

# CDC Audio Script Writing Guide\*

## General Guidelines

- Use a script to sound more focused, produced, and polished and to ensure that information is clear, concise, and in order. A script helps you retain full control of the content.
- A script should be invisible. When delivered, it shouldn't sound like a script. If it sounds like a script, your program won't sound spontaneous and won't sound friendly to your audience. The invisibility of your script depends on how it's written and how it's presented.
- Conversational writing needs to sound natural, not stilted and artificial. The best way to see if your copy sounds natural is to read it out loud. Do you have to stop for a breath in the middle of a sentence? The sentence is too long. Do you repeatedly stumble in your reading when you get to a certain point in your script? The idea or wording isn't clear.
- Write for the ear, not the eye. Text written for the eye can be more complex and still not lose the meaning because readers linger over the text until they figure out your meaning. Scripts written for the ear go by literally at the speed of sound. They have to be much simpler.
- Write clearly. Listeners only hear it once, unless they replay it. You can't count on them to do that, so your meaning has to be clear the first time your listeners hear it.
- Interview-style podcast – script the introduction and closing and outline the questions. Never script the answers because they can sound stilted when people read them. If necessary, use notes or bullet points to ensure nothing important gets left out.
- Build a connection. Audio products are a chance to create a bond with people as they listen. Invite them into your world by using inclusive language such as 'we' and 'our.'
- Pay attention to rhythm. Be careful about running too many sentences together that are all the same length. A bit of variety will hold a listener's attention longer.
- Podcasts are sometimes translated and made available in other languages. Using a simple style and plain language insures the message is accurately transferred into the new language.

## Script Elements

- Standard CDC podcast opening – pre-recorded and added to all podcasts by the production team.
- Introduction – Welcome listeners to this CDC podcast. Introduce speaker and any guests. Introduce topic. Co-brand to your Center/Division/Office, if desired. This can also be added to your ending, instead.

- Interview questions (not answers), if it's an interview, OR information on topic.
- Ending – Thank listeners for listening. Give resource information.
- Standard CDC podcast closing – pre-recorded and added to all podcasts by the production team.

### **TIP 1: MAP YOUR SCRIPT**

- This makes the listeners feel comfortable.
- Tell them:
  - Who's talking (host and guest, if it's an interview)
  - What's coming up
- Don't forget the ending:
  - End with a call to action and/or resource information

### **TIP 2: WRITE LIKE A SPEAKER**

We rarely talk as formally as we write. We tend to talk in short sentences, even sentence fragments. We use contractions and simple words. Use this style in your writing, even though it may go against what you've been taught about proper writing. Remember, it doesn't matter what it looks like on paper as long as it's easy for the listener to understand.

- Listen to the way people talk in everyday conversation. Write everything the way you would say it, not the way you would read it.
- You might know what you mean by a certain symbol, but an announcer may read it the wrong way. For example, what does “.25 in.” mean? Point-two-five inches? A quarter of an inch? Don't make others guess your intent. Write it out exactly as you want it read.
- With numbers, write out one through nine. Use numerals for 10 through 999. Write out words like “thousand” and “million.” Use the appropriate combination of names and numerals for numbers like 22 million.
- Write out names for symbols. When recording a script, “dollars” is easier to read than “\$.”
- If you use an acronym or abbreviation in a script, make sure you use (or “establish”) the full name first. Example: *We'll examine optical character recognition, also known as OCR.* In general, though, avoid acronyms unless you are certain your listeners will understand them as readily as words. Use the whole phrase instead. A listener can't go back up to the top of the page to relearn what the acronym means.
- Use the ‘coffee bar’ test. How would you tell a friend about a new computer you just bought? How would you explain something technical, scientific, or medical to your aunt, who teaches kindergarten? Language should be *clear* and *direct* so the meaning is conveyed instantly.

- Use plain English, not Latin-based language. Example:

Instead of this (Latin-based): *A policeman called this morning, **enquiring** about how I had **acquired** my bike. I told him I'd **discovered** it just outside my gate. From the **expression** on his face, I got the impression that he didn't believe me. In fact I really had **investigated**, to **ascertain** who it belonged to, but no one around here could **assist** me.*

Use this (plain English): *A policeman called this morning, **asking** about how I had **come by** my bike. I told him I'd **found** it just outside my gate. From the **look** on his face, I got the impression that he didn't believe me. In fact I really had **asked around**, to **find out** who it belonged to, but no one around here could **help** me.*

- Don't use jargon.
- Watch out for the word "that." You can usually do without it. Eliminating words you don't need frees time for more words you do need. Example:  
Instead of: *The club meeting that was held at the coffeehouse was lively.*

Use this: *The club meeting held at the coffeehouse was lively.*

### **TIP 3: USE SHORT SENTENCES**

- Use short sentences so listeners can easily follow the thread of your words. A good rule of thumb is to keep sentences under 25 words. Another rule: A sentence shouldn't take more than one breath to say.
- If you need more than one dash in a sentence, you probably need more than one sentence.
- General idea – convey one idea per sentence.
- Always ask yourself: Can I split this sentence in two? Example:

Instead of: *Thompson, who trained as a lawyer at Harvard and went on to get his MBA at Wharton, assumed his current position last February.*

Use this: *Thompson trained as a lawyer at Harvard and went on to get his MBA at Wharton. He assumed his current position last February.*

### **TIP 4: WRITE FROM A TO B**

- People don't want to replay the file to understand something. If they don't understand it the first time, they generally won't bother trying to review it. You have to make it clear the first time.
- Use a linear structure: from A to B.

- Don't start a sentence with a subordinate clause (use your discretion). Examples:
  - *After Amy sneezed all over the tuna salad...*
  - *Once Adam smashed the spider...*
  - *Until Mr. Sanchez has his first cup of coffee...*
  - Instead of: *Even though it wasn't clear exactly what the job entailed, Thompson thought his new role would be a chance to escape the humdrum life of an attorney.*

Use this: *Thompson thought his new role would be a chance to escape the humdrum life of an attorney, even though it wasn't clear exactly what the job entailed.*

### **TIP 5: USE CONTRACTIONS**

- Contractions sound less formal and friendlier. Sounding conversational is important in reaching your audience in a medium in which one person essentially is talking to others. Also, it's easier and more natural for you/your narrator to read.
- Examples:
  - There is = there's
  - Do not = don't
  - Is not = isn't
  - Instead of: *It is likely to be of most use to middle managers, who often do not like to micromanage.*

Use this: *It's likely to be of most use to middle managers, who often don't like to micromanage.*

### **TIP 6: AVOID THE PASSIVE VOICE**

Instead of: *The car was driven by the boy.*

Use: *The boy drove the car.*

- The active voice:
  - is more direct, so it gives your statements more authority.
  - makes sentences shorter
  - helps you write from A to B

### **TIP 7: PUT PUNCTUATION TO WORK**

- Punctuation in scripts is for the narrator only
- Don't worry about proper usage
- Most useful:
  - commas
  - dashes
  - periods/full stops

- Instead of: *Qualities like patience the willingness to listen and believing that there's something good in everyone are what set those women apart along with their commitment and compassion.*

Use this: *Qualities like patience, the willingness to listen, and believing that there's something good in everyone, are what set these women apart – along with their commitment and compassion.*

### **TIP 8: DON'T USE BRACKETS OR QUOTES**

- Why not brackets (parentheses)?
  - You can't see them; this is audio.
  - They're almost impossible for the narrator to convey. Nobody speaks in parentheses.
- Instead, delete the phrase or set it apart.
- Instead of: *All employees not only need to know what the company's mission is (so leaders must not stop communicating) but they also need to know what they can do to make it happen.*

Use this: *All employees need to know what the company's mission is, and what they can do to make it happen. So leaders must never stop communicating.*

- Why not quotation marks?
  - It's not clear when a quote ends
  - The listener may lose track
  - You may run into copyright issues
  - If you must use a quote, introduce it with a phrase such as ``In these words.''
  - Instead, paraphrase or use reported speech
  - For long quotations, consider using a different voice. For example, if you're a male, use a female voice for the quote.
  - Instead of: *You may be wondering, "How am I going to do that?"*

Use this: *You may be wondering how you're going to do that.*

### **TIP 9: MAKE THE SCRIPT SLIP-PROOF**

- If your script is hard to read, the narrator will stumble
- This will waste time in recording and editing
- Get the format right:
  - Times Roman 14 point font
  - 1.5 spaced lines – or greater, if your narrator prefers.
  - Break the pages at the ends of sentences
  - Number the lines (Word will do this automatically)

- Spell out symbols and abbreviations. For example: percent, kilogram, micrograms per deciliter
- Write out URLs as they should be read.  
For example: w-w-w-dot-c-d-c-dot-gov-slash-tobacco
- Spell out long numbers and dates
- Spell out unusual words phonetically, with stress. For example:  
Lyon – LEE-on  
Xochimilco = zoch-ee-MIL-co

**TIP 10: READ YOUR SCRIPT OUT LOUD & HAVE SOMEONE ELSE READ IT OUT LOUD**

- Do you/they stumble?
- Does it flow well?
- Does it make sense?
- Are there any sound-a-likes?  
For example: *Thompson won a special achievement award from the Law Society, and his wife won two.* Or was that “too”?

**SUMMARY**

A well-written, well-presented script can:

- help you organize your ideas better
- convey your content in an engaging way
- build you a reputation for quality
- cut down on production time

If you have any questions, please e-mail [podcasts@cdc.gov](mailto:podcasts@cdc.gov).