

# Closed Circuit Television and the Script Writer

## Good Scripts are Essential to Effective TV Production

Maurice Lubetkin

**T**he time may soon come (if it has not already arrived), when you, the Training Director will become involved with Closed Circuit Television as one of your primary training devices.

If the responsibility for programming is yours, or, if the responsibility is delegated to one of your subordinates, a sound knowledge of script requirements would be in order.

This article makes no pretense of being a complete outline of all TV script writing information, however, in conjunction with the texts listed in the Bibliography, it should serve as a valid starting point for the development of knowledge concerning intelligent and meaningful script writing techniques.

In establishing guide-lines for the script writer, it is important that he understands the need for the script

and the varied functions it may serve in the total television production.

A script is more than an outline for the narrator or a direction sheet for the director. The script is the heart of the production and is equally important to the actors, the technicians, and the engineers. It is important to the actors since it cues their actions and helps them create the proper mood. It is important to the technicians and engineers since it gives them a base to control the lighting, camera angles, and audio cues.

Keeping these thoughts in mind, the writer should realize how important it is that his script be written with an understanding of the needs of the medium and of the people responsible for the production. Unless this perceptive approach is used, the script may produce nothing of value and become a useless endeavor, utilizing peo-

*Maurice Lubetkin*

*Education Specialist, Instructional Methods Division, United States Army  
Signal Center and School, Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.*

ple, time, space, and equipment to no avail.

The process of TV script writing may be broken down into specific functions, all of equal value, bound together in the final production as a unit. Discussing each part as a separate entity makes it easier to absorb the salient points in an "area-oriented" fashion. In the summary, all items will fit together, tied-in with sufficient transitional information to enable the novice writer to tie-up loose ends and, in retrospect, see the flow and development of the script.

### **Steps in Script Writing**

#### **1. Firming up the idea.**

Mere possession of a sound knowledge of the subject matter does not adequately prepare the writer to begin a script. It is of prime importance that he be aware of the reason for the script and he must be thoroughly satisfied with the idea to be presented. To be of any value to the writer, the idea must be free of the "fuzzy mess" which usually surrounds problem situations and must be expressed in a simple statement of purpose.

The writer must examine all of the facets of the problem; he must analyze the areas which will be suited to television production, and he must eliminate all areas not so suited. He must call into play all of his perceptive ability and critical evaluative sense, blending in a mixture of imagination and sensitiveness, thinking in terms of what can be accomplished with the subject matter at hand. All of these areas must be clearly defined before he puts pencil to paper, or, fingers to the typewriter.

In essence, the script writer must critically observe and gather all the facts. He must analyze the pertinent information to find the germ of an

idea which will lend itself to the television medium.

#### **2. The narrative.**

Once the writer has examined the available information and clearly defined the idea in terms of its adaptability to the television medium, then, and only then, does he begin to write. For experienced writers, this simply means writing the TV outline in the proper format. For the beginner, it might be better if he were to construct a short narrative of the subject, condensing and eliminating ideas as he goes along. In his narrative, the writer should include the major theme around which the production will revolve and also the contributing, or, substantiating factors which will lend credence to what he means to express. Some writers do a lengthy, well detailed narrative. Others write no more than a paragraph. In either case, the narrative contains all essential components arranged in a logical and informative sequence. Most writers write as though they were speaking the lines to prevent the use of pedantic or stilted language, which could destroy the appeal. The alert writer employs words with which he is familiar, trying not to use more than two or three syllable words. A good rule to observe is: Use spoken language when placing the written word on paper.

#### **3. The TV Format and the Audio outline.**

When the information has been gathered and the idea clearly defined, the writer must prepare his material in a format suitable to the television medium. There are many different ideas on which format is the best, however, for our purposes, we shall standardize on one. This is the format which employs a standard size bond

paper divided down the middle by an "invisible" line. One side, the right, is labeled, "Audio" and the other side is labeled, "Video." In the Audio por-

tion, the writer places the narrative, dialogue, and audio information. A sample appears below:

**Sample TV Script Format**

<u>VIDEO</u>	<u>AUDIO</u>
Establishing shot, narrator by equip. MCU.	Narrator: "The soldering iron is generally placed against the metal part which is to be soldered.
Music up and under	
#1 plan to metal ECU	The solder, which is applied to the heated metal, begins to melt and flow when the temperature reaches a spe- cific level.
#2 on narrator's hands, CU solder,	
fade to black, up	
on #1	

Note: Video cues are entered on the left side of the format. Generally these are marked in by the director after his story conference with the writer. The writer may express his ideas to the director concerning the types of effects he desires to achieve, however, it is the responsibility of the director to execute the necessary camera positions and the various shots. The employment of the "TV Word Guide," shown below, will, in many cases, assist the writer in figuring out just how much material will produce the required amount of time, or, vice versa.

**TV Word Guide\*—4 words per line**

_____1	_____15
_____2	_____16
_____3	_____17
_____4	_____18 1/2 minute
_____5	
_____6	Narrator trained to speak 135 words per minute.
_____7	
_____8	4 words per line.
_____9 1/4 minute	
_____10	pauses for effect or for ideas to sink in.
_____11	
_____12	
_____13	4 words per line—
_____14	36 lines equals 144 words.

\*"TV Word Guide" courtesy of Miss Ann Stommel, Film Script Writer, United States Army Research and Development Laboratories, Fort Monmouth, N. J.

This simple guide will assist the writer in determining the number of words needed to fill a particular time slot, however, remember, this is not an inflexible situation; it must vary with the production situation.

#### 4. Summary of script writing techniques.

Starting with the narrative form, the writer must gather all pertinent information, generally in the form of a story or recital of events. Usually, this is lengthy and well detailed

which makes the narrative impractical for television use. The information must be pared down to specifics and be visually oriented for the medium. Once the writer has completed the narrative, he should make a rough outline of the presentation, setting up guide-lines for the next step which is the conference with the director. The script, at this time, should be in an acceptable television format, such as shown on the Sample Format. This should include the following information, placed at the top of the script:

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**TITLE:**

**TECHNICAL DIRECTOR**  
(ADVISOR)

**WRITER:**

**DIVISION:**

**DATE SUBMITTED:**

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To preclude the possibility of loss, it might be a good idea to include the above information on all pages of the script.

These other points should be kept in mind:

- a. When writing the narrative, use familiar language, the spoken word, contractions and short sentences.
- b. In selecting visuals and writing the script, keep the audience in mind. Think in terms of the past experience of the audience, their knowledge of the subject, and above all, don't insult their intelligence by writing "down" to them.
- c. Use examples and comparisons which will make the message more understandable to the viewer and remember that examples may be visual and/or oral.
- d. Ask yourself the following questions:
  1. What does the audience want to know?

2. What misconceptions need correcting?
3. What significance should be brought out?
4. What is the goal and the final impression to be made?
- e. Avoid telegraphing what is to come, i.e., comments, "... in the next picture you will see . . .," etc.
- f. If the talent is experienced, the presentation may be given with only an outline script, quite basic and simple.
- g. For a more involved subject, or when the talent is not experienced, a detailed script is most suitable.

#### Summary

In the final analysis, a television production will stand or fall on the quality of the written script. A good script, along with a director and crew with the necessary "know-how," will ensure an effective and meaningful production.

## Bibliography

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## 1975 Technicians Need

The total requirement for technicians in the U. S. will reach nearly one and a half million by 1975, according to a recent study by the Department of Labor entitled; "Technician Manpower: Requirements, Resources, and Training Needs," published by the

Bureau of Labor Statistics. The projected need represents an increase of over 77 percent from the 1963 employment level. State governments will emerge as the largest governmental employers of technicians.

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