Script Structure

Information Sheet

Note: To become familiar with how the following elements of script structure are used by different authors, look at some scripts (Old-Time Radio scripts if possible). Try to find examples of each element.

1. Prologue. (1 or 2 minutes) This is usually a narrative introduction to the story and its characters, but may include a brief dialog scene. The prologue serves one or more of several purposes: It sets up the situation and gives any important background the listener needs to know; it grabs the listener’s interest and reveals just enough about the story to make the listener want to keep listening; it may be used to show something about the characters and the circumstances surrounding them at the moment.

2. Hooks. In commercial scripts, these are used at the end of each act as a device to make the listener want to come back to see what happens next. In Old-Time Radio, they were often dramatic high- points just before a commercial break, usually emphasized with music or sound effects. In non- commercial scripts there are fewer needs for hooks. The idea, however, is no less important; details that intrigue and keep the listener listening should be scattered throughout the script.

3. Acts. These are the longer units that tell the story. In the commercial radio drama scripts of the

1940's, a half-hour program might have three acts. In these shorter commercial scripts the acts served to provide points in the script where commercials could be inserted. Act I was about 5 minutes long, Act II about 10 minutes, and Act III usually a little shorter than Act II. The length of the entire half- hour script was about 24 minutes. Hour long plays often had more than three acts.

Short plays, such as you may be writing, may require only one act. The number of acts should be determined by the story. Examples of the need for two or more acts would be a story where a great gap in time or space is spanned by a transition or where two sub-plots are interwoven. These kinds

of stories, however, would require more time to tell and would become long plays. For our purposes here, a general rule of thumb is that short plays should consist of one act of several scenes of alternating lengths.

4. Scenes. These are the shorter units that make up the acts. During the 1940's, radio drama producers varied in their demands relating to this part of script structure. Some felt that no scene should be more than two minutes. Others would accept a script where an entire act is one scene. These various needs were, for the most part, motivated by the commercial needs of the program.

Because we, in the classroom, are more interested in telling a story than in selling a commercial product, scenes should be as many or as few and as short or long as the story requires.

5. Variety is important in script writing, so in order to eliminate monotony the scenes should alternate in length–a longer scene followed by a shorter scene. Another technique for adding variety is alternating setting. Script writers shouldn’t stick to one setting and only change the time and characters. This may sometimes be necessary when writing a stage play, but changing the set in a radio drama can be done easily and quickly, so let your imagination be your guide.

6. Transitions. Any change in location or time represents a transition. Simply playing music between scenes certainly lets the audience know that one scene ends and another begins, but there needs to be more. The listener needs to know the “where” (place) and, depending on the scene, even the “when” (time) of the new scene. It is not a good idea to use dialog to communicate time and place except occasionally. Whenever possible, use sound effects to set the scene For instance, if the scene is on the street, traffic noise could be the first sound heard.

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