. The emphases are on the specific applications of structure to meet the demands of the program form and on the gratifications necessary to reach the audiences for which these programs are intended.

The final part, consisting of one final chapter, presents to the student some concerns about broadcast writing as a career. What may a writer expect from the industry he or she serves, and what will the industry expect in turn? Some ethical issues that individuals will have to face when they enter the industry professionally are also briefly raised.

Using This Book

It would be nice if all of the groups of principles presented in the chapters of Part 2 could be presented simultaneously, for all of them do interact with one another. Further, you would then be able to apply them all at once to whatever project or assignment you might have. It is not possible to do that; of necessity they must be presented in discrete chapters, and sequentially.

It is also necessary that you combine the consideration of these principles with the writing of particular types of copy. The theoretical study of the principles of good writing doesn't have much practical significance until one begins to apply those principles. Persuasive appeals have to be applied to persuasive copy—commercials or public service announcements. The principles of structure have to be considered in relation to particular types of programs that you may be preparing, be that a talk show, a drama, a documentary, or whatever. Therefore, you will need to combine readings from the genre chapters in Part 3 simultaneously with your study of the various chapters of principles.

If you are using the book as a text in an organized course, your instructor may choose to begin consideration of the principles of writing at any one of a number of entry points—not necessarily in the chapter order presented. For example, an instructor might prefer to begin by discussing aural style (Chapter 2) as it relates to the writing of news copy (Chapter 12), or perhaps to consider target audiences and persuasive appeals (Chapters 9 and 10) as those considerations affect the writing of announcements (Chapter 11).

If you are not reading this book as an assigned text, you are of course free to approach it as you choose. I suggest you skim through the chapters of Parts 1 and 2 first, so that you have some grasp of what is included there—how the various clusters of principles relate to each other and to the practical tasks of preparing copy. Then, as you attempt to write for any particular form, you can refer back to those principles you find most important to your task.

Other Features

Exercises are provided at the end of each chapter. If you are using this book as a text, some of these may be assigned by your instructor. If not, I encourage you to attempt some of them anyway. Practice is the only way you can learn to write.

Some of the exercises are intended to guide you through the process of research and decision making that must take place before actual script writing can begin. In the industry, professionals often make these judgments without conscious thought, but for beginners these exercises will help "talk you through" to the point where writing begins.

The remaining exercises mirror, as much as possible, the actual tasks writers face in the industry. They are also broadly described, to allow opportunity for you to seek creative solutions.

Supplementary exercises and suggested classroom activities are contained in the *Instructor's Manual*.

A list of key terms and concepts is included for each chapter. They provide a good self-test. If you can define each one and explain its significance to broadcast writing, you will know that you have a solid understanding of that chapter's contents.

Bibliographies for each chapter are placed at the back of the book. If, as is our assumption, you aspire to a career in broadcast writing, you will need a substantial personal library, for both inspiration and reference. The "inspiration" will be needed when you are faced with a writing task that you just can't find a good approach for. You can turn to other writers who have faced similar problems and see how they solved them. References, of course, are for checking—on style, grammar, layout, etc.

If you were to purchase all of the books listed for each chapter's bibliography it would be very expensive, and very difficult, for some are out of print. But I urge you to begin to collect for your personal library.

The *Instructor's Manual* also provides a bibliography of teaching and learning resources, examination questions, model course outlines, and some suggestions on evaluating student work.

Acknowledgments

My own career as broadcaster and educator has been influenced by three professors with whom I was fortunate to study. All three were outstanding teachers, who inspired the desire to learn in their students. They are Stanley Donner, with whom I studied at Stanford University, Harrison Summers at Ohio State University, and Kenneth Harwood, then at the University of Southern California.

Dr. Summers' ability to outline complex topics is directly reflected in several chapters of this text. The organization of Chapter 6 on program structure and the concepts of sponsorship in Chapter 8 and audience gratifications in Chapter 9 are based on materials originally presented in his courses although newer information has been added.

A number of professional broadcasters have contributed their own work or collected examples from colleagues. Their contributions are greatly appreciated. Examples of announcements were provided by Walt Shaw, KRAK, and Tom Chase, KWOD, both Sacramento, and by Frank LaRosa and Ed Goldman, who operate their own advertising and public relations businesses. The editorials are from KTXL, Sacramento, contributed by Cal Bolwinkle. Mike Koelker, with Foote, Cone and Belding/Honig San Francisco, contributed several TV photoboards.

News copy has come largely from KCRA-TV, Sacramento, collected by Steve Haskins, Executive Producer. Other items were provided by Dru Doyle at KXPR, Dick Cable at KXTV, and Don Ross at KTXL, all Sacramento.

The barter scam series in our documentary chapter is the work of Brad Willis, made available by his station, WFAA, Dallas.

The dramatic example from *Riptide* was supplied by J. Rickley Dumm, producer for that series, who also reviewed the content of the chapter on dramatic writing.

Chapter 7 ("Handling Visuals") is very largely the creation of Kent Lacin. I'm pleased to be able to preserve in that chapter the ideas Kent has presented so successfully in guest lectures for my classes.

Some of the ideas in Chapter 2 ("Aural Style") and Chapter 6 ("Handling Sound") were originally presented by Albert Crews in his book *Professional Radio Writing*. His very perceptive thoughts about the process of writing for the ear are no longer available, since his book has long been out of print, but the basic ideas are still relevant, and we've attempted to show their continued importance to contemporary broadcast writing.

The research and publications of Jay Blumler have contributed a great deal to the portion of Chapter 9 that discusses audience gratifications. Dr. Blumler has been a leader in developing methods for gratifications research, and in evaluating and synthesizing conclusions from the many studies now appearing in the literature.

The impetus for this text came originally from Roth Wilkofsky, Executive Editor for Humanities, in the College Department at Random House. During the several years it has taken to get from ideas and outlines to this final stage Roth has continued to be enthusiastic and supportive. Peter Sandman, who is the consulting editor, has likewise been very helpful throughout. In particular I value his ability to explain to me, since I am new to textbook writing and publishing, the tremendous range of decisions and options that must be considered in preparing a work for publication. One might think that having written and produced innumerable radio and TV programs it would be easy to translate those experiences to a book. Not so, and Peter has helped immeasurably.

At various stages the proposal, drafts of selected chapters, and the manuscript were reviewed by colleagues from several universities. Their comments, too, have helped to settle the final focus and scope of this text. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Stanley Akers, University of Akron; Norma Champion, Evangel College; Sandra R. Davis, Savannah State College; James Ettema, Northwestern University; James E. Fletcher, University of Georgia; Michael Havice, Marquette

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Contents

Part 1

The Process of Broadcast Communication

To be successful as a broadcast writer, you will need to understand not only the principles of good writing and their application to various types of content, but also how the broadcasting industry functions. Most of this book is devoted to the first two of these requirements—writing principles and their application to the more common types of programs. We will also consider, in later chapters, the respective roles of program originators (sponsors) and of receivers (audiences). We begin, however, with the broadest perspective, an overview of the process of communication as it applies to broadcasting, and even more specifically as it applies to writers and their scripts.