

## Writing for radio

Note: Different rules apply for or news items

---

### 1. Introduction

When writing a script for the radio, you should always bear one thing in mind: you are writing for listeners – not for readers. The listeners will only hear your text once and they will have to understand it immediately.

Readers of a newspaper or an online article can read sentences that they do not understand two or three times. They can even look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary. In addition, readers can process the information at their own pace. Some people are slow readers, others will just scan an article. In radio, however, the speed at which the listeners have to digest the information is determined by the speaker. And everyone has to listen to everything.

Radio texts have to be well presented, logically structured and easy to understand. If listeners stumble over unfamiliar words or cannot follow your train of thought, you lose their attention. And even if the listeners are only disoriented for a moment, the speaker on the radio meanwhile continues reading. So it will be difficult for the listeners to catch up with the context, once they are ready to concentrate again. Ultimately, much of your message will be lost on the listeners.

### Differences between reading and listening

Reading	Listening
Reading is a primary activity. When we read, we do not do anything else at the same time. We only concentrate on the text.	Listening to the radio is frequently a secondary activity. We often do something else simultaneously (drive a car, prepare a meal, etc). We do not concentrate 100% on what is being said.
Readers can read an article at any time they like.	Listening to the radio depends on the broadcast times.
Readers can re-read information they do not understand.	Listeners only hear information once.
Readers can determine how fast they read and when to take a break.	Listeners have to follow the speed of the speaker or radio journalist. If they stop listening for a moment, they miss pieces of information.
Readers see how long an article is and can decide whether they want to read the whole text. While reading, they always know how much more there is.	Listeners can not tell how long a piece on the radio will be. They never know what comes next in the report.

Newspaper articles and radio scripts are two very different things. Information has to be packaged differently depending on whether the audience will take it in with the eyes or the ears. If you want to be understood as a journalist and want to contribute to the success of your radio station, you will have to write your scripts in good radio language.

## 2. How is it done?

Radio scripts are not literature. In radio, simplicity wins. Simple words, clear short sentences and a logical structure are necessary to get information across.

Radio scripts should be informal, direct and polite. When you write your script and when you present it on the air, imagine that you are talking to one individual listener: your neighbour, your friend or your aunt. If you are writing a radio report, for example, think of how you would tell your neighbour the information which you are about to give to your listeners. What words would you use to talk to your neighbour? What is the first thing you would tell him or her, what would you mention later?

When you present your script on the air, don't think of the hundreds or thousands of listeners who might have tuned in – think of that one concrete person: your neighbour, friend or aunt. Imagine him or her sitting across from you in the studio. Talk, as if you were addressing just that one person. You will discover that your presentation will be much more direct and animated than if you presented your script *without* imagining that one person listening.

Radio language should be very close to spoken language. Write as you would speak. However, this does not mean that you can slip into colloquial slang. Aim for straightforward simplicity and avoid long, complicated sentences and specialist jargon.

When writing your script, you should always know what language is appropriate for your target group. If you use words that your listeners do not understand or language that they find offensive, you alienate them and not get your message across. You need to keep in mind what your listeners' religious, moral and ethnic sensibilities are. What words are taboos? Carelessness can cause great harm and damage your radio station's image and credibility.

### 2.1. Make short sentences

Research shows that listeners find it difficult to understand sentences with more than 15 words. Your listeners should not feel like the Spartans once felt in Ancient Greece. After they sat through a long speech delivered by a messenger from the Island of Samos, they said: "We forgot what he said in the beginning and did not understand the end because we couldn't remember the beginning."

#### Example

##### Not good (sentence too long):

"The globally-active pharmaceuticals group PILLCO, which – at its Supervisory Board

meeting on Friday of last week in LITTLETOWN – finally decided to go ahead with the construction of a new factory in BIGTOWN, reassured local environmentalists, who had originally voiced concerns, that pollution filters would be integrated in the smokestacks of the factory so that emissions would not endanger the residents.”

**Better (several short sentences):**

“PILLCO announced last night that it would integrate pollution filters into the smokestacks of the new factory in BIGTOWN. According to PILLCO, these filters will prevent emissions endangering the residents. PILLCO decided to go ahead with building the new pharmaceutical factory in BIGTOWN last week. But local environmentalists voiced concerns.

## 2.2. Repeat important terms

It is confusing for radio listeners, if you replace nouns or names with pronouns. It is better to repeat the name or noun. This may not sound elegant, but it guarantees clarity.

**Example**

**(not good):**

“The PILLCO Group did not find the decision an easy one. In its considerations, it not only had to take the international market conditions into account, it also had to consider whether qualified manpower was available. Following careful deliberation of all these points, it came to the conclusion that the BIGTOWN site offered ideal production conditions”.

By the time you’ve reached the second sentence, listeners no longer know what “it” refers to. You’ve confused them and have lost their attention.

**Example**

**(better):**

“The PILLCO Group did not find the decision an easy one. In its considerations, PILLCO not only had to take the international market conditions into account, but also had to consider whether qualified manpower was available. Following careful deliberation of all these points, PILLCO came to the conclusion that the BIGTOWN site offered ideal production conditions”.

Repeating key words, names and phrases would not be considered good style in a work of literature. But in radio journalism it is essential to avoid confusing the listeners.

## 2.3. Synonyms, foreign words and abbreviations

Radio language should be lively. But it is even more important that it should be understood immediately. Synonyms may seem like a good idea to make a script livelier – but in fact, they often confuse the listeners. For instance, when you are writing a script about the U.S. Ministry of Defence, it might not be a good idea to use the synonym “Pentagon”. Not all of your listeners would know this term. And if they

do not know that the U.S. Ministry of Defence is also called the Pentagon, they will not understand the information that you are trying to convey.

Similarly, if you talk about Bonn in a script and then replace the city's name with the synonym "the former German capital", listeners may be confused. Not everyone will be aware that Bonn *is* "the former German capital" – some may think you are talking about two different cities. They would start wondering, which city was the former German capital or which city is the capital now. And as soon as your listeners get caught up in such thoughts, you have lost their attention and your message will not reach its audience.

If in doubt, you should always repeat a name or term that your listeners already know. It's better to say "Bonn" in three consecutive sentences than to use confusing synonyms. In Radio, redundancy is good – unlike in literature. It promotes easy understanding.

Avoid using foreign words. Do not base your manuscript on what words you understand, instead try to think whether your listeners will understand it.

If there is no alternative for using a foreign word, you should provide a translation or an explanation of the word in question (e.g.: "...The *Bundestag*, the German parliament, voted in favour of the law" or: "Richard Wagner aimed to create a so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art comprising music, poetry and the visual arts.")

If you use abbreviations or acronyms in your script, you should say the full name or explain the abbreviation at least once. Don't assume that all listeners know what the ICRC is (International Committee of the Red Cross) or what UNESCO stands for (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). There are only very few abbreviations that your listeners will understand even if you do not give the complete name (USA, NATO, UN etc).

## 2.4. Numbers and figures

Radio is not the medium for detailed figures and numbers. Printed texts or online articles are much better for conveying this kind of information. Therefore it is better to concentrate just on two or three key few figures in a radio script – those that are absolutely necessary – and leave the rest to the printed press or online articles.

If you have to mention numbers or figures in your script, it's usually better to round the numbers off if this is possible without changing the information content of your message.

### Example

#### (not good):

"PILLCO plans to invest 78.89 million Euros in this country."

#### (better):

“PILLCO plans to invest almost 80 million Euros in this country.”

**(not good):**

“7123 people have signed a petition against the construction of the new factory.”

**(better):**

“Well over 7000 people have signed a petition against the construction of the new factory.”

However, there are cases in which it is essential to give the listener exact numbers and figures – sometimes up to the second or third decimal point. This applies particularly to election results, inflation rates and wage agreements.

Percentages frequently sound abstract to radio listeners. Wherever possible, try to avoid them in your scripts.

**Example**

**(not good):**

50 %

**(better):**

half

**(not good):**

66 %

**(better):**

Two thirds

## 2.5. Comparisons

When you talk about sizes, amounts or quantities of objects, it helps radio listeners visualise what you are saying if you draw comparisons. If, for example, you mention that a building site is roughly the size of two football fields, most listeners will be able to visualise this better than if you tell them the size in square metres. If, however, your listeners have never seen a football field, this comparison will obviously not work for your script. It is important that you draw your comparisons from your listeners' frame of reference – things they know and can relate to.

**Example**

**(not good):**

“The crane which PILLCO will use to build the factory is about 15 metres high.”

**(better):**

“The crane which PILLCO will use to build the factory is about as tall as a three-storey building.”

## 2.6. Graphic language

Using descriptive words and expressions is essential for a radio script. Keep in mind that your only tool to convey information to your listeners is the medium of sound – words. You cannot show them colourful pictures, like a television journalist would. And you cannot use graphics, charts or drawings, like a newspaper or online journalist would. You have to put all the information these visual media contain into your words. That's why it is crucial to use visual and descriptive language.

You are the listeners' eyes. Describe to them what you see when you are reporting on location. But you are also the listeners' ears, nose and taste buds. Don't just describe what something looks like, explain what it smells, feels or tastes like as well. The more descriptive you are, the easier it will be for your listeners to imagine what you, the reporter, are seeing and experiencing.

## 2.7. Active verbs

If possible, write your radio script in the active voice. This will make it sound livelier and less stilted. The passive voice often makes texts sound like official announcements: boring and wooden.

### Example

(not good):

"A contract between PILLCO and city officials will be signed later today."

(better):

"PILLCO and city officials will sign a contract later today."

## 2.8. Quotes

When you are quoting what someone said in your script, your listeners cannot see where you've put the quotation marks. They may sometimes not understand where the quote begins and where it ends.

It is not enough to indicate where a quote begins and where it ends through your intonation. It is better to say "quote" and "end of quote" at the beginning and at the end.

### Example:

"PILLCO president John Miller said – quote – This factory will bring wealth and prosperity to the people of BIGTOWN – end of quote."

As you can see, this wording may be unambiguous, but it does not sound very good. On the radio, it is better to change quotes into indirect speech (unless the statement is very short and snappy).

### Example:

"PILLCO president John Miller said that the factory would bring wealth and prosperity to the people of BIGTOWN."

## 3. The structure of a radio script

The fact that everything spoken on the radio can only be heard once and therefore needs to be understood immediately also has an effect on the structure of the manuscript. Imagine you have to take your listeners by the hand and lead them through the topic – on a straight path, without wandering off to the right or left. Spare your listeners detours, do not bother them with insignificant sidelines. For your manuscript, this means: a clear structure, which informs and does not confuse.

### 3.1. Strong introduction

Always start with a strong opening, which catches the listeners' attention, arouses their interest and makes them want to hear more about this topic. A slow, boring introduction will make listeners switch off and turn their attention to other things.

#### **Example**

##### **(not good):**

"Yesterday evening, PILLCO – following extensive negotiations – confirmed that the residents of BIGTOWN whose houses will be demolished to make room for the new pharmaceutical factory will receive financial compensation."

The introduction "Yesterday evening" already gives listeners the impression that you are about to present them old news. Their interest in the subject will automatically fade. In addition, the wording sounds wooden and the sentence is much too long.

##### **(better):**

"Residents of BIGTOWN are breathing a sigh of relief: everyone whose house has to be torn down to make room for the new factory will get financial compensation. PILLCO confirmed this last night. The decision was made following extensive negotiations."

The introduction "Residents of BIGTOWN are breathing a sigh of relief" catches the listeners' attention. They immediately ask: "Why can they breathe a sigh of relief?" You have aroused their interest and they want to know more about the topic.

The strong opening is followed by

### 3.2. The Main facts and questions:

- The people whose houses will be demolished will receive money
- How much money will they receive?
- When will they receive it?
- When will their houses be torn down?
- etc.

This is followed by:

### 3.3. Details:

- Why are the buildings being demolished and the residents moved elsewhere?
- What will happen with the land?
- Has there been any reaction to PILLCO's announcement yet?
- What do the supporters of the project say on the matter?
- What do its opponents say?
- etc.

This is followed by:

### 3.4. Background information:

- Do the affected residents have to apply for compensation?
- Which office/body is responsible?
- Are there deadlines?
- etc.

In this example, the background information is strongly service-oriented. You are giving the listeners who are directly affected information that is important if they want to receive compensation. And the listeners who are not directly affected will get the impression that your radio station really cares about its listeners.

This is followed by:

### 3.5. Summary/Conclusion:

- After years of debate, the PILLCO and the city of BIGTOWN will go ahead with the project
- What does the current situation mean for PILLCO?
- Will the opponents of the project give up now?
- etc.

## 4. The outward appearance of the radio script

When writing a radio script, the contents and structure are undoubtedly the most important factors. However, if you want to get your message across to the listeners, it is also important how you present your piece.

It's helpful if your script is easy to read. This will make a good and lively presentation possible. You can focus totally on the text and the presentation and do not have to battle with unnecessary obstacles. Here are some helpful hints:

- **Only write on one side of the paper**

If you have to turn the pages of your script to read text on the reverse sides, your listeners will hear your rustling pieces of paper. This unwanted sound will distract them.

In addition, you may get confused whether you've already read both sides of the paper. You can make things easier for yourself if you just write on one side. You can then put each page aside once you have read it and don't have to look if there is anything written on the reverse side.

- **Space between the lines and clear paragraphs**

Generous space between the lines of your text will make it easier for you to focus on the text while you are reading it on the air. It will prevent you from accidentally slipping into the wrong line.

If you leave space between the lines of your text, you can add pronunciation and intonation marks over or under the words.

Clearly define paragraphs within your text. This visual aid will show you at first sight where to pause and take a breath.

- **Write legibly**

When you are reading an illegible script on the air, you have to focus mainly on deciphering the text. Your pronunciation and intonation will not be lively. It's very likely that you will stumble over certain words or phrases that are hard to read. Listeners will think that this sounds unprofessional. Their attention will be diverted from the contents of your report. In the end, you will lose your listeners.

- **Avoid words and expressions that are hard to pronounce**

When writing a text, avoid words that you might stumble over later, when you present the text on the air. If you think you could have a problem pronouncing a certain word, choose a simpler one.

Numbers and figures can also be linguistic stumbling blocks, especially larger numbers. It helps if you write out thousands, millions and billions in words rather than figures. It's easier to read "two million" than to see a figure like "2 000 000" and have to count the zeroes to figure out whether you are dealing with millions or billions.

If you stick to the above-mentioned tips and tricks, you should have a radio script that looks virtually impeccable. But before you can present it in the studio, you should

read it out loud at least once. That way you will discover which sentences may be too long, where you may have the odd unpronounceable word and whether your report has the intended total length.

Finally, ask a colleague to go over your script or to listen to you reading it out loud. Maybe your colleague will spot phrases or words that are hard to understand or do not make sense.

Once your colleague (or your boss) has given you the green light, you are ready to go into the studio and present your text on the air.