How to Write A Radio Drama

The Following is an overview of an article from John Hopkins University, center for communication programs written by Esta de Fossard. It contains highlights essential for successful creation of radio dramas, and those interested in this subject are strongly encouraged to read the entire article available free online: http://www.jhuccp.org/pubs/fg/3/3.pdf.

Introduction to the Use of Radio Drama for Social Development
Radio is a universal and versatile medium, well suited to the delivery of programs encouraging social change.

Enter-Educate (Entertaining Education) serial dramas combine entertainment and education in a format that can be highly attractive to a listening audience.

The Enter-Educate approach has been popular throughout history, as can be seen in Traditional enjoyment of myths, parables, fables, and theatre.

Writers of Enter-Educate serials should have some training or preparation before taking on the writing of a radio serial drama.

The Enter-Educate drama writer should know the audience, purpose, objectives, and message of the specific drama.

Enter-Educate writers should understand and appreciate the multiplot structure of a radio serial and its advantages, the value of believable role model characters, the importance of emotion, the methods of fostering listening literacy, and the strengths and weaknesses of radio as a medium for entertainment and education.

Writing Begins: The Writers’ Brief

There are two main types of radio for social development: nontechnical programs and technical knowledge programs.

Nontechnical programs focus on increasing the audience's awareness of and interest in a new pro-social behavior.

Technical knowledge programs, which are often used for distance education, require listeners to learn, recall, and use specific information.

The writer bases the design and content of the educational aspects of Enter-Educate programs on information contained in the Writer’s Brief.

The Writer’s Brief is part of a larger design document drawn up by the design team; it includes all the information needed to provide a solid foundation for the radio serial, and includes details about the audience, the objectives and purpose of the project as a whole and of each episode, the message content, and a time line.

A script support team is available to advise the writer on content, audience, audio production, and government policy.

Characteristics of Radio Serial Drama

Drama is the doing or performance of a story that recounts a chain of events, a web of relationships, and a series of emotions that involve one or more people.

Dramatic conflict is a vital feature of all drama because it captivates the audience.

Dramatic conflict refers to the unusual, often unexpected, turns that may occur in all human activities that create uncertainty, tension, suspense, or surprise.
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There are three main forms of dramatic conflict: a person against fate, a person against another person or group of people, and a person in conflict with herself or himself.

All dramas contain four components: characters, plot, setting, and theme.

Drama used for social development includes a fifth component, the message, which must be blended into the story naturally, subtly, and gradually.

All dramas follow a five-part structure: introduction, development, climax, resolution, and conclusion.

The three types of drama commonly used on radio and television are independent dramas, series (including situation comedies), and serials.

The serial is unique because it presents a story in multiple episodes over a period of weeks, months, or years, and because it contains several plots developing side by side, with each episode ending on a note of suspense.

The multi-plot structure of the serial has many advantages for pro-social drama: It appeals to a wider audience, maintains suspense, varies the emotional appeal, is relevant to various audiences, allows for message repetition, provides message relief, and presents multiple Steps to Behavior Change.

Radio serial episodes all follow much the same standard format:

1. Opening signature or theme music;
2. Standard opening;
3. Recapitulation of previous story action;
4. Three to four scenes including at least two different plots;
5. Closing signature tune;
6. Closing comments from narrator;
7. Standard closing announcement; and
8. Brief repeat of signature tune.

Some writers give each episode a title to ensure that it has a clear focus.

### Blending Story and Message in The Drama Plot

The writer should keep in mind the ten aims of plot development, which deal with the importance of emotion, human stories, culture, conveying ideas rather than words, demonstrating the message, humor, positive ideas, trust, advocacy, and originality.

Good writers avoid clichéd works and create dramas that are both familiar and original at the same time.

Successfully combining story and message requires:

1. Knowing the information in the Writer’s Brief;
2. Preparing an event list; and
3. Creating plots that allow the message to be introduced naturally, subtly, and gradually.

A writer can follow a sequence of steps in plot development that will encourage the successful blending of message and story.
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Steps in Plot Development
1. Start with an exciting, locally appropriate story.
2. Put together the event list.
3. Draft the treatment of the main plot, including the message to be included and the underlying theme.
4. Draft the treatment of each sub-plot, including the message to be included and the underlying theme.
5. Check that the message is spread among the plots naturally, subtly, and gradually.
6. Determine the central uniting character.
7. Combine all the treatments into the full serial treatment.

Character Development

Characters are essential to every drama; they carry out the action and reveal the dramatic conflict and emotions that attract and hold the audience.

Writers should develop characters who are realistic, appropriate to the message and the audience, varied, limited in number, and of a suitable age for radio production purposes.

The characters selected for a particular radio serial depend on the message to be disseminated and can be determined largely by the event list drawn up during plot development.

Writers can choose from a wide range of characters, including heroes and heroines, villains, comics, advocates, and role models.

Writers should remember, when creating characters to attract and hold the audience, that listeners often are drawn more to villains than heroes.

The major characters in the drama need to be fully developed—including an understanding of their predominant personality traits—before script writing begins.

Detailed profiles should be drawn up before script writing begins, so that each character can be presented accurately and consistently throughout the serial.

Characters reveal their true natures in four ways: in what they say, what they do, what others say about them, and how they react to given situations.

Writers should understand how to use non-characters, notably the narrator and the host, effectively in radio dramas.

Developing the Setting

Setting (both time and location) are just as important in radio drama as they are in television.

Listeners must be able to visualize where the action is taking place.

Time can be established through dialogue and sound effects.

Each scene in a drama should take place in real time, with dialogue being used to indicate to listeners whenever time has passed between one scene and the next.

The use of flashbacks (going back in time within a scene) should be avoided, because they are difficult to write well and may confuse the audience.

Writers should create settings that are:
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✓ Familiar to the audience;
✓ Suitable to the message;
✓ Limited in number;
✓ Standard for each plot; and
✓ Identifiable by sound, if possible.

Radio writers should make sketches of frequently used settings so that they can present them accurately and consistently.

 Writers should make a map of each location in which a major scene occurs.

Dialogue and sound effects can help the audience visualize the locations where scenes take place.

Writing for the Ear

The golden rule of radio is to write everything for the ear.

Dialogue is used to convey action, setting, personality, message, and emotion.

To be effective, dialogue should be fully scripted, natural, suited to the character, and paced to fit the action.

Names should be used more often than in daily life.

The use of soliloquy should be avoided because it tends to destroy a drama’s sense of reality.

Word pictures are important in assisting the audience to “see” settings, characters, and actions, but figures of speech should be used cautiously.

Similes and metaphors can be used if they fit the speaker’s character.

Analogies can help the audience understand the message.

Local proverbs and sayings can help the audience see the drama as relevant to their lives.

Sound effects are an important component of radio dramas but must be used judiciously and sparingly.

Music cannot be used in radio drama as freely as it is in television, because it tends to interfere with the audience’s ability to observe action through words.

Having a musician as one of the characters is an effective way to add music to a drama in a natural manner.

Scene Development

For inexperienced writers and for listeners unaccustomed to radio serials, it is better to introduce the various plots gradually during the first eight to ten episodes.

Writers find it easier to create cohesive episodes containing several scenes if they create an episode treatment before writing each script.

Keeping a plot chart during the writing process helps maintain time and integrity as the serial moves forward.

When developing scenes, the writer should follow established guidelines with regard to:

✓ the number of scenes in an episode and their purpose;
✓ the use of a hook;
✓ links between scenes;
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- advancing the dramatic conflict;
- limiting the action;
- establishing emotion;
- pacing;
- maintaining real time; and
- using suspense or cliff hangers.

The best way to learn how to weave the various elements of a scene together effectively is to study a well-constructed example.

Interactivity and Enter-Educate Drama

Interactivity refers to any interaction between the characters or noncharacters of the radio program and the listeners.

Interactive involvement greatly enhances listeners’ ability to learn, retain and use information. Listener interaction can occur during the broadcast (intra-program interactivity) or after the broadcast (post-program interactivity).

Intra-program interactivity includes parasocial, thoughtful, emotional, physical, and oral interaction.

Questions requiring an immediate oral response from listeners can help them determine whether or not they have understood and can recall information.

Guidelines for the use of interactive questions include:

- The use of a cue prior to a question;
- Basing questions on information already given;
- Providing a pause for listeners’ response (PLR);
- Keeping expected answers short;
- Giving answers in the same words that listeners would use;
- Giving the answer immediately after the pause;
- Avoiding “yes” or “no” questions;
- Blending interactive questions with the story; and
- Providing open-ended questions to encourage thinking.

Post-program interactivity may include letters, telephone calls, quizzes, contests, group discussions, and role-playing.

Testing the Pilot Programs

A pilot program guides and directs the construction of other programs. Pilot programs are written and tested before full-scale script writing begins.

Even though trained researchers conduct the pilot program tests, writers should be involved in them so that they can see firsthand the strengths and weaknesses of the programs they are creating.

Pilot scripts introduce main characters, include part of the message, and demonstrate the type of emotional involvement the drama will offer the audience.

The writer needs to know whether the audience accepts, understands, trusts, is attracted to, and appreciates the programs.
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Script Presentation

The script must be presented on the page in a logical and consistent manner, so that all those using it can refer to lines and instructions quickly and accurately.

The cover sheet of the script should contain this essential information:
- Program number, title, topic, date of writing, duration, writer’s name;
- Program objectives and purposes;
- Character list; and
- Sequential list of required sound effects and music.

Every page of the script should have a header showing the program title, writer’s name, writing date, and page number.

Every line of the script is numbered for ease of reference.

Names are given in upper case letters, followed by a colon. A reasonable space is left between the name and the speech.

All instructions for technicians are presented in upper case letters and underlined.

All instructions for actors are given in upper case letters in parentheses at the appropriate place in the speech.

A remarks column can be placed on the right-hand side of the page where the writer can make notes for the support materials writer, director, monitors, and others using the script.

The Finished Script and Writer’s Check List

A well-constructed serial episode attracts and holds the audience’s attention by opening with action or a hook, involving the audience emotionally, presenting an entertaining plot, and concluding with a cliff hanger.

An Enter-Educate serial introduces the message into the story naturally, subtly, and gradually; demonstrates the relevance of the message; and expresses the message in language, story, settings, and characters that are suitable to the audience.

Good script writing makes it easy for the audience to follow the story by linking scenes smoothly together, establishing settings quickly, making characters’ personalities clear, letting characters address one another by name, and using evocative word pictures.

Good script writing makes limited use of narration, music, and sound effects.

The Value of Editing

After completing a script, Enter-Educate writers must check the accuracy and completeness of the message content against the requirements of the design document.

Writers should review the story structure, development, and dramatic impact of the draft script and strengthen them if needed by:
- Involving new listeners in an ongoing serial;
- Maintaining momentum in scenes that primarily convey message information;
- Conveying emotion in scenes with little action; and
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✓ Subtly incorporating the message into the story pose special challenges for Enter-Educate writers.

Using and Adapting the Drama Scripts

A guide for using drama scripts
(adapted from March 2003 Voices)

Farm radio broadcasts are intended to be informative and educational. But radio must also be interesting and entertaining. That's a challenge that we face every time we step up to the microphone.

Sometimes, radio drama is the answer. Drama provides a framework to help listeners understand how certain attitudes and behaviours shape everyday events. Through drama, listeners connect with characters and their struggles - and become involved in finding solutions to the characters' conflicts and challenges.

There is much more to producing a radio drama than reading from a script. Here are some important things to consider when bringing radio dramas to life:

🔍 **Find the right actors.** You don't need professional or experienced actors to produce a successful radio drama.Try to find willing volunteers through theatre groups in your area, or at local schools and community centres. Also, consider casting people you know who are natural speakers and would be willing to participate. When casting roles, it is important that you find voices that are clearly distinct from one another to provide texture in the production and to avoid confusion for the audience. Avoid casting based on what you see and pay attention to the actors' ability to convey action and emotion through what you hear.

🔍 **Practice, practice, practice.** It is important for your actors and studio technicians to feel comfortable with their cues, and to develop appropriate timing and pacing for the drama. When you have chosen your actors, ask them to read through the script together, in advance, so that everyone will be comfortable with their lines. Discuss with them ways to adapt the script to suit their needs and change awkward wording. The cast should have additional rehearsals to develop natural conversational tones and timing. When you feel everyone is ready, assemble them together to rehearse in the recording studio. This will help you plan how equipment such as microphones will be shared, and how to limit unnecessary noise (such as ruffling of script pages).

🔍 **Plan sound effects.** Though package 77 contains cues for sound effects, you may wish to adapt these cues for your audience and local situation. While you can add a lot to a drama script by using sound effects to set the scene or suggest an action, you must plan carefully. You might be tempted to use so many effects that your audience will become confused. Keep effects simple, consistent and easily identifiable.

🔍 **Use music.** Use the instructions in these scripts to guide your choice of music. Music in radio dramas can be very useful as a simple transitional device. A clear, uncomplicated
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melody can be very effective. Perhaps you can find musicians in your community who are willing to participate in your production.

概述

Prepare the studio. Whether you are recording the drama in advance or broadcasting live, you will need to set up your studio. If you have enough equipment, position each of your main characters at their own microphone. Minor characters can share a microphone. If you have just one microphone, instruct the actors to step back when they are not involved in a particular scene or when they do not speak for several lines. Actors should feel comfortable with their microphones and should practice projection as well. Usually, a regular conversational volume and tone will be appropriate, but you can also convey distance between characters by placing them away from the microphone. Pay attention to the instructions in this package, e.g., "OFF MIC", "COMING ON", etc. Work out ways to limit background noise on the recording. If possible, place scripts on stands to avoid the sound of paper shuffling. Practice with actors to limit heavy breathing, coughing or footsteps.

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Put it all together. The easiest way to record a radio drama is in "real-time", when everything is performed - including sound effects and music - without interruptions. This allows for a more natural feeling and momentum to come through on your final product. The energy and spontaneity of everyone being "kept on their toes" will contribute to the recording as well. If mistakes are made during the drama - keep going (especially if you're on air!). If you are recording, you can go back to the opening of the line and retake the dialogue after you have reached the end of the scene.

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The final product. If you recorded the drama, and you have the necessary equipment, you can edit in retakes and edit out pauses and distracting noises. In all stages of production, you should pay close attention to what you hear rather than what you see. Try closing your eyes occasionally to focus on what works well and what should be changed.

Remember - a successful radio drama allows your audience to picture what they are listening to and imagine that they are right in the middle of the action. As you can see, you don't need professional actors or special equipment to tell a good story. With good planning, teamwork and imagination, you will be able to bring your scripts to life.

Broadcasters aren't expected to be technical experts on subjects they broadcast

Broadcasters are first and foremost communicators, not subject matter experts. In other words, broadcasters, with few exceptions, do not have the technical knowledge to answer detailed questions about desertification or other subjects, nor should they be expected to. But it is useful for broadcasters to know where to find this kind of information. This knowledge is useful both because it will support their efforts to develop better programming, and because it will help them direct listeners to accurate and up-to-date information.

Appendix I offers some general guidance on what kinds of organizations to contact for technical questions about the script content. For this package, you can also consult the original ten scripts (41-1, 42-6, 42-8, 43-8, 44-1, 44-2, 44-8, 45-2, 45-7, 75-4) on which the present drama is based, which are all posted on DCFRN's website. We have also included some drawings in Appendix II which illustrate some of the land conservation methods used by characters in the drama.
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Tips for adapting package 77 for broadcasters with limited resources

While large stations may have the staff, resources and skills to mount a production of these multi-character dramas, smaller stations may need some help in adapting the dramas to their capacities. Thus, while we offer the following suggestions for using and adapting the dramas to all partners, they are directed in particular to broadcasters at smaller radio stations.

1. **Pool your resources** with other radio stations and/or interested organizations in your region or country. Serial radio dramas can be expensive and time-consuming to produce, and this can help small stations to make the best use of limited resources. Together, you may find it easier to hire the actors and translators, research the local content, organize the production, and do all the other things required to produce the 13 episodes. Mounting a serial radio drama might be a perfect opportunity to practice fundraising. There are potential funders for projects which combine popular entertainment with important development messages. Appendix III provides Internet addresses for documents which list possible funders, and offer tips on fundraising.

2. A second idea is to **collaborate with a local theatre group** to produce the dramas. It might be a good idea to find a theatre group which aims to promote environmental and social goals such as land conservation and community development.

3. Thirdly, you could read through the drama and consider which episodes might tell a **stand-alone story**, or which could be **condensed and adapted** as shorter dramas. If handled correctly, a narrator can cover some of the actions in multi-character dramas, with actors voicing the parts of the two or three major characters.

4. We are including what is termed a "design document" which was created by ARDA for package 77 as Appendix IV. This version of the design document is a greatly summarized version of the document which ARDA created to guide writing the 13 episodes of the drama. Stations with little or no funds can use this document to produce shorter dramas, for example dramas with two characters and a strong narrator who tells the stories as they are in the design document. The two-person cast can then improvise short dramatic dialogues and action from time to time. With effective rehearsals, this could be produced live or recorded quickly using an edit-free style when the studio is available. If you wish to use the design document to create scripts with the desertification messages featured in package 77, please consult the original Network scripts on which the serial is based. It will be important to clearly write out the farming methods mentioned in any episode so that the actors can read these descriptions, even though the rest of their dialogue is improvised.

These are just a few ideas; you will probably come up with many more yourself! And, remember, Network partners are the real broadcasting experts, so please don't hesitate to approach other partners with questions or suggestions about adapting this package to your needs and capacities. Please visit our website to see who our partners are. If you would like contact info for a partner, contact Blythe McKay at bmckay@farmradio.org. Remember - as always with DCFRN scripts, don't forget to add local content and local expressions whenever possible.