

# SCRIPTWRITING WORKSHOP

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## **Introduction**

The 1985 Planetarium Association of Canada Conference in Toronto included a scriptwriting workshop that was repeated at the 1986 Middle Atlantic Planetarium Society meeting. The workshop dealt not only with the abstractions underlying the writing of planetarium scripts, but also with critical reactions to actual scripts distributed to all participants before the workshop convened.

Since I had proposed this “hands-on” style workshop to Chris Sasaki at the McLaughlin Planetarium, Toronto, he asked me to chair the event. We enlisted John Kenny (Senior Producer at the McLaughlin) and Ray Villard (producer at the Davis Planetarium in Baltimore) to fill out the panel. Each of the panel members first presented 3 - 5 minutes of introductory remarks concerning our own approaches to scriptwriting.

The exciting part of the workshop, though, began with the script critiques and open discussion. Thirty or so articulate, opinionated planetarians proceeded to disagree with each other in a most gratifying way, with the discussion centering around the three scripts chosen for their diversity of style, content, and programming philosophy. A transcript of that discussion might make a more intriguing article than the present effort. But John, Ray and I share with you below our recollecting of our opening remarks: our opinions about how to write a good planetarium script.

It occurs to me that we are frequently inundated with opinions. Much of what passes for “news” in our newspapers and magazines, and on both radio and television, is actually “opinion.” It also seems to me that much of this “news” ought to be disregarded by sensible, intelligent creatures attempting to arrive at their own conclusions about the world around them.

Perhaps a new medical procedure is justified. I'd like to propose the “opinion-ectomy,” the surgical removal of dumb ideas. “I'm sorry sir, but you're just too stupid for words, and so we're going to have to remove your opinions.”

I know, this sounds rather elitist to you. After all, who makes the opinion-ectomy decision? Well, let's be fair – you and I can handle it. Of course, that's my opinion.

Please feel free to perform your own opinionectomies on the following pieces.

## **I. Francis C. Bidy**

It seems to me that a good planetarium script has a logic that is apparent, as well as a flow that feels natural. While it presents fact, it emphasizes the process of science. It leaves plenty of room for the rest of the audio and visual effects to achieve their various results. A good script has captured, and conveys or stimulates, emotions.

When writing a script, we need to know what our theme is, and emphasize it strongly. If, within that theme, we're telling a story, we need not only tell the story, but relate it to our theme.

We need to write to be heard, not read. And we should remember that the audience will hear our words while simultaneously seeing our visuals and listening to our music.

Who is that audience? It's a truism that the writer should know who the audience is, but very little work has been done in defining our audience(s). If we knew our audience, then we might try to decide how that knowledge should effect our choice of topics and writing styles.

And speaking of topics and writing styles, here are some of my thoughts... science documentaries are great, but why should we limit ourselves and our audiences to a steady diet of documentaries? The facts are that both science-fiction and humorous shows, as well as plays, concerts and a variety of other special events, can be (and have been) done well in planetariums. Some of them have been successful not only at the box office, but also in their attempts to convey new views of the human experience in astronomy. These "alternative" productions help to maintain public interest in our facilities, and to increase our visibility and appeal in our communities.

In documentaries, we should not limit ourselves to the basics: it may be difficult to convey the joys of gamma-ray astronomy, for example, but it's also important (and possibly more important than still another review of the circumpolar stars).

Where do our script ideas come from? That may be the most-asked question at writing workshops, and it's probably the most un-answerable. Certainly, voracious appetites for the solitary joys of both reading and writing help. We've got to read countless books and periodicals just to stay current, and our range of reading material need to include not only the obvious astronomy journals, but also documentary movies and television programs and a variety of prose and poetry. After all this "intake," the question still remains: where do the ideas for the "output" come from?

Some script concepts come straight from the reading itself. For example, a year-end synopsis of astronomy stories in "Science News" triggered a show about recent discoveries in astronomy (several disparate stories united by the common theme of "1984's hot topics"). Other ideas come from a sort of free floating musing over my "idea file" (stuffed with clippings, photocopies, and handwritten notes), an attempt to see or feel connections between apparently unrelated items. These musings may generate such themes as "things we still don't understand," or "periodic, cyclic events in astronomy."

Whatever our conscious or subconscious source of ideas, the task of actually writing still remains, and it helps if we enjoy the process of writing, instead of the state of having written. It also helps, I think, if we remain solitary writers: committees rarely create, but individuals do. And creative work succeeds best, I think, when it remains true to one person's artistic vision. That's not to say that each show should be entirely produced by one person, but that the script should be written by one person. Likewise, the artist doesn't need advisors during the painting process, and the composer (or audio engineer) should be left as free as possible during the creative audio process.

Finally, as with any creative endeavor, it's important to know when to stop.

## **II. John Kenny**

Writing, of any sort, is an art. The craft of the word-smith is to fashion, from text, environments, emotions and understanding. At its very best, good writing can stimulate, not only the inquisitive mind, but can vicariously arouse all of the senses, images, textures, sounds, smells, and tastes.

There are all sorts of techniques that can be used to produce a desired effect, such as similes, alliteration, onomatopoeia and others. But these are just tools. They can be well or poorly used. The key to the skillful use of these tools to produce quality writing is style.

I guess it's like endorsing motherhood, but it bears repeating: a clean, comfortable writing style is the most important ingredient in a good planetarium script. There's no single recipe. The very nature of style is that it is as individual as the writer. It's the muse whispering in your ear that lets more than ink flow from the pen to the page. It's the key which lets the disembodied voice, in the dark star theatre, pass the audience's ears and enter their minds and hearts.

A script that springs from a blending of the author's personal style, and a careful consideration of what subject matter itself wants to say will have the most of the other attributes people ascribe to good writing: flow, harmony, logic, pacing, vibrancy...

Having said that, let me move on to a few of the prejudices and preferences I have that reflect my style, my approach to the planetarium as a medium, and my understanding of the audience in Toronto.

Overall, I probably fall into the conservative or traditional category. I prefer a documentary approach to script writing, rather than a sci-fi story. It allows me to speak directly to the subject material. There is less chance of confusion on the audience's part between what is fact and what is a plot device, or outright fantasy. It also gets rid of the character that you hear but don't see, something that always bothers me. Yes, you can use film and video for some sections, but by and large, the characters are voices in the dark. It also avoids the problem of having two focuses, the information and the plot. Usually one becomes subordinate to the other and the result is a disjointed script.

Another problem with sci-fi shows is the danger of trying to do a "Star Wars" type, whiz-bang extravaganza. It can't be done. At least, not as well as Hollywood can do it.

It leaves the planetarium open to unfair comparison. There are a lot of things at which a planetarium cannot be excelled. In a highly competitive market like Toronto I like to do what we do best, and that is produce informative, entertaining documentaries.

That's what our audience expects, and what scores highest in our surveys. This could say that we've preselected our audience by the type of program we offer, or that we don't do anything other than documentaries very well, but I don't think so. If people want Star Wars they go to the movies; if they want comedy, they go to the Improv.

Which brings me to my next point. Comedy is the most difficult skill in acting and writing. I'm wary of it in planetarium shows. Humor works best with a live actor, who can play off the audience. It also works best in a full house, which is rarely the case in planetaria. I've seen and heard jokes in planetarium shows fall so flat I wanted to die. A few light moments, tongue-in-cheek asides, and polite chuckles will help a script, but a star-theatre show is not and should not attempt to be a sit-com.

There are exceptions to everything I've said. You may be a great comedy writer (which leads me to wonder what you're doing in a planetarium). Fantasy-adventure elements are important in writing for children who cannot yet handle abstract-logical conceptual development. They are interested in the story and learn intuitively and by an extension of personal experience. But by and large, for a general adult audience, I like a good narrative documentary.

I don't see it as a limitation. A good narrative needs a story to tell just as much as a sci-fi show, and if you want, you can play "let's pretend" with a narrative. Enough of what a script should not be.

What it should be, to begin with, is informative. Our surveys show that our audience is very interested in, but not very informed about, astronomy. That's why they come. They want to learn a couple of constellations, and a few new concepts. Research has shown that enjoyment increases when new ideas are presented to an audience.

Up to three or four major new concepts can be presented in a show, after which overload occurs. I don't avoid astronomical terms either. My surveys have shown a very high comfort level with all but the most complex astronomical terms, i.e. people may not know the definition of a word like parsec but they have heard it before, on "Star Trek" or something, and they're eager to learn what it means from the context or definition in the script.

I like a liberal dose of "schmaltz" too. The best effect on any planetarium is turning on the stars. The judicious use of romantic prose and poetic metaphor, under a dark planetarium sky, can help stimulate a sense of cosmic wonder. The thing that excites me most about astronomy is the mystical fusion of natural, scientific, and philosophical aesthetics. It's an essential part of my writing style and something I hope my audience takes away with them.

Beyond the previous thoughts are the more mechanical considerations in writing a planetarium script.

I believe in good organization; it paves the way for a good script. This means all that horrible stuff your English teachers tried to force into your head. Once a topic is picked, I do a little preliminary research. Next, I form objectives for the show. These evolve into a scene breakdown with major visual sequences and points to be covered.

This all helps focus my research and the ideas that spring up along the way. Some objectives may be dropped and new ones added to replace them. Eventually I bring it together as a storyboard, and begin writing.

Perhaps you have your own method. Whatever it is, a plan like this helps prevent hours of sitting, pen poised, staring at a blank page, or the frustration of writing three sentences and scratching out five.

Pace is important. I like to mix sentence lengths to punctuate thoughts. Sentences should not be too long, since the voice is coming at you in the dark and once it's gone, it's gone. You can't go back and reread it.

I think it is important to let big ideas sink in slowly, either by lightening up the tone for a page or giving a good long music pause. The latter are very important (and I'm always accused of not putting in enough).

I find it helpful to write with a narrator or sound quality in mind. Just as it's important to mentally visualize the slides and effects that illustrate a sequence, it is important to mentally auralize as well. If I know I want to use a certain narrator to give a certain feel, I try to write with them in mind. I also try to choose narrators that read my stuff the way I hear it in my head.

Visual design is a whole other side of script writing, and the weaker one as far as my talents are concerned, so I won't go into much depth about it. But it is essential. Ideally, the words and visuals evolve together. In my case, the words usually take the first step. That's OK as long as the visuals keep up. When I write two pages of text and no visuals spring up, I figure I've lost my focus. The same is true when I get a scene in my head, and no words come out. The most important part of visual design is to think in terms of the whole dome as an environmental unit, rather than individual slides or pans.

Finally, after all the research is done and a first draft script has been written, it is time for polishing. Edit, edit, edit. Does it follow the story? Is there a logical progression of ideas? Have all of your surviving objectives been covered? Does it still excite you to read it? If the answer is yes to all of these questions, please tell me how you did it. Otherwise, rewrite, and ask for comments from others. Swallow your pride and listen to the comments, too. I firmly believe that ruthless editing, though it can hurt, can also turn a mediocre script into a good one. It's a process of literary survival of the fittest. What results will be a more svelte, trim and vigorous script.

Now, I'm going to take all this pontificating to heart, and try to improve my own writing.

### **III. Ray Villard**

In planetariums, everyone has their own special recipe as to what constitutes a “good” show, but there are some general guidelines that apply to almost any planetarium program; ingredients which are as basic to a successful show as milk and eggs are to any recipe.

#### *1. Preliminaries*

As a first step, it's important to clearly define your audience. What's going to interest them and what's not? (Or, are they really going to sit through a show on the Julian Calendar?) It's safest to assume a high school level of education – no more. That doesn't mean the show can't be multilayered, having visual sequences that excite a five year old as well as nuggets of information to enlighten the Ph.D. The script's tone should be friendly, relaxed, and conversational, avoiding the traps of "talking down" to the audience, sounding to “high-falutin”, or going right over their heads with a truckload of technical terms.

#### *2. Focus on a Topic*

Once you've defined an audience, decide what you want them to experience, both on the intellectual as well as emotional level. What are the key new insights or facts they should take home with them? Outline the specific ideas you want to get across and see if there's a logical flow from one concept to the next. Build your story from there.

Many a potentially good show winds up on the rocks by trying to cram too much information into 40 minutes, or padding too narrow a topic to fill the time slot. Topic and show length should fit hand-in-glove.

Spend a fair amount of time planning the show's beginning and end, and tie them together conceptually. A prologue or "teaser" at the very beginning may serve to introduce a mystery or conflict, or simply soften up the audience to your topic.

Ideally, the show should build up to an easily recognized climax which neatly wraps everything together, rather than just running out of steam and leaving the audience staring at a blank dome (until they finally catch sight of the exit sign).

#### *3. Write for the Medium*

As you research and develop an outline for the show, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that you must visualize these concepts. A script written as if it were intended for publication rather than presentation results in a show long on narration and short on visuals.

Visual sequences have to be mapped out simultaneously with the script's outline. There is a lot of give and take here, and inevitably some wonderful topics get scrapped for lack of dynamic visuals to support them. However, better that than leaving the audience staring at a Kodalith graph for 40 seconds, as if it were an eye chart.

Planetarium scripts are essentially captions to pretty pictures. Much more detail would be as much at odds with the medium as would be the sight of Dan Rather reading the New York Times on television every evening.

It's hard to lose with a show having a lively pace, and where a scene doesn't last longer than ten or twenty seconds. The show's pace should also speed up and slow down at carefully planned locations. When well-executed, the end result is a presentation that sweeps the audience along on an intellectual journey as well as an emotional roller coaster ride, with peaks, dips and surprise turns.

Shows should also have built-in "breathers," where the narration stops to allow the audience to simply sit back and look at a scene for a few moments.

Deliberate humor also provides a much-anticipated relief for both adult and child. However, it must be handled carefully lest it backfire and completely upset the balance of an otherwise coherent production. Keep the audience's sensitiveness in mind, making sure that what's funny to you will be appealing to them. Few things put more of a drain on the show than stupid, tasteless or "in" jokes that consistently bomb, show after show.

#### *4. Edit, Edit, Edit*

No matter how skilled and talented the writer, every script needs to go through several editing reviews, preferably with several staff members involved. On a first draft, most writers use more words than needed. Many a mediocre show could have been trimmed into shape simply by unloading the extra weight of excessive verbiage.

While editing, keep in mind Henry David Thoreau's admonition: "Simplify, simplify." This applies to topics as well as sentences. Most of our shows would have been better if they were shorter. Take out the weakest two or three scenes. Keep sentences short, introducing no more than one new idea per sentence. Compress paragraphs into no more than three or four sentences each. Strive to keep the story tight and concise.

Shows easily derail the audience's attention by using an overabundance of technical terminology and jargon. The writer's motive should not be to impress the audience with his vast knowledge and language skills, but simply to inform, excite and enlighten. Use a technical term only when it is more precise in meaning than a commonplace counterpart. Minimize the number of new technical terms introduced. Defining too many new terms eats up valuable show time (or unnecessarily pads a show). In the end, they probably won't be remembered anyway.

Don't feel compelled to bludgeon the audience with an endless stream of facts and figures, which soon blurs into meaninglessness for the common visitor. Avoid the Carl Sagan Syndrome of framing everything in "billions and billions." Remember the mockery it got him? The audience is much more receptive to simple relative comparison and analogies. Example: "Though Earth is 12,756 kilometers in diameter, its atmosphere extends merely 60 kilometers, 1/100th the Earth's radius." vs. "If the Earth were the size of a baseball, its atmosphere would be no thicker than a postage stamp."

Shows sometimes insert taped quotes from astronomers. Though this can add variety and color to the story, the quotes should be brief and used to vary the pace, rather than serve as a primary means of getting facts across. Since most people don't speak casually with the clarity and conciseness of a well-written script, editing becomes critical. A slightly different approach is to quote from a historical figure instead, using a character voice, and carefully selecting the sentences quoted.

A successful planetarium show is highly visual, thoughtful and entertaining. The experience is so rich, varied and colorful that the audience leaves wishing it lasted longer and wondering how so much show was compressed into so little time!

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