

PLANETARIUM SCRIPTWRITING FOR BEGINNERS

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So, you've decided to take the plunge and try your hand for the first time at writing the script for your next public show. Well done. You're accustomed to communicating your love of astronomy through the spoken word to your patrons, now you want to take on the challenging task of doing the same with the written word. It's by no means easy, but can be enormously satisfying when done properly. You won't become a good scriptwriter overnight; it will take perseverance and patience, so expect to put in the same dedication you show in the rest of your planetarium work. Take inspiration from planetarian Jimmy Horn who says, 'A good script will make people leave your dome feeling smarter. That makes it easier to bring them back next time.'

It's a daunting challenge. Where on earth should you start? What are the ground rules? What are the ingredients that make not just a good script, but one that sends your audience home saying to themselves, "Boy, that show was well designed and presented?" Well, read on and you'll find tips that will put yourself ahead of the field.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Before you even think about the merest possibility of perhaps one day considering the merest thought of maybe putting pen to paper, you should ask yourself the key question: What's the purpose of my script?

Ideally, your answer should include such things as engaging your audience's attention, acknowledging their intelligence and communicating the excitement of astronomical discovery in such a way that they can have fun while learning. This approach is a key element in education today. So it is vital to decide at the beginning what your objectives are for the show, summed up in no more than a couple of sentences, as a script without a clear purpose will soon show its weaknesses to a confused audience. Once you've settled on your objectives, make sure they are made crystal clear in the show's introduction.

Once you've set about researching your material, don't make the classic mistake of cramming everything you discover into 30-40 minutes. Information overload is self-defeating, so be prepared to trim everything down to the essentials. This takes a lot of self-discipline, I know, but it will immeasurably improve the script's impact.

It is essential that you never forget you are writing for the ear, not just the mind, as it would be if you were writing a book. A sentence that reads fine when you go over it in your mind may sound stilted when read out loud. So always think about how your words sound when they're strung together. This will put the text through more revisions than you may like, but eventually you'll get into the habit of instinctively writing for the ear.

On that same point, people today want us to talk *to* them, not *at* them, so developing a conversational style of writing is becoming more and more common and necessary in the high profile, popular scripts. Yes, it is difficult at first, but your practice will be rewarded.

Gone are the days when our audiences were content with the didactic, Voice of God approach, which saw a presenter give the dreaded, dry lecture under the stars with no feedback expected or encouraged from the audience. Increasingly today, people like, or even expect to be, involved with the show, so think of ways in advance of working some form of constructive participation into the show, even if it may be brief. As an example, look at the script, *Explorers of Mauna Kea*. Most of the show is on tape, but there's a ten-minute live section in the middle. During this time the presenter hands out about 35 hand-size mirrors to the audience, and asks them to reflect light from a powerful bulb at the front of the planetarium on to an image of a CCD on the dome. This neatly demonstrates the principle of using multiple mirrors for today's large telescopes. I know from firsthand experience that audiences are pleasantly surprised to be given this opportunity to be an active part of the show.

WRITING THE SCRIPT

If you can afford a narrator, think of that person as your friend and give them the same consideration. Be kind to him or her by avoiding long, complex sentences that will be hard to read out loud, let alone understand. Keep sentences fairly short and mix their average length, as this is more kind to the ear. By using no more than three or four sentences for each paragraph the text will be split into nice bite-size pieces, which the narrator will find much easier to read comfortably. And the use of lively, active verbs will bring sentences to life, thus keeping the narrator happy and interested.

It's always worth considering the use of two narrators, particularly for scripts that may be a little longer than most; even the most enthusiastic visitor will find their attention wavering a little if one voice only is used. Apart from anything else, dividing the script between two narrators will hold the audience's attention.

Avoid sibilance, the back to back use of too many words beginning with the same hissing letter, such as 's'. These pose narrators needless difficulties. Here is *Babylon 5's* scriptwriter, J. Michael Straczynski's exaggerated example of

this innocent problem: 'Sometimes sibilance seems sensible; still, saying sentences steeped in s's simply staggers some stars.'

Don't write sentence after sentence if you can't think of appropriate images that can accompany the words. The planetarium is a visual medium, after all, and you should always be looking for the most appropriate fusion of words with images.

Planetaria are competing with other media, such as music videos, the movies and computer games, for the public's attention, but this doesn't mean we, too, have to throw images at people so fast they can't assimilate the information quickly enough, thus leaving them with just a blurred memory of the event. The pictures you choose should complement and expand upon your well chosen words in a meaningful way, so build in "thinking time", particularly after the audience sees especially important slides or video clips that relate to one of the shows cornerstone facts. Without this consideration, people will become frustrated at not being given enough time to keep pace with the script. So, if you've just told them about some deep cosmological mystery, build in perhaps 10 seconds of music and no images, just a star field.

A good script should have a life of its own, quite apart from the accompanying images, so don't just make it a series of connected caption-like commentaries for the slides and video. That approach will make people think they may as well just be at home reading a book about the topic.

A 30-40 minute script should have no more than a handful of big ideas for your audience to grapple with. Decide early on what they will be, and use them as the show's cornerstones. Fact-packed scripts tend to have a short half-life in the memory, compared to those that concentrate on the universe experience, as it were. If you really can't avoid some of the dry science, present the package with a layer of verbal chocolate, disguising the essential information in nuggets of other, easier to swallow concepts.

Book authors are encouraged to think of a snappy opening paragraph, to hook the interest of the browsing reader who picks up their tome in a shop. The same principle can liven up the opening of your show. For example, were you to do a Mars show, an old fashioned and not very exciting way of beginning it would be to immediately go into a dry historical account of how our perception of the planet has changed. However, if you want to grab people's attention and keep it (difficult if you don't do it immediately) you could perhaps show a simulation of the Mars Excursion Rovers bouncing across the Martian surface as they landed, followed by some of those marvelous panoramas. *Then* launch into a *lively* historical perspective.

If your script is particularly complex, take a tip from the movie world and set it out in the form of a picture storyboard. This will lend a structure to the

show, even before you've written a single word. Without a storyboard you may be all at sea, not sure where the words fit into the overall plan.

Unless its part of an interactive feedback session with electronic handsets, an audience will get nervous and fidgety if the script keeps asking direct questions of them, such as, "Do you know why stars twinkle?" So try to avoid these in favor of rhetorical, thought-provoking questions.

This point is contentious, but it's worth at least considering the insertion of a little humor into the script. If you have a tried and tested, sure-fire winner of a one-liner or a short story, my feeling is that you should put it in if it helps to highlight an important script element. But try not to center any aspect of your script round the humor. Make it as throwaway as possible, just in case it falls on stony ground.

Children love to be active participants in the learning process, so if you're doing a schools program, lookout for the many opportunities for giving pupils handouts they can refer to or complete before, during or after the show.

Background music can either add an extra dimension to the atmosphere of the occasion, or leave your audience cringing, depending on its suitability. So think carefully about your selection and whether or not you really need that cheesy sound effect, or the music clip that may sound a little outdated.

Keep the hard science and technical terms down to a bare minimum. You and I may be able to recite them in our sleep, but some can take a lot of explaining, which uses up valuable show time. Use brevity to give your audience a taste for the topic, rather than the full recipe.

A continuing problem with explaining the Universe to a lay audience is how to convey the sheer scale of cosmic distances. Earthbound analogies often help. For example, you can explain the difficulty ground controllers at JPL had in targeting *Pathfinder* from the Earth to a specific site on Mars, by saying it's equivalent to throwing a pebble in Los Angeles and having it fly through a specific window in New York's Empire State Building.

Resist the temptation to show off every function of your star projector. You don't have to put all of its capabilities into one show. After all, the special effects you leave out of this show may have a place in the next one, thus giving that audience something new to see.

It's the experience of many of the top scriptwriters that up to 90% of the facts, numbers and concepts they originally began with don't make it into the finished product. So don't be afraid to shed material if it isn't strictly needed.

POLISHING

Once you've finished the script put it away for at least a couple of weeks, and then come back to it fresh. Read it slowly and carefully. Let your colleagues read it, and be prepared to swallow some pride in listening to their constructive comments.

People will soon notice if the script doesn't have a proper structure, so cover the basics first. Does the script meet the primary objective you began with? Does it have a beginning, middle and end? Or does it have what the poet, Philip Larkin, would say is, 'A beginning, a muddle and an end'? Sounds obvious, I know, but if you're not an experienced writer it can be easy to forget. Is there a sense that it's been written to impress your colleagues in the profession, rather than to inform and entertain the public? Is it lopsided, going into too much detail in some areas at the expense of others? Is the pace too fast or too slow? Is there needless repetition? Does it stick to the main theme throughout? Are any of the words vague? Is the grammar correct? Can it be understood the first time its read or heard? Does it show an understanding of the visual experience? Does it have a natural flow? Is there a logical progression of ideas? Is it vibrant, or do some areas need livening up? Is there any unnecessary padding, or only loosely associated information? Are parts of the script top-heavy with facts at the expense of other parts? Does it make the audience feel involved? Are all the visuals appropriate? Is there a copyright problem with any of them? Is it immediately clear which visuals are linked to specific paragraphs? Is the style conversational? Does it place too much emphasis on the use of a pointer? (For a young audience particularly, a pointer dancing across the dome for half the show will be an easy distraction from your well chosen words). Is there scope for adding scenes where one or more characters play out a role to highlight a point, and with whom the audience can empathize? Are those characters distinct? Is it always clearly apparent which character is speaking? Have you made good use of word imagery? It is more of a challenge, and more satisfying, to paint an image with skillful words than to pick out a convenient image; sometimes words last longer in the memory than pictures. Finally, does the script take a fresh approach to the subject, or is it just a rehash of old information the public can find elsewhere?

Planetarium scriptwriting is like molding a ball of clay into a fine work of art. I hope some of the advice above will hone your broader planetarian skills, so you become a modern sculptor of words and images for the mind and soul.

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Editor's Note: This article was originally published in *The Planetarian*, the journal of the International Planetarium Society. Steve Tidey has co-authored and edited a Great Lakes Planetarium Association Tips booklet, *Tips For Planetarium Scriptwriting*.

