

How to Write a Radio Play
Fiona Ledger, BBC Drama Producer,
offers the following thoughts on writing for radio.

BBC WORLD SERVICE WEBSITE

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Nobody can teach you how to write a good play. Good radio plays result from a mixture of inspiration, talent and craftsmanship. These guidelines are about the craft of writing for radio - we leave the talent and inspiration to you. Rules of the African Performance Competition and an entry form are also included.

Radio is an extraordinary medium. A radio play can travel through time and space, between centuries and continents. It can take place in an airplane, down a goldmine, on a ship; it can also take place within the confines of somebody's mind.

All this can be done for a fraction of what it would cost to do the same in film. But in every case the audience has to be attracted, and its attention held, by the means of sound alone. Good dialogue is not simply a matter of stringing together different conversations - every bit of speech must help the plot move in some direction, increasingly involving the listener as it does.

In addition to speech, the writer needs to think about sound effects, music, and, something rarely appreciated by the inexperienced writer, silence. Silence can convey a variety of things: suspense, anxiety, tranquility. Pauses also help listeners take in what they have heard and help prepare for what happens next.

Themes

You can write on any subject that tackles the lives of Africans. Your play can be set in the past, present or future. Try not to cram too much in, whether in terms of events or ideas.

Structure

A radio play has scenes like a stage play, but these can be swift and fragmentary, as well as long and solid. It is useful to think of a scene as a sequence. One sequence, or scene, might consist of one line of dialogue, or it might just consist of a crucial sound effect (known as FX).

For example:

A CAR DRAWS UP. ENGINE OFF. DOOR OPENS. FEET WALKS TO THE FRONT DOOR. KEY IN THE LOCK. DOOR OPENS. FEET WALK DOWN THE HALL TO THE KITCHEN ETC.

NO

YES

FX: KNOCKING AT DOOR

IMMACULATE: That must be him now. I must just finish putting these away..

FX: DISHES BEING STACKED ONTO SHELF. KNOCKING AT DOOR INCREASING VOLUME

IMMACULATE: (CALLING OUT) I'm coming, I'm coming.

FX: PLATE BEING DROPPED TO FLOOR

IMMACULATE: Now look what I've done...

Number of characters

Do not have more than 6 characters in a half hour play. There is a risk of confusion if you do. Remember also that the listener only knows the character exists if that character speaks, or if another character refers to him or her by name.

Information for Actors

It is very useful for actors to write into the script adjectives describing the

way in which a line should be said, e.g. angrily, regretfully, trying to be brave.

Thinking in Sound

A variety of sounds is essential for holding the listeners' attention and engaging their interest. This variety can be achieved by altering the length of sequences, the number of people speaking, the pace of the dialogue and location of action. The contrast between a noisy sequence with a number of voices and effects, and a quiet passage of interior monologue (the actor thinking aloud to himself or herself) is very effective. There is also a good contrast to be achieved between an indoor setting and an outside setting.

Sound Effects

These should be used sparingly and effectively. They can be used functionally, e.g. door opening, or to create a mood, e.g. dogs barking in the distance on waste-land. If used to excess they become tedious and pointless.

For example:

Scene 3 KWABENA'S OFFICE

(FX: PHONE RINGING)

KWABENA:Hallo... hallo... hallo!

(FX: DIALLING TONE AS CALLER HANGS UP)

Scene 4 KWABENA'S SITTING ROOM

KWABENA: She did it again.. she's doing it to drive me crazy, destroy my family.

KWAME: Take it easy, man.. don't let your imagination run away with you.

Transmission Times

Radio plays must run to exact lengths as the programme schedule is always fixed. For example, the plays broadcast in BBC African Performance run to 28 minutes, excluding the introduction and credits. There is no way of measuring 28 minutes by the number of words or pages. The only reliable method is to read the script aloud against the clock, making allowances for sound effects, music and

Radio plays can very rarely be produced without some changes to the script sent in - this applies even to very experienced writers. If your script is accepted for production, be prepared to work with the producer, making cuts and changes in scenes if necessary.