
UNIT 2 RADIO FEATURES AND COMMENTARY

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the all-important role of language in radio features and commentaries,
- enumerate the diverse skills required to prepare a commentary or narration for a feature on radio,
- describe the steps to be taken in drafting a narration/commentary,
- discuss the various characteristics of voice, its modulation and presentation on air to suit the aural medium of radio.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we have discussed many important characteristics of the news on radio. We have seen that news writing styles differ according to the medium. Writing news reports for a newspaper is quite different from writing for radio bulletins. The character and the demands of the audio medium make radio different and unique.

In this unit, we shall discuss the various aspects of radio features and commentaries. We shall acquaint ourselves with skills needed to say and voice them. We hope that, after going through this unit, you will be able to recognize a radio feature not only by identifying the type but also the quality. And perhaps even script a radio feature on any topic of your choice.

In the next two units of this block on 'writing for radio and television', we shall first consider the news on TV. Thereafter, we shall study 'Television Feature and

Activity 1

At some time or the other, you must have heard many radio commentaries be it sports events, a VIP'S funeral, the Republic Day parade etc. You may be in the habit of carrying a small transistor set with you when there is a cricket, hockey or football match. Perhaps you switch it on to catch the relay commentary of your favourite game. And you may have more than one good reason to remain within hearing distance of the live commentary : pleasure, convenience, etc.

Before you proceed further with this unit, write down your reasons for listening to radio commentaries. You may use the space provided below.

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2.2 PREPARATION FOR THE COMMENTARY

In the audio medium, voice, sound effects and music are the critical elements which gain the listeners attention and hold it. The spoken word is crucial to a radio feature or a commentary. Special attention has to be paid to what is said and the tone in which it is uttered. A radio commentator is both the eyes and ears of the listener. A commentator creates verbal pictures in the minds of the receivers by simply combining the spoken word with music and sound effects in a creative fashion. While the narration itself is the result of a carefully written script, the tone in which it is delivered assumes equal if not more importance.

The contribution of the commentator is truly revealed by the fact that the final quality of voice, diction, intonation, etc., lends, take for instance the funeral ceremony of the former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the sober restraint and dignified emotion in the commentator voice brought to the listeners the significance of the events. Prior to going on the air, the radio commentator must make a deep study of a number of things. In the above case, these included the route the funeral procession would take, and information on say the historical backdrop and occasions associated with Nehru.

Or, in another moment, with the body lying in state, the commentator would point out the numerous impatient occasions when Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Rashtrapati Bhawan, even at the time when it was the Viceregal Lodge and history was being made between India's top political leaders and the British Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten.

2.2.1 The State of the Art

Lest you assume that a commentator's job is a cakewalk, first consider the amount of hard work that must have gone into preparing an interesting and informative commentary. The road to success is an uphill task all the way. Ideally, a radio commentator would require a skillful combination of an observant eye, a ready tongue, nimble wit, imagination, tact and a sense of humour.

In Activity 1, we have had a chance to mention the different occasions when running commentaries are broadcast: a sports event, proceedings of Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations or a funeral ceremony of an important leader of the State. We thus have different types of commentaries based on their subjects and occasions. A commentary is loved and interspersed with location, sound or ambience.

A radio feature has any number of topics under the sun upon which to elaborate. It is a creative capsule presentation of an equally creative area or theme. Narration is a crucial element of a radio feature. The spoken word is liberally supported by sound effects and music.

Commentary is an art and its successful practice depends on attention to a special technique—descriptive power and narrative style. This is possible only when one has the capacity to notice the finer details and also express them in simple but evocative terms. Without preliminary preparation, the commentators would find themselves in serious trouble. The best plans can be thrown out of gear by some unforeseen circumstance say a new twist to the event.

An intelligent and resourceful commentator will be able to place his thoughts and ideas across without much difficulty. In order to evoke a vivid word picture, one would require alert human faculties, and a vast knowledge of men and matters gathered through extensive reading and intense involvement in the social, political and cultural developments in the country.

In short, a radio commentary describes an occasion or event in vivid words. The attempt is always to verily transport the distant listeners to the scene of action or attention. Naturally, the commentators has to be all ears and eyes to perform the job perfectly.

2.2.2 Step by Step Writing of Commentary/Feature

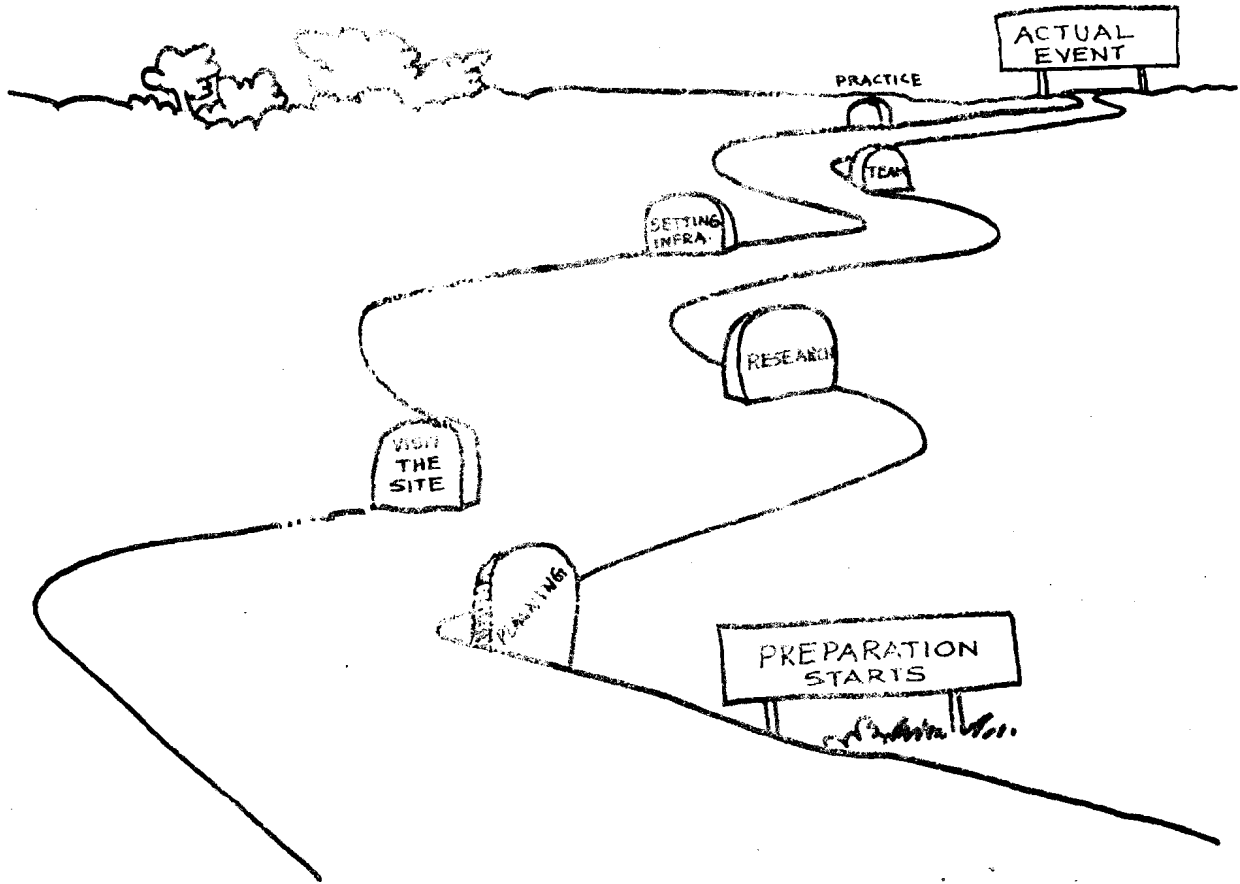
A commentator has to obtain all the information necessary about the location of the commentary broadcast: the occasion, the background information, technical terms and areas of emphasis. Accordingly, he will have to write the script or take notes. Usually, commentators visit the site of action, e.g., stadium, football or hockey ground, the scene of a cultural show, the route of a funeral ceremony, the cremation or burial ground, etc. This he does to familiarise himself with intricate, even trivial details and to trace the history leading up to the occasion, then he is ready to make a layout of the course as seen from one or more vantage points, and note all the important details. Finally, before the broadcast day, he must keep a sharp lookout for any picturesque spots or amusing incidents to relate during the commentary.

Sometimes, technical snags can cause problems for the unprepared commentator. As a result of interrupted transmission the commentator may be forced to end the relay commentary at short notice. At the other end of the spectrum, one may have to prolong the commentary indefinitely! This actually took place once, during the visit of the (late) U.S. President Eisenhower to India.

Since the arrival of his plane was delayed by quite a few hours, the commentator had to go on and devise his own "show" to see him through his trouble. These days, one can promptly had the programme back to the studio in the face of any technical faults. Even that requires commentators with presence of mind to size up the situation without any panic.

There is a well known saying that anyone can say anything into a microphone, but what comes out at the other end is what matters. This holds good in the case of commentators as well. Commenting is a balancing act: neither must you unnerve the listeners with monotonous, high-pitched or excited commentary from beginning to end nor must you slip up in what you say and thereby irk the listeners. Undoubtedly, rendering commentary is a job best left to mature people quick on the uptake, capable of taking any new development in their stride.

The audio medium thrives on word pictures created in the mind of the receiver. A programme meant for broadcast, let us say a commentary, a feature, a play, etc., which ignores this peculiarity is so much a waste of breath on the air. It is on the projection of one's personality through the microphone that the effectiveness of a broadcast ultimately rests. Broadcasting, therefore, is not a mechanical process. "The technique of delivery is of fundamental importance", as pointed out by the late Prof. Harold Laski with reference to successful broadcasting. Winston Churchill had said during World War II to the Americans. "Give us the tools, and we will finish the job." The broadcasters tools will be discussed in the next section.



Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) It has been decided that a famous football player would be the Chief guest of the annual sports event of the local school called "Vivekanand Vidyapeeth". You have been asked to be the compere for the event and give commentary as and where required. List all the aspects that you would consider while preparing for this event.

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- 2) Which two steps would you take if you are asked to prepare a commentary or narration?

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2.3 TOOLS TO MASTER THE ART OF DEVELOPING COMMENTARY AND SCRIPTING NARRATION

A radio commentator/feature narrator must have certain essential physical characteristics. In using the word physical, we imply the personality of the commentator as reflected in the cadence and vibration of speech delivery which actually holds the key to success on the job. We shall now enumerate the various desirable attributes of the commentator and narrator.

2.3.1 Broadcaster's Voice and Microphone Manners

Whether one is a commentator, interviewer, newsreader or announcer, one must take care of one's voice. To make a beginning, one needs to breathe correctly, enunciate clearly and attend to the vocal rhythm in order to ensure a liquid stream of pure sound.

How does one breathe properly? One must breathe from the diaphragm as one does when asleep. This in turn helps you to speak rhythmically and the reserve breath helps to carry you smoothly from one sentence to another. Breathing from the diaphragm instead of the throat or through the nose also helps you to avoid extreme breathlessness, which the microphone is quick to catch and amplify. Hence, never speak on your last breath.

Proper enunciation is extremely important. This helps you to overcome the slurring of speech to a great extent. One way is to properly enunciate the consonants while leaving the vowels to look after themselves. How does one achieve this? By opening one's mouth widely to raise the soft palate and keeping the lower jaw forward. By doing so, you give free play to a remarkable variation of sound and the English language, in particular, is rich in sound. If one does not pay due attention to this aspect, one would throw away a wealth of meaning and emphasis.

2.3.2 Speech Rhythm

Rhythm is the life blood of speech. Without this very important input, speech becomes lifeless and mechanical. Nothing kills a broadcast more surely than the monotony of delivery. Remember, words are the petrol of the speaker's thoughts, and rhythm is the oil that lubricates that vehicle. Therefore, the broadcaster's sound not only sends messages, but also ensures that the listener is persuaded by it. Again, every broadcast has to be kept alive and this is mainly achieved by correct emphasis, stress, and pause in the speech.

All top class commentators/broadcasters pitch their voices higher than used in ordinary speech. This is because the very low notes are apt to muffle the consonants, causing a booming effect on the microphone. Even so, in an interview, the lower the pitch of the broadcaster's voice, the less is the energy required. Also, there is less tendency to tighten the throat and back muscles. The low pitch is best for speech. However, it must be achieved with ease and not by suppressed sound. This definitely contributes to attractive and effective narration and commentary.

2.3.3 Language

The broadcaster's language is indeed easy to understand because only the simplest possible terms are used. It is important to remember that the language be intelligible to the majority of the listeners. You must know that one picturesque phrase will do more to arouse the listener's interest than a bunch of literary and idiomatic expressions.

Usually, a listener reacts quickly to the broadcaster's manner. There are a few thumb rules which a broadcaster would do well to follow. We shall enumerate these rules here.

- a) Do not patronise the listeners. At least, for having taken the trouble to listen to you, the listeners ought to be treated with courtesy. The listener is a friend. Would you not treat a friend in a natural and respectful manner? So, address the listeners too on equal terms.

- b) Be friendly without being familiar. Do not take the listeners for granted. Do not shout or preach. Speak impressively, confidently and with dignity.
- c) Finally, be yourself and not what you would like the listeners to think you are. While the listener is seldom deceived, you may flounder and reveal your true colours sooner rather than later. Give your listeners the best of listening by being your natural ebullient self.

The art of writing a production script for the radio very often lies in the art of knowing what not to say. It is said in BBC TV circles that a commentator is paid as much to comment as to keep quiet.

2.3.4 Avoid Padding

The term 'Padding' refers to the filling out of a sentence, publication, etc., with superfluous matter.

While preparing the script for a radio programme, you must not pad out the narration. As a rule, avoid using unnecessary words, and admitting irrelevant contexts or distantly related topics in your scripts. One dull patch can imperil the broadcaster's hold on the listeners. Therefore, never let your script or commentary/narration meander even for a moment.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given for your answers.

ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Why do you think a commentator's voice and rhythm are very important? Respond in two sentences.

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- 2) Why is simple language very essential for a successful commentary?

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Activity 2

Recollect a commentary that you have listened to recently. Comment on its merits and demerits in terms of the

- Language :
- Voice quality (of the Commentator/Narrator)
- Content :

2.4 TIPS FOR A GOOD SCRIPT

We should acquaint ourselves with the ingredients of quality radio scripts. Their success rests entirely on the right mix of words and sounds in the narration/commentary.



2.4.1 Keep the Script/Commentary Moving

The shorter your sentences and crisper your narration, the greater will be the commentary's impact. While padding has to be avoided at all costs, repetition of the main points is permitted and may even be necessary. This you can do towards the end of the programme in the form of a summary. It is to ensure that all the points that you want your listeners to remember are, in fact, briefly expressed again.

2.4.2 Enliven the Script/Commentary

The wider your vocabulary, the more visual are your images. And this, in turn, helps you to vary your form and have a firm hold over listeners/audience.

2.4.3 Be Completely Natural

It is very life of your broadcast that you read aloud your narration/script/commentary as you write, if it is not off-the-cuff broadcast, e.g., running commentary. If it sounds natural, as though you were talking, you are on the right line. If on the other hand, it sounds like formal written language, you will immediately know you are off-the-track. Get your friends and well-wishers to help you with their reactions. This tried and tested method will be of immense help to you in improving your performance.

2.4.4 Keep Cliches Out

This applies to hackneyed phrases as much as to journalistic ones. The microphone only reinforces their staleness. It is only radio journalism at its worst.

2.4.5 Keep on Looking for the Needs of the Market

It is well to remember that broadcasting is essentially a family affair. Good taste is what matters and should be the main criterion. The writer's script should be simple and conjure visual rather than oral images in the listeners mind. Remember: short sentences and short words are always more effective than long-winded and pedantic phrases.

2.4.6 Do not Talk Down to the Audience

In any programme where the spoken word dominates — in a running commentary

or any other—one must take precaution against any slip of the tongue that would offend a listener. Be professional when you have to explain some matter. Do not sound like the know-all teacher talking down to the students.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Suppose All India Radio (AIR) finds you suitable for various commentary assignments. AIR keeps your name on the roster. How would you prepare yourself to go live on air? Suggest practical steps.

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2) Cliches should be avoided even in every day speech, why is this especially true for the radio feature/commentary?

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Activity 3

A producer has just planned the ingredients that would go into a radio feature on the XI International Book Fair. We shall mention them here in a moment, but hasten to caution you that the treatment of the feature's content is not in chronological order. Try your hand at putting them all in proper order.

- Music interlude
- concluding summary : perceptions of producer of radio feature or the statement of the feature
- Excerpts from various interviews : with stall owners, visitors, publishers about their perceptions and suggestions if any
- Introduction : about the world of books and book lovers
- Excerpts from the Chief Guest's speech at the inaugural ceremony.
- Location sound effects
- Theme of Book Fair 1994
- Narration : on the crowds and sales and what exactly accounts for the success of the Fair.

2.5 LANGUAGE OF THE RADIO COMMENTARY AND FEATURE

The language of speech (the spoken word) differs considerably from the language of writing (the written word). The differences arise in the

- vocabulary,
- sentence length,
- sentence structure, the
- density of distribution of information, the
- writer speaker's intention and attitude to the subject and toward the listeners.

The important factors which make or mar a commentary are the

- stress on syllables and the
- accent of one's speech together with the
- amount of information and the
- actual speed of delivery.

One must take into account the varying spans of memory and levels of comprehension of different listeners. Clarity of both content and actual narration is thus essential.

One must remember that it is an individual's memory and comprehension that we deal with. Listeners generally cannot turn to anybody for explanation. Neither can they be expected to have reference books at hand. **Therefore, all the necessary aids to memory and comprehension are, generally built into the programme material.** Scripts for radio commentary and features ought to be written with this vital factor in view. The narrators too must be chosen with due care and given instructions about the required pace of narration, style of delivery, etc.

The radio is an audio medium. The secret of the ideal radio broadcast is the unexpressed will to woo listeners to stay tuned for the entire programme by simply providing the right fare. A good radio feature or running commentary is one that strives to describe the subject or phenomenon cogently and comprehensively.

A radio feature and commentary is written in words that create appropriate atmosphere and concrete pictures in the listener's mind. It is by improving the script and presenting it creatively that a radio feature writer and commentator make even the most complex subject appear simple. It is in their hands to make listening a gainful and lasting pleasure. They have only to wield their power correctly to endear themselves to their audience.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

Just sit down for a while. Recollect all the major points that you have been reading about in this unit. Now write down five major things that you, as a radio commentator or narration writer, should not be doing.

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learned that it is important to conduct extensive research and collect information and facts before venturing into a radio commentary assignment. Only adequate preparation can help build one's confidence to write commentary or narration for a radio feature.

A radio commentator paints pictures with words. Therefore, the words must be simple and easy to understand

A radio commentator must possess the knack of observing even the minute details, and also, a swift tongue to describe those details in appropriate language.

Many times it is said that if one wants to talk for five minutes in a radio programme, one has to prepare for it for five hours. Indeed, a thorough preparation is required for a successful commentary. This preparation includes library work and personal visits in advance to meet important people.

During the actual commentary, the broadcaster must pay attention to his voice, rhythm, breathing and language.

A commentator usually writes the commentary, while the feature writer scripts the narration and does not necessarily narrate the part(s). Under these circumstances, the script assumes much importance. The words you choose to put in the narrator's mouth must be chosen with care. The language must befit the occasion as must the style of presentation. The commentator/narrator would do well to address the members of the audience as equals. It is best to avoid talking down to a listener even by implication. One ought to resist the temptation to pad out the commentary/narration. Finally enliven the commentary must make all the efforts to the commentary.

2.7 FURTHER READING

Cohler Koith, David, *Broadcast Journalism*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, U.S.A.

Iyenger, Shanta and Kinder, Donald R., *News That Matters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Bliss, Edward, Jr. and Patterson John M., *Writing News for Broadcast*.

Bhatt S.C. (1993), *Broadcast Journalism*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi.

2.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: MODEL ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1)
 - Collect in advance the background material on the famous football player, his achievements, his present occupation, areas of interest and competence
 - Visit in advance the place where the seating arrangements would be made; the surrounding of the location.
 - Collect the programme schedule in advance, say from the commencement of the sports events to the award distribution ceremony.
 - Collect material on the important personnel of the school such as the principal, teachers, physical instructor.
 - Check for your self, one day prior to the event, the positioning of your microphone for the commentary.
 - Prepare questions for a short interview with the chief guest.
- 2)
 - Do the groundwork thoroughly, i.e. research comprehensively into the subject of the feature or commentary. Choose words and phrases with care to ensure both a truly vivid description and natural presentation.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) ● The tone of the radio commentator's voice reflects enthusiasm and authority regarding the subject. Besides, the correct intonation acknowledges the respect one holds the audience in. A professional broadcaster would never be overwhelmed or pompous over the fact that one is actually advising an audience; instead of being one among them. The rhythm of the voice contains the key to creative and artistic presentation. A commentary or narration without rhythm in the delivery is a lot less appealing to the listener's perceptive ear.
- 2) ● The use of simple language ensures the carrying of subject matter, emotion, feeling, etc., most effectively, across to the audience.
 - It is easy to understand.
 - It alone establishes a meaningful equation between the commentator and the listeners.
- 3) ● Do not patronize the listeners; that tone is boring and rubs the audience members the wrong way.
 - Be friendly without being familiar. Address the listeners on a one to one basis. Strike the middle path; do not enrage them nor sound too chummy.
 - Be yourself. Do not put on airs or bluff your listeners into assuming you have a personality that really is not quite yours.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) ● Practice regularly to improve the clarity of speech and pronunciation.
 - Practice voice modulation.
 - Improve the ability to express ideas and thoughts lucidly.
 - Read a lot on various relevant subjects to gather information of all types and varieties.
- 2) ● Prepare for the feedback, be it brickbats or bouquets, from your listeners.
 - Cliches are overused phrases that seldom ring true to the listeners. They sound harsh and superfluous to the casual listeners. Quite possibly the audience will tune the station out in response to the liberal sprinkling of the hollow sounding phrases best avoided on the radio.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) ● One should never use extremely formal language; words on radio must be spoken for the ear, so as to be easy on the listeners ear. Description must be vivid, nevertheless, in simple terms:
 - One should never use uncommon, idiomatic expressions or words that are both difficult to pronounce and understand.
 - One should never sound hoity-toity. A commentator is different from a listener only in that he has obtained the chance to speak on the air. For the rest, both are very much equals.
 - One should never sit in a commentary box without adequate preparation.
 - One should never move around without note book and pencil/pen to jot down ideas and elusive comments and phrases that he may occur in passing.