

## Scripting for the Radio Documentary

by Alwyn Owen and Jack Perkins

Teaching script writing, like teaching sex, is essentially a secondhand operation; in either case, it's easier to learn by doing. In either case, too, some people will bring a natural flair to it. And to extend the analogy even further, unless Certain Precautions are taken, the joy of creation may be soured by Dreadful Consequences.

### Why do we script?

Often, I suppose, because we can't get people to say what we want them to say. But thinking it through more logically, here are a few reasons to script. There must be many more.

- To introduce and/or end an item or programme
- To link sections of a programme
- To convey information that is not available in recorded form, or which can be more logically or succinctly conveyed by a narrator
- To give a programme editorial direction so that somebody can be **heard** to be controlling the flow of information.
- To introduce mood or feeling into a programme, or to set a scene
- To tell a complete story as in a feature programme

It's quite possible of course to produce an entirely scripted programme. But limitations of time and finance make the fully scripted feature a rare occurrence.

### How much script?

It is a general axiom that the more analytical a programme, the more scripting is involved. Compare Radio New Zealand programmes *Spectrum* and *Insight*, for example. An analytical programme, *Insight* by its nature demands the logical presentation of a variety of material, and this can only be shepherded into sequence by the controlling hand of the scriptwriter. In *Spectrum*, on the other hand, talent is often directed in the field so that a transition can be made from one section to the other smoothly and without need for script.

But in either case, scripting must be held to a minimum, within the requirements of the programme. The aim is to say what needs to be said cleanly, economically, and efficiently.

### **Detachment versus involvement**

What is more interesting and at times more perplexing is the manner in which it is said. How detached or how involved should the writer be in his scripting? Traditionally, the answer has been clear a neutral script on all occasions. That's easy enough if you're scripting a studio recital by the Kaiwharawhara Brass Band. But what if something moves you, shocks you, horrifies you?

In a contentious issue abortion, for instance it's clear that any personal involvement will let all hell loose. On the other hand, there are many other programmes where I feel that a degree of involvement is no bad thing ... where a degree of skepticism perhaps, or approval, can appear in the scripting. But this can only work, I'm convinced, if you're mature, and reasonable, and have the ability to project this in writing and reading your script. Otherwise you sound brash and opinionated. It's a matter of judgment and surety in controlling your medium that tends to come with years.

### **Tone**

While we're still on generalities of style, it follows that scripting must suit the tenor of its subject. You can't wax poetic on a perfectly straightforward topic, and similarly you don't want to ruin the feeling of a cut with insensitive scripting. A cumulative mood generally develops as recorded material comes to hand, and once you can surrender to this and at the same time control it, you're well on the way to scripting effectively.

The commonest type of scripting is simple linking narration, between cuts. Let's consider this type of writing.

### **Planning**

Scripting is integral with planning. You can't sit down at the computer, script the opening cut, and then wonder what the hell you're going to have in your next track. A programme compiled in that way has no overall shape and no flow.

Planning is really a two phase operation:

- (a) pre recording, and
- (b) post recording.

### **Pre-record planning**

Invariably, you go into the field with some sort of basic plan, even if it is not down on paper. It may well be modified by circumstances in fact it almost invariably will be but you must have some reasonably clear idea of what you are about to do.

Failure to appreciate this leads to the "Magpie Method", a syndrome which is readily recognised by all newcomers to documentary work. The "Magpie Method" means the almost indiscriminate gathering of material, on the premise that if enough is obtained, somewhere in its bulk will be a programme. The penalty for this undisciplined approach becomes evident back at the studio. The commonest predicament of the newcomer is to face a pile of recorded tapes, with little idea of how to order this vast amount of material.

So you must go into the field with a fairly clear idea of what you want. In the straight factual type of programme this isn't hard. You must first ask the basic questions, which might run something like this:

- What is the present situation?
- How has it come about?
- What will happen if it isn't remedied?
- What steps are being taken?
- Who is taking them?
- When can we see a change?
- What is that change likely to be?

...in short, the old "who, what, when, where" questions.

Even a simple plan like this can be fouled up by speakers saying the unexpected, or by the intrusion of complicating factors. So when the recorded material is brought back to the studio and auditioned, a second stage of planning begins.

### **Post-record planning**

How you do this depends very much on personal preferences. A simple and very workable method is something like this:

- a) Listen through to what you've recorded. Roughly cut out the pieces you plan to use and name them. You should not have hugely more sound than the length of your programme (although how much room you plan to leave for script very much depends what kind of programme you are making, i.e. an *Insight* has much more script than a *Spectrum*).
- b) Create a document (word, notepad, a notebook) and note the cuts in it.
- c) Jot down the main areas to be covered in the programme. (i.e. make a paper list of what should be covered)
- d) Look through the list, and place these areas in a logical order.
- e) Go to your planning document, and select the strongest cuts in each area, thus:

Cuts Outline			
		Cut	Duration
Present position:	McDonald	1	2'00"
	McPherson	3	1'40"
How come about?	Anderson	5	1'50"
Consequences if unchanged:	McBride	7	2'30"
Steps being taken:	McPhail	11	1'00"
	McShane	9	1'30"
This discounted by:	McAlistair	13	2'00"
Comment by workers concerned:	Vox Pop		2'00"
When effective?	McDougal	15	1'00"
Two views by public representatives:	McLeod	10	1'20"
	McTaggart	14	1'00"

*(The subject of this supposed documentary is a strike by haggis fillers.)*

A layout like this gives a good visual indication of the shape of the programme, and makes the work of scripting infinitely easier.

## Scripted Openings

Let's consider this programme in more detail.

First, the opening.

It's become almost a cult to begin a programme with a cut. This has everything to commend it if the cut is arresting, relevant, and short. The idea of course is to grab the attention of the listener. Properly handled, it's as effective in an analytical programme as in a human interest one. But it must not be overdone to the point of gimmickry. There's a lot to be said for a simple announcement, and then good clean opening narration.

If your own voice as narrator isn't quite all you'd like it to be, there's something to be said for using an opening cut; it means that your own voice won't directly follow the announcer, suffering in comparison.

Alternatively - and cautiously - you can use effects.

**Three Sample Openings:****Possible Opening One**

Announcer:	It's three o'clock, and time for our weekly documentary series, "Cream of the Crud".
Prog Begins: (Cut)	It's bluiddy ridiculous. I hae'na had ane wee bit sup o' haggis syne las' Hogmanay. It's these bluiddy workers, y'ken. Och, an' I had my way I'd string them a' from bluiddy Tay Bridge tae swing.
Narrator :	We present "Haggis' Where the Heart Is" - an investigation of the current haggis dispute. I'm Shamus O'Reilley.
(Cut)	Can ye tell me how a Scotsman can exist wi'oot his haggis, mon? Next thing, ye'ken it'll be the bluiddy whusky. I tell ye.
Narrator :	Like his fellow Scottish expatriates in this country, Dougal McDougal is irate at the haggis strike, now entering its third month. He sees it as a threat to his way of life; to his very identity. Its effects parallel those of the great Bagpipe Workers and Sporrans makers strike of the 1930s but its origins are much more subtle. They lie, says Angus McDonald, Scottish trade commissioner, in the offshore oil find.
(Cut)	When they found the oil, y'ken, the lassies left the haggis factory in their thousands tae awa' tae the oil rigs for the easy bawbies. Now working in a haggis factory does something tae a man it gets his hormones in top gear, y'ken. And we' nae lassies about, the boys were getting restless, so they told management, "Find some more lassies or we're oot" ... etc.

**Possible Opening Two**

Duty Announcer:	It's three o'clock, and time for our weekly documentary series, "Cream of the Crud".
Announcer: (On Tape)	We present "Haggis' Where the Heart Is" - Shamus O'Reilley looks at the continuing effects of the Great Haggis strike.
Narrator:	For three months, haggis workers in Scotland have been on strike. Here in New Zealand, expatriate Scotsmen have been condemning what they see as gross irresponsibility on the part of the workers. There have been mass protests in Dunedin, and numerous letters in the press. The Robbie Burns statue in Dunedin's Octagon has been defaced with graffiti. At Waipu, the township is in a state of tension, and the Wellington Police Highland Pipe Band has been sent north to restore order. But if the results of the strike are plain, its origins are more subtle. They lie, says Scottish trade commissioner, Angus McDonald, in the oil find off the Scottish coast.
(Cut)	When they found the oil, y'ken ...

### Possible Opening Three

Duty Announcer:	It's three o'clock, etc. ...
Tape Fx	Bagpipes: fade under and out on cue.
Narrator:	For years, the ritual of Burns night – in New Zealand no less than in Scotland – has included the piping in of the haggis. But this year, there are no pipes, and Burns Night has been cancelled. The reason - there is no longer any haggis.
Announcer: (On Tape)	We present "Haggis' Where the Heart Is" - Shamus O'Reilley looks at the continuing effects of the Great Haggis strike.

These examples may seem extreme, but they do indicate three possible methods of approach. They also show how the introduction flows into the opening cut. The simple "narration/cut" type of documentary is very much a cut and paste job.

### Flow Between Sections

The art in scripting and producing it is to make one section move easily into the next, so that there's a logical almost inevitable flow to it. Without this flow, the programme becomes a succession of narration cut, narration cut, like a string of sausages.

Flow is achieved first of all by good clean writing; by avoiding short staccato sentences or long convoluted phrases that leave a narrator breathless; by writing good spoken English which means you're continually reading back as you write, and amending where necessary; by eliding where necessary, or substituting words with synonyms that fall more easily from the tongue; by using good grammar without being pedantic to the point of avoiding acceptable colloquialisms.

As indicated, flow also comes from merging script into cut, and cut into script. The easy way to introduce a cut is the rhetorical question. It's also the ugliest:

*"What does Angus McDonald think about the situation?"*

As bad, is the too frequently heard:

*"I asked Mr McDonald about the origins of the strike."*

The technique of the "parallel statement" is probably the best:

*"But if the results of the strike are plain, its origins are more subtle. They lie, says Angus McDonald, in the oil find off the Scottish coast."*

Here we've introduced the speaker, and given an indication of his argument without revealing too much of it. We've mentally prepared the listener for what is to follow, so that the cut is smoothly introduced.

A rather similar technique can be used at the end of a cut. An example, from a documentary on William McGonagall:

READER: (Quoting a tongue in cheek contemporary review of McGonagall's poems)	"If the Laureate's traditional butt of Malmsey has not yet reached Mr McGonagall, it may be due to the fact that vested interests must be respected. McGonagall can afford to wait."
NARRATOR:	"McGonagall could not afford to wait; he was desperate for money. A month after his tuppenny edition was published he was in the dock of the Small Claims Court ..."

Here a phrase from the end of the cut has been "picked, up" and amplified or rather, negated. It all makes for easy transition from cut to narration.

Don't use a technique like this unvaryingly throughout a programme though variety is as necessary in script as in cuts. (But *style* must remain constant throughout the programme.)

### Identifying speakers

Consider even the various ways of identifying a speaker with a cut:

1.	Name	Cut	
2.	Cut opening	Name	Remainder of cut
3.	Cut	Name	

If you're using a limited number of speakers, and their voices are readily distinguishable, it's not necessary to identify them at each cut. There are in fact occasions when a speaker's qualifications important in an analytical documentary or name, aren't germane to the programme. In a narrative style programme in which, say, two or three speakers recall an event, the use of names could well be an intrusion in the body of the documentary. The simplest plan then is to identify each speaker with a brief cut at the beginning, and then simply let the story take over. Other programmes have used the technique of identifying speakers at the end, with a recap of a sentence or two each.

When cuts are short, separating them with names tends to segment the programme. Two short cuts, of say a minute's duration each, can often be run together, identifying both speakers before or after.

The scriptwriter must be something of an opportunist in making best use of material. There are times when it's stronger *not* to script; when a cut stands so strongly in contrast to its predecessor that it begs to be slammed in without narration.

## **Scripting the More Subjective Documentary**

When you move from a simple investigatory documentary like the one discussed, to a more subjective programme, script writing becomes a little more complex and rewarding. The script becomes more than merely a link between statements and opinions, and is woven much more closely into the fabric of the programme.

The professional documentary maker soon discovers that, to some extent, it's an artificial separation to categorise procedures into planning, recording, editing, scripting, and compiling. The reason is simply that they mingle and interact with one another. Experienced producers in the field are not solely concerned with interviewing and recording. They get to the point where they mentally edit their material as it goes on tape; they think of script links as they record; they listen for the telling effect that will underline a passage of narration. From the start, they have the total package very much in mind. They know scripting will be difficult if – for instance – speakers start with a cough, or a phrase like, "Well, as I was saying", so they direct talent accordingly. If speakers use a telling phrase off tape, they'll switch the machine on and persuade the talent into repeating it; it's surprising how often this works out in practice.

In short, the experienced producer lays the groundwork as efficiently as possible.

Even so, there will be times when they have to paraphrase in script, or evoke atmosphere in narration.

### **Writing place**

This leads to another point that in undertaking documentary work of this nature, producers have to sensitise themselves to their surroundings. They have to take note quite frequently of things like the feel of the landscape, the character of a speaker, the weather. It sounds rather formidable, but it quickly becomes second nature. Back at the desk, these impressions have to be translated into words. In my early documentary days, I carried a simple camera with me, so that I could visually check back on material like this.



It led to an interest in photography. More to the point, it trained my eye to the point where I no longer needed any visual re-creation. This is taking things to extremes, but it worked for me.

In conveying atmosphere, the great rule of simplicity still applies. You *cannot* get any effect by over writing, by purple prose, or by a plethora of adjectives. It's the well chosen word; the telling phrase; the carefully selected verb, that does the job. The more economically you write, the better.'

**An example from a recent documentary:**

*"Port Waikato 'is no great commercial centre. There's a store, with a petrol pump outside, and a wharf that stands there begging for somebody to use it. A good scattering of holiday homes and baches, and that's about it except for the great reach of the Waikato itself, probing back between low clusters of islands, and fringed by great thickets of alder trees.*

*Here at the township it's wide, and infinitely variable in mood, in response to light, and weather, and tide.*

*And on this overcast day, it's grey and sombre."*

And an even better example. In a few short words, a 15-year-old Maori girl draws a superb portrait of her father:

*"Here's my Father Bo Pohurata Uerata. Grey hair, big stomach, hard working ... and always will be."*

Who needs a TV screen with that picture?

**Scripting on the spot**

Field recorded programmes invite the possibility of writing and delivering a script in the venue where you are gathering material. Try scribbling a short description of the scene around you or your reactions to what is going on. And a few words saying where you are going next can be useful in moving the story along.

The success of this kind of writing depends on it sounding as though you are talking off the cuff – it should be more informal than the studio constructed equivalent. Longish 'thought' pauses, even hesitations are ok and reinforce the feeling that you are chatting. Practise working from notes rather than a fully written out script: this will encourage you to talk rather than read. Of course if you are fluent enough to do away with script or notes entirely and ad lib, so much the better. A sense of 'being on the spot' and 'place' will be enhanced by the natural ambient sound and acoustics.

Allowing yourself to go a bit off-mic If you turn your head to look at something will also aid this. Don't work too close to the mic; a foot or more distance will create a sense of space and help to emphasize ambient sound.

And if all this doesn't work, you always have the studio option to fall back on.

Here's a piece recorded when the upper Whanganui river was in flood and a single-person flying fox was the only means of getting across.

⇐ [Listen: Scripting on the spot – Whanganui River\\*](#)

### **The use of tenses over sound**

Be it the straight factual current affairs reportage or the more subjective style of programme, the present tense and the active voice should predominate in the scripting. 'Tom Jones slams the door' gives a more immediate picture than the past tense passive voice of 'The door was slammed by Tom Jones'.

A script is often placed over sound and no matter when the sound was recorded, our imaginations translate it into the present: our mind's eye is looking at the scene. A present tense script reinforces this illusion and creates more vivid 'theatre of the mind'. Here's an example; the scene is the World War II battle at Alemain in the North African desert.

Script over heavy gunfire FX	'Near a thousand guns are pouring shells on the Axis positions. The bombardment is one of the most intense in the history of warfare. It will continue for five and a half hours... '
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### **The passive voice**

The passive voice is often used in formal writing, where detail and minutia are required: the official document, the language of law, diplomacy and other time-honoured professions. But while wordiness, indirectness and formality may survive on the page, where the eye can absorb, re-read, and there's time to consult a dictionary, the ear can do none of these and copes badly with this kind of verbiage.

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\* Download audio from the Radio New Zealand website at [www.radionz.co.nz/specialfeatures/how\\_to\\_make\\_a\\_radio\\_documentary/resources](http://www.radionz.co.nz/specialfeatures/how_to_make_a_radio_documentary/resources)

## When Is A Script Not A Script?.....

**When it's a list.** No, it's not a bad Christmas cracker joke, because, in the right context and with the right treatment, a simple list of terms can make very effective radio. There are topics which lend themselves to this trick of the trade because they have a host of terms closely associated with them. But it's not enough merely to draw up a list, get someone to read it, and insert it into the programme. The list should be designed rather like a piece of verse; it should scan and may even include irregular rhyming. The programme's narrator could read it, but it's usually better to use another voice. The reader should take care to bring the list to life using expression and varied pace.

The audio below is taken from two *Spectrum* documentaries; one on sewing and the other is a visit to a sale of fabrics and textiles. In both cases the list's purpose is to present a quickly moving kaleidoscope of words which expand and enrich the programme in a way that script cannot. Many of the listed terms come from foreign languages, are technical or archaic. The listener does not need to understand the meaning of each term: the list flows like a stream of colours or musical notes.

The craft of sewing has a long history and a large number of terms have evolved around its many and varied practices. The first piece of audio is just the list of sewing terms; the second demonstrates how this list was integrated into the programme's opening.

⊞ Listen: [Scripting – Sewing Audio I](#)

⊞ Listen: [Scripting – Sewing Audio II](#)

In this last example, where *Spectrum* producer Jack Perkins visits a sale of fabric and textiles, the list emphasises the huge variety of materials available and the often exotic origin of their names. Of course, the internet and Google are invaluable tools for building lists.

⊞ Listen: [Scripting – Fabric Audio](#)

With only a little imagination but a great deal of work, producers could build on the concept of the simple list: for example, two or more voices could intertwine several different lists. The possibilities are considerable, especially in the more imaginative feature format.

**So...**

So, just as listing is a simple device, good script writing is simple writing. It's transient, heard fleetingly through a receiver. It has to be clear; it has to say exactly what you intend it to say. You have one chance to make your point, and carry the listener along with you.

A certain amount of expertise comes with experience but the basis of the whole thing is a good self critical faculty, plenty of listening to programmes good and bad, and – most important of all – a good measure of plain commonsense.