

Script: Broadcast News Writing Script
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Writing for television and radio is often called writing for the “ear” because it has a very linear presentation. That means without a DVR – your audience isn’t really able to go back and re-read listen to what you’re saying a second time. That means clarity is of the utmost importance.

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Think about it like a cocktail party... how many conversations can you carry at once? Just one, right? Well... unless you’re really talented...

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...and even then, you can’t control what things people remember. So, it’s important when you’re writing a script to make sure that you’re including only the most important facts. You need to limit your “list” to just the most important items.

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Mervin Block – a longtime CBS News producer and newswriter for Walter Cronkite – teaches young writers that shorter is stronger and sharper. His advice: get to the point, make it relevant to the viewer or listener and have the courage to write simply.

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There are a number of ways you can do this. First, remember that you’re simply telling someone a story. Imagine yourself on the telephone with your best friend or a family member. What would that conversation sound like?

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Chances are you’re using short sentences – that have a single thought in each one. In most cases, even if you don’t realize it, you’re speaking in active voice. That means that they have a subject, verb, object construction.

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So, for instance, that means that instead of saying a police officer was shot by a robber...

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...you’d put that in active voice, and say the robber shot the officer. Diagram that sentence, the robber is the subject, shot the verb and the police officer is the object.

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Remember in elementary school... when there were class pets? Well, if you were to say the rabbit was cared for by class, that would be passive voice. The rabbit is the object of that sentence. The class is the subject.

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So, turn it around, and put it in active voice. The class cared for the rabbit.

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If you're still having a hard time grasping passive voice – here's a test that works *most* of the time. Usually, passive voice can include the actor following the verb. Basically, if you can add "by zombies" after the verb and it makes sense, it's probably passive voice. The town was attacked... by zombies. Yup, that's passive voice. Turn it around – and say Zombies – or whatever it that that did the attacking – attacked the city.

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Verbs bring action to our writing. When we write in the present tense, we're make sure we bring the viewer into the moment. Yes, sometimes we end up creating a false present tense... but the viewer sees and hears it as its happening on the screen... so just go with it!

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After all, it can help us advance our stories. Sure, by the time our newscast hits air the hurricane has made landfall. It did happen two hours ago, but when we say the hurricane is moving inland we're able create a sense of immediacy with our writing.

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When I was given this assignment, I was told my video needed to be five minutes. That meant I had to strongly consider what I covered – and what I left out put in the additional resources. Strong broadcast writers find themselves doing the same thing every day – making sure that every word in a script is necessary. If not, you're wasting precious time in your newscast.

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Here's an example of a sentence – that has a lot of information in it.

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...but the writing can easily be tightened up, cutting out six unnecessary words.

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As with any kind of journalistic writing, attribution is key. It's how we tell our viewers and readers *where* we got the information.

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I'm sure you've seen it written in newspapers or online that "so and so said" – and for a text story, that's correct. The person said whatever it is they said to the reporter in the past. So, you'd attribute using the word said. But, when you're writing for the ear, you're going to use "says" – in the present tense.

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That's because video and audio stories happen in a false present tense. We're about to see or hear the source say whatever it is they've told you ... so, you're going to write it in present tense. I know, it sounds strange on the face of it. But, think about it: If you interview the police chief and run his quote in the newspaper, she's already said whatever is in that quote. If it's on television, you're *about* to hear them say what's in that quote – or soundbite.

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For that reason – you're going to always put your attribution *before* the quote... *because* the person is about to say it, even though they kind of already did in real life.

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Finally, read your script out loud. Does it sound like something you'd say to your best friend? Because, let's be honest... who says AT THIS HOUR!?!?

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No one, right? We'd say "police have a suspect in custody." It's active voice. It's present tense... and it's just how we speak.

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Read that one aloud... I'll give you a second. // It's nothing but a collection of sentence fragments, that even when read out loud, don't make sense.

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Put that in a subject verb object sentence construction – keep it simple – and you've got the basis for a well-written script.

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