

# A GUIDE TO FICTION PODCAST WRITING & PRODUCTION

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## ABOUT THE GUIDE

The producer and story editor of the original *Star Wars* radio series – the first contemporary audio drama in the US to draw large audiences – shares best practices in writing and production for the New Golden Age of audio drama (fiction podcasts) that began in 2015. Audio drama is often thought of as an experience for our ears, but is actually a highly visual form of storytelling. The Guide focuses on writing and production techniques that are becoming the standard for the New Golden Age. It outlines contemporary fiction podcast (scripted fiction) structure, story elements, dialogue, the uses of screenwriting techniques, the importance and integration of environmental ambience and sound effects, script formats, the podcast musical genre, and audio docudramas (the most popular form of audio drama today). It includes implications for writers in the current transition in the US from nonprofit to commercial podcast production, developments in contracts and scales, and what’s helpful for writers to know about audio production in creating compelling scripts for this visual theatre of the mind. The fiction and docudrama podcasts noted in the Guide are selected based on their ability to attract and sustain significant audiences (millions, not thousands) or because they represent notable developments or experiments in writing and production.

## SUBMISSION OPPORTUNITIES FOR AUDIO WRITERS

*While the current audio drama revival with podcasting began in the sheltered world of nonprofit radio, it's now transitioning to the commercial production environment of Hollywood (even if these studios are not located in Lotusland). As a result, a growing number of submission options are being offered by established national (US) screenwriting competitions. That means most of these charge submission fees typically starting at \$35 and escalating at set dates as the submission window progresses – enter when the window opens for the lowest fees.*

BBC WORLD SERVICE – International Radio Playwriting Competition

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5J6bfwwQ4G0044HZ5Skt33w/the-international-radio-playwriting-competition-2020>

The competition offers two £2,500 prizes (one each for those with English as a first or second language) and restricted to writers living outside the UK. Continuation of the competition in 2021 TBD. From the BBC: *The radio dramas can be on any subject, as long as they are 53 minutes long (about 50 pages in something close to BBC format).*

AUSTIN FILM FESTIVAL – Fiction Podcast Competition

<https://austinfilmfestival.com/submit/podcast-competition/>

An offering from one of the leading US film festivals noted for its screenwriting competition. Submission window: April 16 – July 9, 2021. From the AFF: *We're looking for ongoing, original, serialized stories. Writers can submit up to three episodes 3-30 pages in length of their series with the overall content of the story not going longer than 90 pages. Writers should also include a series outline, detailing the events of the remaining episodes in the series.*

PLAYING ON AIR – James Stevenson Prize for Comedic Short Plays

<https://playingonair.org/about-the-james-stevenson-prize>

Named for the famous *New Yorker* magazine cartoonist, offering \$1,000 - 6,000 for three finalists to support audio podcast production. Subscribe to their newsletter for information.

BBC SCRIPT ROOM Competition

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/opportunities>

The annual competition is restricted to residents of the UK and Ireland. From the BBC: *Script Room is not looking for projects to commission or produce. We are looking for writers to develop rather than specific projects. We look for what the script tells us about the writer. We see all scripts as a calling card to showcase a writer's talent, ability, and voice.* Also listed are 15 UK theatres offering other submission opportunities mostly with a focus on UK nationals, but some are open to what one theatre calls the “diaspora.”

NPR Student Podcast Challenge – College Edition (*Productions*)

<https://www.npr.org/923402038>

For currently enrolled undergraduates: docudrama or other nonfiction narrative podcasts produced specifically for this competition – not scripts – with a maximum running time of 08:00 minutes. Only 20% of the evaluation score is for production, thus focusing on story over

production values. Continuation of the competition in 2021 TBD. Prizes: an NPR interview and/or broadcast of the submission.

SHORE SCRIPTS – Fiction Podcast Competition

<https://www.shorescripts.com/podcast/#overview>

For audio drama – not docudrama – scripts, specifically pilot scripts for episodic shows. Prizes are \$5K in production support for winners plus \$1K for writers. Entry fees. 2021 competition TBD.

SCREENCRAFT – Fiction/Nonfiction Podcast Writing Competition

<https://screencraft.org/podcast/>

Limited to pilot scripts for a series (drama) or treatments (docudrama) and offering connections to Hollywood’s developing podcast studios who also adapt podcasts to television. \$1K-\$500 prizes for two drama finalists and \$500 for docudrama. Submission window opens Dec. 1.

AUDIBLE – Podcast Development Program

[https://www.audible.com/ep/podcast-development-program?source\\_code=MRQOR22711102004JN](https://www.audible.com/ep/podcast-development-program?source_code=MRQOR22711102004JN)

From Audible (now part of Amazon): *...dedicated to commissioning and creating new original podcasts from emerging and undiscovered storytellers around the world. We’re exclusively looking for podcasts with an episodic format and a narrative arc (i.e., a beginning, middle, and end... though not necessarily in that order).* Continuation of program TBD. A brave attempt to democratize script submissions through bypassing traditional gatekeepers, following discontinued experiments in doing the same for screenplays by Francis Ford Coppola’s American Zoetrope, and film and television scripts and concepts by Netflix and Amazon.

BBC AUDIO DRAMA AWARDS

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01pf59s>

The annual competition for works released (broadcast or streamed) in the UK, primarily in English, thus open to US productions available on streaming services from Apple, Google, and Spotify, among others. Includes the Imison Award for *best original radio drama by a writer new to radio* and the Tinniswood Award for *best original radio drama script*.

TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL – Podcasts (*Productions*)

[https://tribecafilm-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/document/document/1810/2021\\_Podcast\\_Tribeca\\_Film\\_Festival\\_Rules\\_1.pdf](https://tribecafilm-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/document/document/1810/2021_Podcast_Tribeca_Film_Festival_Rules_1.pdf)

One of the major US film festivals began offering a podcast category in 2021 for one-off or serialized fiction and narrative nonfiction podcasts with a January entry deadline. TFF’s *narrative nonfiction* category is borrowed from usage in the US publishing business, but means *audio docudrama*. Link is for the 2021 entry rules – read the fine print before submitting and check <https://tribecafilm.com/> in mid-summer for details on the next Festival.

NEW JERSEY WEB FEST – Fiction Podcasts (*Productions*)

<https://www.newjerseywebfest.com/fiction-podcasts>

The NJWF began a fiction podcast component with the September 2021 event, an effort to provide independent fiction podcast creators the kind of showcase and support the Sundance Film Festival offered to indie filmmakers in its early years. Includes panel discussions and workshops. Submission deadline is early April (\$35 entry fee).

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## AUDIO DRAMA, DOCUDRAMA, & PODCAST MUSICAL – SCRIPTS

*Audio drama is currently a sparse script landscape compared to feature film or television with the exception of transcripts of Golden Age of Radio shows. This is partially offset by the relative ease of analyzing scripts through listening to productions – a notable difference from feature film – and increasingly fiction podcast producers are posting scripts or transcripts when episodes initially drop on Apple, Spotify, and other distribution channels (see links on production company sites).*

BBC (UK) Writers Room Script Library - Radio Drama

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts/radio-drama>

Multiple downloadable scripts from recent BBC radio drama productions. The Writers Room also offers (under Resources) tips on writing for radio with podcasts and videos for television and film.

SHORE SCRIPTS – Fiction Podcast Scripts

[https://www.shorescripts.com/fiction\\_podcast\\_scripts/](https://www.shorescripts.com/fiction_podcast_scripts/)

A compilation of eight produced scripts by the judges of their 2020 Fiction Podcast competition, including the *Homecoming* audio pilot. Also of interest: Yhane Washington Smith's *Harlem Queen*, an experiment in adapting the Hollywood biopic genre – a hybrid of docudrama and fiction – to audio.

TWO-UP PRODUCTIONS – *Limetown* [Fiction]

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/gjzpskxmrm5x9h/AABtD9f5zxnRvAgAB09BOVZaa?dl=0>

A transcription (not the original audio script) of the produced podcast pilot (Season 1, Episode 1). Transcriptions are not in format so should not be used as a basis for audio script formatting, but in the absence of the actual script, they provide insights into story structure.

TWO-UP PRODUCTIONS – *36 Questions* [Musical]

[https://www.dropbox.com/s/7z4yw9v62a6dzyp/36%20Questions\\_Transcription\\_112419.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/7z4yw9v62a6dzyp/36%20Questions_Transcription_112419.pdf?dl=0)

A transcription, but essentially an augmented script – in something close to BBC radio drama format – of the full production that launched the still-experimental podcast musical as a genre in 2017.

*Serial* (USA) [Docudrama/True Crime]

<https://www.adnansyedwiki.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Serial-Podcast-Transcripts-of-All-Episodes-with-ToC.pdf>

Transcripts of the popular docudrama, thus not in script format, but they show the basic elements of story structure used in the series. Transcripts may more easily be understood after listening to episodes.

GENERIC RADIO (USA) – Script Library

<http://genericradio.com/library>

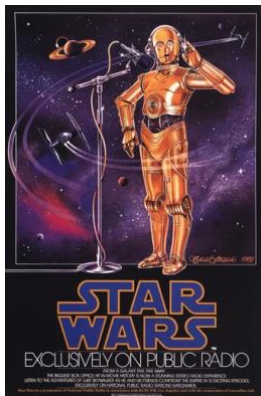
Transcripts of episodes from 189 (at last count) shows, most produced during the Golden Age of radio drama, for download. Mostly transcripts, but in something reasonably close to US and BBC audio script format.

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## CONTEMPORARY AUDIO DRAMA [FICTION PODCAST] – PRODUCTIONS

*While the original Star Wars radio series drew what was a huge audience for audio drama at the time – about 1.5 Million listeners – successful fiction podcasts in the New Golden Age (2015 –) draw multiple millions, making audio drama the genre third mass entertainment medium with film and television. To draw audiences of that size, radio drama had to be freed from the radio. That resulted from the development of personal listening devices (earpods & headphones) and new distribution channels (Apple Podcasts, Spotify, etc.) that encouraged play on listeners’ personal schedules instead of traditional broadcast timetables.*

NPR/BBC/LUCASFILM – *Star Wars Radio Series [A New Hope]* Episode 4



<https://soundcloud.com/user-801911931/star-wars-episode-4-while-giants-mark-time/s-POVnboVfAlu>

By Richard Toscan, producer & story editor (1981). The first contemporary audio drama to attract a mass audience in the US. It reestablished the importance of environmental ambience, sfx, score, and strong plots for audio drama and influenced generations of US audio creators. National releases over the next 25 years including sequels supplemented by CD sets through 2007. For an overview of the development of the original series and sequels: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star\\_Wars\\_\(radio\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Wars_(radio_series))

PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS (USA) – Soundstage



<https://www.playwrightshorizons.org/watch-listen/soundstage/>

New audio plays with good production values for streaming by established writers and performers associated with the well-known New York theatre company. If you’ve only got time for two: *Edge of Night* (musical by Kirsten Childs) and *Gather* (thriller by Robert O’Hara – *image left*). A number of US regional (nonprofit) theatres, motivated by coronavirus restrictions, have

begun producing audio dramas based on previously produced stage plays, usually marked by the negatives typically resulting from transferring plays to audio – with the addition of sfx and score – as opposed to re-conception of the original work for audio. PW has been more successful in this transition by asking its playwrights to conceive plays specifically for audio.

BBC (UK) Radio Drama – Radio 4: *No Place but the Water* (episode 1)



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08p4p5f>

By Linda Marshall Griffiths (2020), using a primary narrator with intercut scenes. Premise: *An odd family with a nasty pig struggles with what may be unknown forces in their nearly deserted coastal hotel as the water rises.* In the publishing business, this would be called a literary thriller. Streaming is ad-free (click on *Listen Now*), but with downloads outside the UK

you get the ads.

CBC (Canada) Audio Drama – PlayME



<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/211-playme>

CBC audio dramas released as podcasts for streaming. If you're overwhelmed by the 100 or more titles, start with *Butcher* by Hanna Moskovitch for its elaborate use of environmental ambience.

RTÉ (Ireland) Radio 1 – Drama On One: *Islands*

<https://www.rte.ie/drama/radio/plays/society/2020/1004/1169356-islands-with-chris-watson-luke-clancy/>



By Chris Watson and Luke Clancy (2020), a combination of documentary and drama, a travelogue to existing and fictional islands, using binaural recording (See *Binaural* below). Multiple RTÉ productions and genres available for streaming.

NIGHT VALE – *Welcome to Night Vale* (Pilot Episode)



<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/1-pilot/id536258179?i=1000366951147>

By Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor (2012), the fiction podcast credited with launching the new era (in the US) of audio drama designed for personal listening rather than via radio broadcast, now with 180+ episodes released at a rate of two episodes a month. Premise: *A radio host tells of the goings on in a small Southwestern town where the residents treat all conspiracy theories as real and fantastical events as ordinary occurrences.* The second most popular fiction podcast on iTunes in 2013 following its launch (*Serial* was 1<sup>st</sup>). Notable for its reliance on a single

narrator telling most of the story interspersed with occasional scenes and extensive background score. In development as of 2017 for a TV series by Sony Pictures Television.

#### TWO-UP PRODUCTIONS – *Limetown*



<https://twoupproductions.com/limetown/podcast>

By Zack Akers and Skip Bronkie (2015). A “mocumentary” and #1 on Apple Podcasts on its first release, using all the techniques of audio docudrama. Premise: *An investigative reporter attempts to determine what caused the disappearance of all the residents of a guarded research facility in Tennessee.* It was later adapted as a television series (originally Facebook Watch and now NBC Peacock). Episodes start with 01:00 of ads – the wave of the future. It remains in the top 10 of fiction podcasts in 2021.

#### GIMLET MEDIA (Now a Spotify company) – *Homecoming*



<https://gimletmedia.com/shows/homecoming/episodes#show-tab-picker>

By Micah Bloomberg and Eli Horowitz (2016), a psychological thriller. Premise: *A former social worker at a reentry program for military veterans attempts to figure out what actually happened while she was employed there.* Later adapted from the first season (6 episodes) as the hit TV series (Amazon Prime) of the same name. It’s unusual in structure – a seeming docudrama based on found footage, without a narrator, using flashbacks (unusual in audio drama) presented partly out of time sequence – but attracting a large audience with a compelling story. [See [Annotated Pilot Script: Scenes 1 & 2](#) in this *Guide* below.]

#### ATYPICAL ARTISTS – *Life with Leo(h)*



<https://www.atypicalartists.co/leoh>

By Octavia Bray (2021). An experiment in adapting the romcom genre from feature film to fiction podcasts. From the producers: *A sci-fi(ish) romantic comedy podcast starring a repressed lawyer, a criminal client, a pesky sister and her fiancée, an infuriatingly sexy coworker, and an android in the mood for love.*

#### INDIE FICTION PODCAST PRODUCTION – *The Bright Sessions* (Season 1, Pilot: Episode 1)



<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-bright-sessions/id1053268058>

By Lauren Shippen (2015). Now in its 6<sup>th</sup> season (2021), proving that simple but carefully placed sfx and high-quality performances can create a successful – and award-winning – fiction podcast series. Selected for *Wired’s* 10 Best Podcasts of 2016 and ranked 19<sup>th</sup> in Apple Drama Podcasts (March 2021 & 8<sup>th</sup> All Time). In development for television. Premise: *A therapist specializes in patients with strange and unusual abilities including time travel.*

The initial production approach mirrored classic – and a staple of Hollywood mythology – low-budget indie film breakthroughs: limited locations & characters, cast drawn from

friends, avoidance of fancy effects, and minimal or “no-budget.” The pilot and early seasons were recorded in Shippen’s bedroom using self-taught technical production skills.

APPLE Podcasts – Fiction

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/genre/podcasts-fiction/id1483>

Audio drama and docudrama offerings from the largest and most user-friendly platform for podcast distribution, ranging from the Golden Age to contemporary productions. Provides an overview of what’s available in the primary marketplace. This also demonstrates how crowded the audio drama world has become: roughly 19,000 audio dramas (Fiction Podcasts) are on offer of which Apple cites 1.3% as “Popular Podcasts.” Options: True Crime (docudrama) and Fiction with subcategories of Comedy, Drama, and SciFi.

SPOTIFY Podcasts – Fiction

<https://www.spotify.com/us/home/>

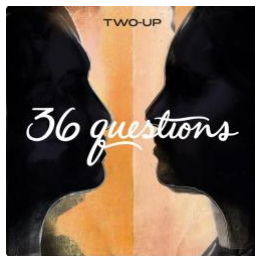
The popular music streaming platform is a good source especially for niche podcasts with small (meaning thousands, not millions) of devoted fans, though it has recently been acquiring podcast production houses (Gimlet Media and others) whose work draws millions of listeners.

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## PODCAST MUSICALS

*The new genre of podcast musicals is in an early period of development and experimentation, drawing on the structure and techniques of contemporary audio drama and docudrama (True Crime). More traditional musical theatre approaches are being explored as well, but the most interesting are reconceiving the book musical (not sung-through) for podcasting. The birth of podcast musicals conceived as audio drama in multiple episodes is credited to 36 Questions with its creators comparing the crafting of the new genre to screenwriting. Producers of the more successful podcast musicals are primarily noted for success in fiction podcasts, though they draw talent from the world of traditional musical theatre. The genre may provide a relatively inexpensive approach to concept demos for stage productions – just as fiction podcasts are seen as pilots for television series development.*

TWO-UP PRODUCTIONS – 36 Questions

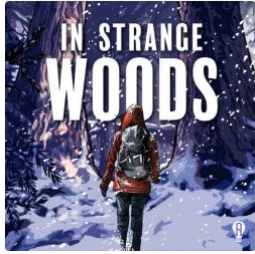


<https://twoupproductions.com/36-questions/podcast>

By Ellen Winter and Chris Littler (2017), from the producers of *Limetown*. Like most stage musicals, it’s structured in three “acts” rather than episodes, but employs audio drama structure, combining substantial ambience and sfx with musical numbers and score. Premise: *A young couple attempts to save their faltering marriage by relying on 36 questions intended to encourage strangers to fall in love.* The influence of audio drama/fiction podcast techniques is substantial.



ATYPICAL ARTISTS – *In Strange Woods*



[https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/in-strange-woods/id1542534548?uo=4&itscg=30200&itsct=podcast\\_box](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/in-strange-woods/id1542534548?uo=4&itscg=30200&itsct=podcast_box)

By Jeff Luppino-Esposito, Brett Ryback, and Matt Sav (2020), from the producer of *The Bright Sessions*. In five episodes and breaking with traditional musical structure. It represents a re-conception of the musical theatre genre for podcasts, using techniques of True Crime audio docudramas. Premise: A young girl searches for her missing brother in the wild forest surrounding her

isolated town.

TOPIC (FIRST LOOK MEDIA) – *Anthem: Homunculus*



<https://luminarypodcasts.com/listen/john-cameron-mitchell-and-bryan-weller-topic/anthem-homunculus/ab4fffb8-7835-4482-8b48-c9898818768f?country=US>

By John Cameron Mitchell and Brian Weller (2019), an example of the rock musical form adapted to podcast in 10 episodes, utilizing substantial ambience and sfx, but preserving much of the rock genre. Premise: A podcaster struggles with the growing tumor eating his brain while attempting to raise funds for the operation that might save his life. The most

high-profile podcast musical to date, coming from the creator of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and featuring Glenn Close, Cynthia Erivo, Laurie Anderson, and Patti LuPone, among others. (Episodes 1 & 2 available free.)

BBC AUDIO DRAMA AWARDS WINNER 2021 – *Magnitsky the Musical*



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000d6yy>

By Johnny Fynn and Robert Hudson (2020), a satirical folk musical semi-docudrama with serious themes. Premise: *The tangled story of Serge Magnitsky's attempts to expose the corruption of Putin's Russia leading to his death in custody and passage of The Magnitsky Act in the US, followed by Russian attempts to trade claimed dirt on Hillary Clinton to the Trump presidential campaign for repeal of the Act.* In a single 01:38:00 episode and

thus a structural outlier among contemporary fiction or nonfiction (docudrama) podcasts.

## CONTEMPORARY AUDIO DOCUDRAMA – PRODUCTIONS

A close relative of “narrative nonfiction” in the publishing business, a style that borrows techniques of mystery and thriller genres to tell factual stories. Despite differences in writing and production, each of these examples is focused on a powerful true story. Most successful audio docudramas focus on crimes, resulting in True Crime becoming a shorthand for the audio docudrama genre.

THIS AMERICAN LIFE: WBEZ (USA: Chicago Public Radio) – *Serial*



<https://serialpodcast.org/season-one>

By Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder (2014), the multiple award-winning podcast series. It demonstrates that music can substitute for elaborate use of sound effects and ambience with a powerful story. Premise: *An amateur investigator attempts to determine if a young man convicted of the murder of a teenage girl is actually the killer.* A narrator-driven story with intercut interviews. It holds the record for one of the most downloaded podcasts (Apple) in the short history of this contemporary form.

ABC (Australia) Podcasts: True Crime – *The Thin Black Line*



<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/thin-black-line/>

By Allan Clarke (2020), notable for its use of environmental ambience and integration of dramatic reconstruction with case recordings. Premise: *An investigative reporter seeks to uncover what led to the death of an Aboriginal teenager in police custody.* The title is a homage to *The Thin Blue Line*, the groundbreaking US feature film that was essentially an audio docudrama with images. Another fine ABC docudrama: Rachel Brown’s *Trace: The Informer – Nicola* (episode 1). Premise: *An investigative reporter tracks down a high-profile criminal defense lawyer now in hiding who also worked as a police informer.* Think *Serial* with the substantial addition of ambience and Sfx. ABC’s priority now is audio docudramas, not drama.

BBC Sounds (UK/Ireland) – *Where is George Gibney?*



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/p08njhrm>

By Mark Horgan and Ciarán Cassidy (2020). Notable for its use of location recording and environmental ambience. Premise: *Investigative reporters attempt to track down a high-profile Irish swim coach and child sexual predator living in the US under an assumed name.* More true crime docudramas from the BBC including the 2018 British Podcast Awards True Crime – Gold winner, *The Assassination* on the murder of Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan’s former Prime Minister:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/zxh4LjPPxRRftGvbtFtsxh/9-true-crime-podcasts-from-bbc-sounds-to-keep-you-up-at-night>

PACIFIC NORTHWEST STORIES (Canada) – *The Black Tapes*



<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-101-a-tale-of-two-tapes-part-i/id997522893?i=1000342806129>

By Alex Reagan (2015). Notable for elaborate use of score, ambience, and on-location recording. Premise: *An investigative reporter seeks to make sense of the world of paranormal research, ghost hunters, and debunkers.* In 2021, ranked #2 in Apple All Time Podcast (Drama) downloads.

NPR (USA) Podcasts: True Crime – *White Lies: The Murder of The Rev. James Reeb*



<https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510343/white-lies>

By Andrew Beck Grace and Chip Brantley (2020), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Audio Reporting. Premise: *Investigative reporters seek to identify the killers of a White minister in a 55-year-old murder case dating from the civil rights era in Selma, Alabama.* NPR has evidenced little interest in audio drama in the years since its success with the *Star Wars* series, but starting in 2019 it began dipping its audio toe into the true crime genre.

RADIO RENTAL ORIGINALS (USA) – *Told a Serial Killer* [episode 2 of the Originals series]

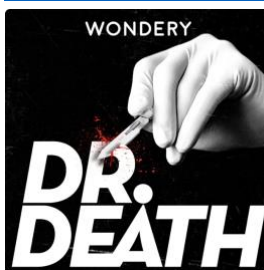


<https://radiorentalusa.com/listen/>

A series of true mysteries named by WBEZ (Chicago) as one of the 20 best podcasts – and only audio drama or docudrama – of 2020. Premise: *A young woman recalls her late-night encounter with a man she later realizes was the serial rapist and killer who had been terrorizing her city.* This episode demonstrates what's possible with a single narrator telling a compelling story with use of a simple score, ambience, and intercuts of news broadcasts related to the tale (episode starts about 04:00 in).

WONDERY (Now an Amazon company) – *Dr. Death*

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/dr-death/id1421573955>



By Laura Beil (2018). Notable for a strong story (typical of docudrama) and complex soundscape of ambience, sfx, and score. Premise: *An investigative reporter exposes how a surgeon was able to harm and kill multiple patients, despite medical oversight that was supposed to be in place.* Continues to rank in the top 20 of True Crime podcasts. Comes with ads.

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## THE GOLDEN AGE OF RADIO DRAMA (USA) – PRODUCTIONS

The success of contemporary high-end audio drama is mostly due to a rediscovery of techniques developed during the Golden Age – late 1930s through the 1950s – including script structure, establishment of locations with sound effects, emphasis on visual storytelling, and “natural” (non-theatrical) acting. By the early 1960s, most radio drama talent including writers, directors, producers, and performers, had migrated to Hollywood’s film and television industries as the “tube” replaced radios as Americans’ primary source of media entertainment.



Golden Age radio dramas were broadcast live with music and sound effects created in real time as the performers (on script) read their parts. Except for technical developments in studio design and equipment, the approach to recording dialogue with has not changed in significant ways.

Left, Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air in rehearsal for the live broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* on the CBS radio network, 1938. Sfx station is out of view.

MERCURY THEATRE ON THE AIR (USA)

– *The War of the Worlds*



[https://soundcloud.com/tp\\_arg\\_okindermann/war-of-the-worlds-radio-broadcast-1938-orson-welles](https://soundcloud.com/tp_arg_okindermann/war-of-the-worlds-radio-broadcast-1938-orson-welles)

Probably the most infamous radio drama ever broadcast in the US and one of the landmarks of the Golden Age, adapted by Orson Welles. Premise: *An easy-listening music program is interrupted with breaking news as reporters on location track the bloody invasion of the East Coast by aliens from another planet.*

Whether it actually spread panic throughout the Northeastern United States is a claim hotly debated by historians.

## OLD TIMER RADIO DOWNLOADS



<https://www.oldtimeradiodownloads.com>

Free streaming of shows in multiple genres from the era, including nearly all the 900+ episodes of *Suspense*, one of the most successful shows – maybe the most successful – of the Golden Age (*The Visitor* – Sept. 18, 1947 – is among the best). The final episode of *Suspense* in 1962 is considered the last gasp of the Golden Age. Sound quality is not what we expect today, but these are still enjoyable and instructive to hear. Also available are four seasons of NPR’s Earplay (recordings are 33rpm transfers, some with noticeable degraded groove noise).

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## AUDIO DRAMA SCRIPT PRACTICE

*Successful fiction and docudrama (True Crime) podcast scripts share characteristics that are helpful to understand when writing for audio. These “rules” are only general tendencies in what is still an evolving entertainment form. But there is one unbreakable rule: In audio drama, we can’t see what we can’t hear.*

**VISUAL STORYTELLING** Audio drama is a form of visual storytelling. Ignore the “fact” that audiences can’t see what’s happening. They can. A combination of subtle clues in dialogue combined with environmental ambience and special effects (sfx) allows us to see the action.

**EPISODIC STORY STRUCTURE** Nearly all successful fiction podcasts and docudramas focus on a single story told over multiple episodes and sometimes over several seasons. A minimum of 6 episodes per season is typical (the equivalent of a 180-page screenplay). Few podcasts extend for more than 2 seasons, though *The Bright Sessions* is entering its 6<sup>th</sup> season, a rare exception relying on an anthology series variant with a continuing central character, but with a new and otherwise unconnected story in each episode. Docudramas (True Crime) tend to have more episodes (10-12) than fiction and are usually told in a single season. In both fiction and docudrama, episodes prior to the final one always ends with a version of a hook (an unresolved inciting incident) – often subtle – that propels us into the next episode.

**EPISODE LENGTH** Podcast streaming has freed audio drama from the time constraints of radio broadcast schedules where episodes were usually required to come in at 27-28 minutes. Fiction episodes now typically run between 20-40 minutes with considerable variation through a season, but most coming in at 25-30 minutes (about 22-27 pages of script in format, allowing for sfx and score). Docudramas tend to have longer episodes occasionally approaching 60 minutes, but with similar variation in episode length within seasons.

**EPISODE “ACTS”** As producers explore ways to monetize fiction podcasts, ad placement within episodes, usually at the midpoint, has led to a tendency to structure episodes in two acts with a hook at the end of the first act to hold listeners through the ad. The two-act structure allows producers to avoid arbitrary ad placement that may confuse or otherwise undercut the listening experience. Mid-point ad insertion is not yet a standard in the distribution business, and fiction or docudrama podcasts with strong plots and typical structure will likely have an appropriate level of tension or suspense at the close of scenes at the approximate midpoint of episodes to support ad insertion.

**SCENE LENGTH** Audio drama borrows typical scene lengths within episodes from screenwriting: scenes tend to be short, usually less than 1 or 2 minutes (one or two pages in format), though unlike film, audio can support extended scenes in the 15- 20-page (minute) range if story tension is compelling. A sort-of rule for scene length in audio drama: *10 minutes is Eternity – 10 seconds is forever.* As in screenwriting, varying the lengths of scenes is typical.

**SCENE TRANSITIONS** Transitions from one scene to the next in audio do not need to be telegraphed to listeners through obvious dialogue references, a technique also utilized in contemporary screenwriting. Environmental ambience and sfx are nearly always capable of signaling the start and location of new scenes. Subtle – and only occasional – hints in dialogue are all that’s necessary for most transitions.

**LOCATIONS** Selecting scene locations with distinct environmental ambience reinforces the visual experience of audio drama and docudrama. Interior scenes with no identifiable ambience can be underscored as a substitute for ambience. Effective script structure separates scenes with locations having similar ambience with an intervening sequence.

**PLOT** Fiction and docudrama podcasts have drawn the largest listener base with strong plots and a continuing sense of tension or suspense. They are primarily plot-driven, not character-driven. Strong plots are among the most effective ways of keeping listeners engaged over a season’s multiple episodes. This is one of the primary distinctions between audio drama and live theatre where successful plays nearly always focus on character-driven stories with minimal plots.

**POINT OF ATTACK** As with contemporary film, television, and stage plays, audio drama relies on a late point of attack: the moment in the history of the story where the tale begins to be told. Extended introductions are not necessary though if narrators are used, they can provide a brief (usually not more than 15-20 seconds) commentary incorporating the initial the hook.

**INCITING INCIDENT (HOOK)** Most audio drama features an early hook that introduces the main plot – the reason we should keep listening – sharing this structural feature with screenwriting. Typically, the hook comes within the first three pages of script in format, and often within the first 10-15 seconds. As in film, the hook can be a mild hint of what’s to come if it’s followed by a building of tension.

**CHARACTER COUNTS** While fiction and docudrama scripts can feature multiple characters, nearly all rely on a two-character limit per scene (two-handers). More than two characters creates clarity issues for listeners unless there are noticeable differences in the vocal tones of performers.

**DIALOGUE** Fiction and docudrama podcasts thrive on a close personal connection between listener and a central character. While millions may be listening, the most successful productions establish a level of one-on-one intimacy. That requires dialogue similar to what’s typical in screenwriting rather than the theatrical or stylized dialogue that works well in live theatre: short, natural dialogue that mirrors speech patterns and word choices typical of conversational usage. Because of the intimate nature of audio drama, characters can be given extended dialogue as part of a “conversation” if a noticeable level of (usually understated) tension is present in the scene. We *see* characters when they talk to each other. Environmental ambience and sfx are a far more effective way of showing us where characters are and what they’re doing than obvious hints in dialogue.

**PROTAGONISTS** The most successful podcasts – both fiction and docudrama – are structured around a strong and empathetic central character, encouraging an emotional connection with

listeners. A very informal survey suggests 60% of the most successful fiction and docudrama podcasts rely on female protagonist vs. formal research results showing 23% for female protagonists in US feature film.

**NARRATORS** Narration by a single character (an internal narrator), nearly always the central character, works well in audio drama and is the dominant approach in docudrama (True Crime). The most convincing narrators speak in an informal conversational style, making that the governing rule for their written dialogue, and establishing an intimate connection with listeners. Narrators can be given extended monologues – they’re storytellers so we’ll accept their descriptions of what they see. External narrators (announcers who are not characters) are rarely used now except for opening content warnings.

**SILENCE** A short absence of dialogue in story sequences is typical in film and television where visual images and sound continue telling the story. In audio drama, silence can work equally well, but the duration of those silences needs to be far shorter. That “rule” again: *10 seconds is forever in audio.*

## A CHECKLIST FOR WRITING FICTION PODCASTS

- Strong Plot
  - Single Story Told in Multiple Episodes
    - Episode Timing: 30-minute Ave. (Range: ~20- 40-min.)
    - 6-8 Episodes
    - Extensive Story(= 180-240pg Screenplay per season)
    - Seasons: Usually 2 (Anthology Series: No limit)
  - Opening Scenes of Episode 1 of Season 1 (S1 E1): Critical to engaging listeners
  - Late Point of Attack (Far into history of story)
  - Early Hook: Pg. 1 Typical (Pg. 3 Max.)
  - Multiple Suspense Plot Reminders
  - Internal Scenes & Episodes End with Hook to Next
- Strong & Empathetic Protagonist
  - Often on Quest for Understanding/Truth
  - Protagonists in successful productions: Female 60% vs. 23% in Feature Film
- Visual Storytelling
  - *We Can't See What We Can't Hear*
  - Minimal (& Subtle) Dialogue References to Location & Action
  - Select Locations for Ambience
    - Specify Interior and Exterior Ambience
    - Occasional Short Scenes without Ambience OK (Not opening scenes)
  - New Scenes Signaled by Ambience Change
    - Abrupt Cuts Standard (as Screenwriting)
    - Dialogue Transitions Rarely Used
- Non-Theatrical (Conversational) Dialogue
  - Short lines (as Screenwriting)
  - Minimal (& Subtle) Exposition (Explicit for Narrators)
  - Subtext Needed with Character-Centered Plots
- Two-Hander Scenes Predominate
  - Extended Monologues with Interruptions OK if Late in Season
  - Extended "Conversations" with Minimal Conflict OK if Late in Season
    - 15- 20-minute Max.
    - Works if Strong Prior Conflict & Listener ID with Central Character
- Optional Internal Narrator (Central character only)
- No External Narrators
- No Episode Recaps (Trust your listeners.)
- Story Concepts Often Incorporate Recording Technology
- Flashbacks Rarely Used
- "Unlimited" Characters: Max Range Episode 1 = 14-26 (2-5 Minimum)
- Exceptions for Docudrama:
  - Subtext: Less Important, but Possible for Investigative Targets
  - Episode Length: Max. 60-min.
  - Episodes Quantity: 14 Max. in Single Season (2 Seasons Max.)



## ANNOTATED AUDIO DRAMA SCRIPT EXCERPT

PILOT SCRIPT – *Homecoming* (Scenes 1 & 2)

Opening scenes of the pilot script by Micah Bloomberg and Eli Horowitz, originally written as a test of story concepts and structure. Annotations include time structure, scene length, key plot points, ambience and sfx placement, and dialogue revisions in production:

# HOME COMING

## EPISODE ONE SCENE 1

*We hear the <sup>sfx</sup> sound of fumbling as a recorder is started, catching Heidi in mid-sentence.*

SCENE 1A  
Time: "Now"

HEIDI: —es, hello, are you Walter?

Identifying characters

WALTER: Yeah, hi, Heidi?

SCENE 1B  
Time: Then  
(4 years  
earlier - 2017)

HEIDI: Yep, come in, lemme just... <sup>sfx</sup> Is it okay if I record this? For my reference?

Inciting Incident (Hook):  
early & subtle

WALTER: Sure.

Clarifying sfx: not obvious  
identifiable sound but  
unnecessary -  
Cut for production

HEIDI: Okay, great. <sup>sfx</sup> *(She fiddles with the recorder some more)* I got this new digital recorder, it's a little bit... bewildering.

*A short lull, during which <sup>sfx</sup> a bubbling sound is heard.*

Ambience - essential for audio -  
runs under entire  
Scene 1B

~~HEIDI: Hm. Seems to be working.~~ Cut for production

WALTER: Is that an aquarium?

Identifying ambience because  
"bubbling" sound doesn't  
read as "aquarium"  
unlike "rain" or "wind"

*Walter taps on the glass.* <sup>sfx</sup>

HEIDI: That? Yes.

WALTER: You like fish?

HEIDI: No, it was here. The guy I replaced, he liked fish, I think.

WALTER: Huh.

HEIDI: You see this hose that's pointed right at them? <sup>sfx</sup> *(fiddles with aquarium tubes)* See how it's bubbling? I can't tell if they like it or if it's making them uncomfortable.

Ambience explained again:  
becomes associated  
with Heidi's office

~~WALTER: Like, if they're enjoying it?~~

Cut for production

~~HEIDI: Yeah.~~

WALTER: I don't think fish... enjoy things.

~~HEIDI: Huh. Yeah. You're probably right.~~ Cut for production

Short silences in dialogue work well with ambience

*They both watch the fish and listen to the sound of the aquarium for a moment.*

~~HEIDI: They're like these... little pieces of pasta. Except they can see.~~ Cut for production

~~WALTER: Hm. Yeah. Noodlefish.~~ Cut for production

*A small laugh from both.*

Character direction: use rarely & only if essential for plot

HEIDI: *(Turning more professional)* Okay, why don't we sit down.

*They sit down.* sfx: chairs

= speaking close "on" mic

HEIDI: *(Speaking directly into the recorder)* Today is... April 10th, 2017, at 9:20 am. Speaking with Homecoming client Walter Cruz. This is week one, session one. I'm Heidi Bergman, EID 101078, and we are in my office, at the facility.

Hook (Suspense Plot) & Unresolved inciting incident (mild) pushing us into Scene 2

Note: No dialogue transition to Scene 2

End SCENE 1A/1B  
### 1.7 pgs

New scene with new ambience

sfx

Away from "off" mic

SCENE 2  
Time: "Now"

*Sounds of a restaurant, a busy diner. A kitchen bell rings. Heidi calls out an order.*

HEIDI: Added dialogue for production - 3 lines, taking order (female patron at table) + sfx: footsteps

HEIDI: Order in! Spaghetti meatball, chop salad, chicken club.

Off mic

*A cook calls from the kitchen.*

Order edited for production: "Patty melt, onion rings, Ceasar salad" + another customer asking for a Coke

COOK: ~~Spaghetti meatball, chop salad, chicken club, working.~~ "Order in." Tightens scene

DARA: Hey, Heidi?

HEIDI: What's up?

DARA: That guy in the booth asked for his check.

HEIDI: Okay, got it.

Short dialogue  
works most  
effective in  
audio

DARA: Oh, also — is there any way you could take my shift on Sunday? Kevin wants me to go to his church.

HEIDI: ~~Sunday~~? Sure. You go to church?

DARA: ~~I do~~ now, apparently.

Off mic

Mix of ambience + multiple sfx  
+ indistinct dialogue

sfx: footsteps

*Moving through restaurant, sounds and conversations come and go. Heidi arrives at a booth; she writes out a check, tears it out of her pad, and sets it on the table.*

sfx: footsteps stops

sfx

HEIDI: How was everything here?

CARRASCO: Wonderful. Delicious.

HEIDI: All set with these?

CARRASCO: Uh huh, all finished.

HEIDI: Great.

*Heidi collects the dishes, stacking plates, putting the silverware on top.*

Multiple sfx

CARRASCO: Heidi? That's your name?

HEIDI: Yup, just like the name tag says.

CARRASCO: ~~This place is retro, huh? All-American?~~

Helping us "see" location  
[unnecessary with  
identifiable ambience -  
Cut for production]

HEIDI: Yeah, or maybe just old. ————— Cut for production

CARRASCO: ~~Very charming.~~ You been working here long?

HEIDI: About four years, I guess. Is that long?  
*Explaining time structure of story*

CARRASCO: ~~And, sorry,~~ are you Heidi *Bergman*? That's your last name, right?  
*Intensification of tension from Scene 1B hook*

HEIDI: Uh, yes. Do I—  
*Italic = vocal emphasis for plot point (use rarely)*

CARRASCO: I'm Thomas Carrasco. I'm with the Department of Defense?

HEIDI: Are you asking me if you're with the Department of Defense?

CARRASCO: No, I am. You're Heidi Bergman? You worked at the Homecoming Initiative?  
*Intro of suspense plot*

*Long pause*

HEIDI: Well... Yes, years ago. What's this about?

CARRASCO: I just have a few questions for you.

HEIDI: ~~Oh,~~ I don't... "have time to..."  
*Intensifying suspense plot [Exchange tightened with overlapping dialogue - increasing tension - for production]*

CARRASCO: How long did you—"work at the Homecoming Initiative"

HEIDI: Wait, can we—I get a break. Can we talk outside?

CARRASCO: Sure. Now?

HEIDI: Yes. Fine. Let me just—

CARRASCO: I'll meet you out there? Right outside?

HEIDI: Yes, I'll be right there.  
*Unresolved inciting incident pushing us into Scene 3*

###

End Scene 2  
2.2 pgs - Scenes 1 & 2 are different lengths

## AUDIO WRITING & PRODUCTION

*Writers don't need to know how to produce audio dramas, but as with screenwriting or playwriting, an understanding of the basics is essential to crafting compelling scripts. Given the relatively low entry barriers to audio production now – at least in comparison to television and film – it's also a more practical area for writers to make the transition to what the industry calls hyphenates: writer-producers. Standard advice today for fiction podcast writers and producers: If distributors aren't interested, self-produce.*

## RECORDING STUDIOS



<https://www.westlakestudios.com/>

Westlake (left: Studio E) is among Hollywood's leading recording studios for music, feature film post-production, and the venue used for the *Star Wars Radio Series* dialogue recording. Typical of studios used for production of high-end fiction podcasts when major performers (film/tv stars) are cast. In recording studios, time is money, so a general rule:

A well-planned dialogue recording session for an audio drama episode in the 30:00 range should only require a single eight-hour recording day with a break for lunch. Postproduction time (mixing of dialogue, sfx, score) depends on the complexity of sound, but typically requires a five-day maximum, assuming an experienced audio engineer for dialogue recording and an accomplished sound designer for postproduction. Podcasting has led to the opening of smaller (and less expensive) recording studios that are a good alternative for dialogue recording and postproduction. Headroom (now Plush) is typical – <https://plushnyc.com/about/#space> – the studio used for *Limetown*.

## AUDIO DRAMA PRODUCTION LAYERS

As with film and television, audio drama is assembled in layers of sound. For audio drama, the soundscape (ambience, sfx, and score) underlying dialogue is especially critical. The typical order:

1. **DIALOGUE** The most effective performance style for audio features unhurried, natural delivery, seemingly effortless. Theatre performers without film or television experience will usually require coaching to realize they will be speaking quietly into our ears and not – as in theatre – stylizing their performance to be intelligible to audiences in the back rows and balconies.
2. **SFX** Non-verbal sounds caused by characters: doors opening/closing, walking, handling objects, etc. May be recorded live with performers to save studio time, but limits editing options in postproduction if sfx are not recorded in isolation from performers. Prerecorded sfx of human-related sounds may seem easier to manage than live sfx but can be less effective – and less convincing to listeners – than sfx created during dialogue recording, though an experienced sfx (Foley) artist with access to live sfx paraphernalia is necessary. Performer voices may also be altered during recording or in postproduction with technical (computer) sfx to suggest altered voices heard from a phone, radio, or in an environment with echo (large empty rooms/buildings, tunnels, etc.).
3. **AMBIENCE** Environmental sounds establishing location: wind, rain, ocean waves, traffic, trains, etc. As with sfx, can be recorded live with the same postproduction limitations. Prerecorded ambience can work well for productions produced in a studio environment.
4. **SCORE** Usually composed music, but can be mixed non-musical sounds, added in postproduction to enhance emotion, tension, or suspense. Can substitute for ambience.

Sound in audio drama plays the same role cinematography (and sound) does in feature film production and poor execution of either can undermine the best script.

WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA (WGA-East) – *The On Writing Guide to Crafting Scripted Podcasts*

<https://www.wgaeast.org/onwriting/scripted-podcast-guide-part-one/>

Despite the title, Part One focuses on avenues for production funding, contracts, protecting IP (intellectual property), and production opportunities. Features Alicia Van Couvering (producer of *Homecoming* podcast and its TV adaptation) and Zack Akers (co-creator of *Limetown*) – two of the most successful episodic fiction podcasts of the last decade – in a 2019 podcast with transcript. *Part Two* focuses on writing audio fiction scripts with a short discussion on producing and casting fiction podcasts: <https://www.wgaeast.org/onwriting/scripted-podcast-guide-part-two/>

AUDACITY – Audio Production Software

<https://www.audacityteam.org>

Free open-source software (100 Million downloads claimed to date) for podcast and audio drama production. Like all software for production or formatting – and no matter how intuitive they may become with use – it’s essential to read the instructions and do the tutorials prior to beginning a real project.

BBC – Sound Effects Library

<https://sound-effects.bbcrewind.co.uk/>

An extensive, searchable, and high-quality library of sfx (over 32,000) available as free downloads for noncommercial use; license fees apply for commercial production. Also offers a soundscape tool for assembling multiple tracks for ambience.

freeSFX

<https://www.freesfx.co.uk>

A free database of sound effects, including music tracks for underscoring. There are also a number of pay-to-play sfx sites that should be approached with caution – many of these offer previews so test with your ears before purchasing or subscribing.

FOLEY ARTISTS [sfx]

[https://youtu.be/U\\_tqB4IZvMk](https://youtu.be/U_tqB4IZvMk)



An intro to the techniques of Foley artists from the (US) Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. An excellent overview of sfx techniques originally created for radio drama during the Golden Age and still used in high-end fiction podcast and Hollywood feature film production (where it’s referred to as *Foley*). Also a good Foley summary, including a section on the groundbreaking sfx created for the first *Star Wars* film and used in the original *Star Wars Radio Series*: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foley\\_\(filmmaking\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foley_(filmmaking))

## BINAURAL (Immersive Sound) Recording



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b06nr54x>

BBC Radio 3 Between the Ears: *The Sheep of Art*, a semi-docudrama by Chris Stuart and Alexandra Harris – the binaural effect becomes pronounced 01:50 in. (Left, a BBC binaural recording head with microphones located in the ears.)

Binaural – also known as *3D sound* or in the UK as *spatial audio* – replicates the impact of the human head shape on hearing, creating the impression of 3D sound environments. Particularly effective in location (non-studio) recording, but listeners must use earpods or headphones for its full impact. It's now being used regularly in audio drama and docudrama. For an overview of binaural recording: The *BBC Academy Guide: What is Spatial Audio?* <https://www.bbc.com/academy-guides/spatial-audio-where-do-i-start>

## FICTION PODCAST DISTRIBUTION – Cover Art, Trailers, & Episode Releases



In the early days (six years ago) of fiction and docudrama podcasts, graphic design for covers was little more than an afterthought as in those for *Homecoming*, *Serial*, and *Limetown*. That's changed significantly as newer podcasts battle for ear-time in this competitive landscape. More recent cover design mirrors approaches typical of the music industry for album, CD, and streaming covers. (Left: Cover for Yhane Washington Smith's *Harlem Queen*.)

Fiction Trailers, borrowed from film and TV PR practice, generally run less than 3-minutes and are dropped about two weeks prior to release of Episode 1. Subsequent episodes are dropped on a weekly basis. For an excellent introduction to covers, see Meredith Reed's *Designing Podcast Cover Art*: <https://ossacollective.com/designing-podcast-cover-art-a-step-by-step-guide-for-beginning-podcasters/>

## CHARTABLE – Apple Podcasts (USA) Drama

<https://chartable.com/charts/itunes/us-drama-podcasts>

Rankings by US listener/download numbers of fiction podcasts (Apple *Drama* category). Also gives rankings for many other countries and genres, providing a gauge of audience interests.

## PODCAST INTEREST GROUPS – Production & Distribution

Given the ever-expanding number of fiction podcasts available now via Apple Podcasts and other sources, the field is beginning to see the emergence of interest groups offering support to members, highlighting their productions, and offering professional online communities.

- Air Media – Community of independent audio producers. Offers a range of fiction podcast workshops ranging from budgeting to sound design (\$100 annual membership fee (much less for students) includes free access to workshops; current non-member workshop fee: \$10 each) <https://airmedia.org/>
- Black Audio Drama Exists <https://msha.ke/blkaudiodramas/>
- Pod People – Production services & roster of audio production freelancers <https://www.podpeople.com/>
- Audio Drama Hub – Facebook Group for audio creators, performers, tech personnel (4.3K+ members) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/AudioDramaHub>



- Audio Drama (Radio Drama) Lovers – Another Facebook group catering to practitioners, a good source for advice. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/audiodramaradiodramalovers>
- The Podcast Academy – A version of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for podcasts including the annual Ambies awards in multiple categories (membership and \$100 entry fees). <https://www.thepodcastacademy.com/>

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## MONETIZING AUDIO DRAMA & DOCUDRAMA PODCASTS

*Production of fiction and docudrama podcasts continues to be a labor of love, though success as a writer may provide a path into film and television. As of 2021, nobody has discovered a sustainable model for monetizing audio fiction other than selling a successful title for development as a television series. Most of these options, when successful, generate enough income to cover production costs of future episodes. Among the possibilities being explored on the money side of this business – or what hopes to become a business:*

**AD PLACEMENT** Everyone ranging from the BBC to US commercial and indie podcast producers has been trying ads placed at the opening of shows (annoying, but probably necessary) and in the middle of episodes (even more annoying but with less chance of listeners abandoning the show). The BBC who only can – or is only willing to – place ads on podcast downloads outside the UK, appears not to have found a market. Commercial US producers like Wondery (*Dr. Death, Blood Ties*), are placing multiple ads in episodes, bringing back the worst days of ad-supported commercial television, but listeners continue to make Wondery’s true crime podcasts among the most popular. Whether podcast listeners are happy to accept ads or are simply making active use of the skip-forward feature is unknown.

**NOVELIZATIONS** An approach borrowed from the Hollywood franchise film business. Current Amazon sales rankings of novelizations for *Limetown* (marginal), *Welcome to Night Vale* (good), and *The Bright Sessions* (strong) suggest this is an option with potential. *The Bright Sessions* began release of a YA/Teen trilogy spinoff in 2020 with high-ranking sales.

**LIVE EVENT SPINOFFS** *Welcome to Night Vale* has had success with this approach, at least prior to the coronavirus pandemic. The current charge for live-streamed *Night Vale* shows is \$5. A large audience already exists for live spoken word shows developed by *The Moth* (\$15 streaming tickets) and other presenters over the past decade.

**SUBSCRIPTIONS & CROWD FUNDING** Listener subscriptions (usually voluntary) and crowd funding appear to provide modest levels of support – sufficient to fund further episodes – if the listener base is large enough (ideally millions, not thousands). Most successful subscription approaches have no paywall for main season episodes with subscribers offered access to bonus episodes, interviews, and first look/listening of new episodes prior to general release. A producer of a podcast musical currently offers access to 8 of 10 episodes (the first two are free) for a required \$35 annual subscription or you can binge all 10 episodes for free by selecting the \$5 monthly payment plan and cancelling within 7 days – effectiveness unknown. Spotify will begin beta testing

of paid podcast subscriptions in Spring 2021, as will Apple, sharing revenue with producers, saying research shows that “really engaged and dedicated audiences” will provide financial support for podcasts they love. Apple will take a 30% bite out of subscription revenue.

**TICKET SALES** Selling tickets for access to streaming podcast seasons has been tried by US regional theatres for audio adaptations of produced stage plays: in 2020, a five-episode adaptation offered with a nine-month streaming window set tickets at \$20, but the following year a second adaptation from the same theatre with a five-month streaming window had free tickets, suggesting \$20 was not a viable price point, at least for audio adaptations of stage plays.

**TELEVISION SERIES DEVELOPMENT** The only viable approach to date for monetization with odds better than being struck by lightning, is selling proven podcast concepts to commercial studios for television series development. It’s likely that as fiction podcast listener numbers continue to grow, we’ll see growth in options for development.

**SALE OF PRODUCTION COMPANIES** Indie podcast production companies with several successful shows are becoming attractive acquisitions for larger players in the media business. To date, this is the approach that generates the largest financial return, at least for the founders. The acquisition of Gimlet (*Homecoming*) by Spotify is the posterchild for this.

## CONTRACTS & SCALES FOR AUDIO WRITING

*As of 2021, the Dramatists Guild (DG) and Writers Guild of America (WGA)-West have deferred to WGA-East for the development and negotiation with producers of contract terms and scales for audio drama/fiction and nonfiction (docudrama) writers. The WGA-East initiative may help prevent well-funded commercial producers (AKA Hollywood) from taking advantage of the current no-rules situation for audio writers. The first WGA agreement for fulltime nonfiction podcast employees was established in April 2021 with Spotify, now the owner of Gimlet Media (Homecoming) and The Ringer. Non-fiction minimums established in the initial agreement with Gimlet range from \$73,000 for entry level associated producers to \$125,000 for editors. Fiction practice continues to be handled as freelance work with significant increases in pay rates over the past year, coinciding with the increasing popularity of fiction podcasts.*

### WGA-EAST AUDIO ALLIANCE

<https://www.wgaeast.org/wgaaudio/>

The primary source for developments on audio writing (fiction and nonfiction podcast) contracts and pay. Follow on Twitter: @WGAAudio. A caution from the WGA: *While large platforms and production companies initially looked to film, television, theater, and the literary world for new writers, they are increasingly approaching indie audio fiction writers about their work. Writers are often alone in these negotiations with powerful corporations, agencies, and networks, and as a result, they may end up accepting terms and conditions that are well below the industry standard – or that are wholly disadvantageous to the writer.*

WGA-EAST – *Five Ways to Optimize Your Audio Fiction Contract*

<https://www.wgaeast.org/WGAAudio/optimize-your-contract/>

A brief but solid introduction to contract issues for media writers. Audio drama/fiction podcasts are the newest element of the media industry – that’s film and television, not live theatre. If you’re coming to audio fiction from playwriting, control of your words will be significantly different from what playwrights assume (and producers accept) in the world of theatre. Contract issues covered include deal structure, copyright & work for hire, essential questions to resolve, and clarifications of deal terms. The Guild offers free contract advice to indie (non-WGA member) audio writers (email address listed).

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## TERMINOLOGY FOR AUDIO DRAMA

*A short glossary for those new to audio drama.*

**GOLDEN AGE OF RADIO DRAMA** The period of major US production of radio drama from roughly 1938 through the 1950s when millions of listeners tuned into more than 200 programs aired by the broadcast networks, mostly comedy, crime, superhero, and thriller, some with as many as 900 episodes.

**RADIO DRAMA** Now generally referring in the US to productions from the Golden Age. The BBC continues to use the term since most of its audio drama and docudrama productions are broadcast over its radio channels in addition to podcast release, but has begun to use audio drama as an alternate term.

**FICTION PODCASTS** The current term of art for audio drama to distinguish it from docudrama (also referred to as *scripted fiction*), recognizing that the vast majority of listeners now stream audio productions for personal listening using earpods or headphones via podcast distribution sites.

**TRUE CRIME** A term for the dominant form of docudrama, since the vast majority of recent productions focus on crime. Docudrama – as opposed to traditional documentary – borrows the techniques of mystery and thriller genres to imbue true stories with dramatic tension. Also referred to as *Nonfiction*.

**SOUND DESIGNER** Conveys with the director the overall sound landscape (soundscape) of a production and oversees integration of dialogue tracks, sfx including ambience, and score in postproduction.

**AUDIO ENGINEER** Also referred to as a Recording Engineer. Sets up and tests microphones, isolation booths, and other recording equipment in a studio or on location and operates the recording console.

**SOUNDSCAPE** The mix of environmental ambience and sound effects, often including score, that underlies dialogue in audio drama and docudrama.

SFX Sound effects (sfx) such as footsteps, doors opening/closing, cars starting, objects handled by characters, etc. Known as *Foley* in feature film production and increasingly in audio drama. Poor sfx quality will undermine the best audio scripts in the same way that poor cinematography (and sound) can undercut a strong screenplay.

AMBIENCE A subset of sfx, establishing the environmental location of scenes such as wind, rain, ocean surf, traffic, machinery, etc. An essential ingredient of audio drama.

SCORE As in film and TV, most often music used to enhance emotion, tension, or suspense. Can also be composed of mixed non-musical sounds and may substitute for ambience in production.

TIMING Audio timing is represented in the format hours:minutes:seconds (as in 01:29:25). Since nearly all fiction and docudrama episodes run less than an hour, timing indication may only be in minutes:seconds (as in 26:04).

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## AUDIO DRAMA SCRIPT FORMATS

*There is no consensus now on script format for audio drama in the US unlike the near-strict formats for film, television, and to a lesser extent, theatre (the BBC is far more insistent on audio format). As US commercial studios increasingly move into development and production of fiction and docudrama podcasts, they evidence little interest in what formats audio writers use. That lack of interest will likely change as audio fiction and docudrama continue to generate large audiences, encouraging the entry of an increasing number of Hollywood and international production companies to the field.*

*Double spacing of dialogue is a notable feature of existing audio format since nearly all audio drama is recorded with performers reading from scripts following minimal rehearsal to control talent and studio costs. As with film, television, and stage play formats, one of the essential purposes is to provide a rough measure of performance timing of one minute per page.*

## FORMATTING SOFTWARE

Industry standard formatting programs, mostly designed for screenplays and teleplays, like Final Draft (FD) do not offer audio drama script templates, though that may change with the growing popularity of fiction podcasts and the trend toward commercial studio production. WriterDuet (WD) offers an option of customizable templates that can be set up for your choice of audio format (see Word template settings below). If you're using standard templates in FD, WD, or similar programs, screenplay format is preferable since it gives a far more accurate estimate of time in audio scripts than stage play format. It is likely that screenplay format will become the standard for podcast fiction scripts, driven by ease of revision, the visual storytelling typical of audio drama, workable timing estimates of one minute per page, and the wide use of industry standard formatting programs like Final Draft in film and television.

Note that the single-spacing of dialogue in screenplay and teleplay formats may complicate the minimal rehearsal typical of audio drama production.

#### SCRIPT FORMAT – Title Page & Character Page

The Title Page for audio drama is a duplicate of what's used in screenplays, teleplays, and stage plays. In audio drama, a Character Page is only included in complex scripts – as in Amanda Dalton's *Caligari* (see BBC Writers Room) – to assist producers. Following is the Character Page for Colin Teevan's *How Many Miles to Basra*, among the more complex audio scripts produced recently by the BBC:

Characters:

Ursula  
Stewart  
Freddie  
Dangermouse  
Geordie  
Malek  
Gus  
Janet  
Sayed  
First Bandit  
Second Bandit  
News Reader on BBC World Service  
Sheikh of the Kuffa Family.  
Jeannie

The speech in italics is that taken from interviews that have been done at four separate times. These times are as followed and marked with the relevant symbols.

# MARCH 17/03/03– DAYTIME - IN THE EQUIPMENT HANGAR AT THE  
BASE CAMP IN SAUDI ARABIA

\*APRIL 11/04/03 – DAYTIME - IN A TENT – FORWARD OPERATING BASE  
ON IRAQ/KUWAIT BORDER NEAR BASRA

<APRIL 15/04/03 – EARLY AFTERNOON - NEAR THE VEHICLE  
CHECKPOINT IRAQ ON DESERT ROAD TO JALIBAH

– APRIL 15/04/03 – LATE AFTERNOON – NEAR THE VEHICLE CHECKPOINT  
IRAQ ON DESERT ROAD TO JALIBAH WHILE TIDYING UP THE INCIDENT  
SITE AND STEWART DECIDES WHAT TO DO.

~APRIL 15/04/03 – NIGHT-TIME – BASRA/AL AMARAH ROAD DURING A  
PITSTOP/TEABREAK

> THE DESERT 16/04/03– NIGHTTIME. A SANDSTORM HOWLING ONLY  
SLIGHTLY LESS. THE CONVERSATION, IN CONTRAST, IS EXTREMELY  
INTIMATE. URSULA AND STEWART ARE FACE TO FACE.

^APRIL 17/04/03 – EVENING – DESERT NEAR A MA’ADAN HUT

US AUDIO SCRIPT FORMAT TEMPLATE – Dialogue Pages

<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts/radious.pdf>

Link to the BBC’s US template, useful if you’re curious or working with producers associated with US public broadcasting (NPR affiliate stations) who may still prefer this old-style format. If you’re asked to use the format, ignore the numbering of speeches and technical directions in early drafts: numbering is helpful in production but makes script revision difficult (numbering of

dialogue and tech lines starts over from 1 on each new page). Most US audio writers use screenplay or teleplay format or their own variation of BBC audio drama format (see below).

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SCRIPT FORMAT SHEET – BBC Dialogue Pages

<http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts/bbcradioscene.pdf>

Link is to the format including Title Page for BBC “scene style” (audio fiction/radio drama). Few BBC audio writers use all of the BBC format. Like US format, it’s a leftover from the days of typewriters and is not easily handled by word processing programs. See discussion of BBC writers’ practice below.

SCENE 1.

SCENE STYLE IS THE BBC'S HOUSE FORMAT  
GENERALLY USED FOR DRAMA, PLAYS AND  
NON-AUDIENCE COMEDY. TECHNICAL  
DIRECTIONS FOR SOUND AND MUSIC APPEAR IN  
CAPITALS UNDERLINED TO DISTINGUISH THEM  
FROM DIALOGUE. OPTIONAL SCENE NUMBERS  
AND HEADINGS INDICATE THE START OF A NEW  
SEQUENCE. A SEQUENCE IN A RADIO PLAY  
MIGHT BE ONE LINE LONG OR LAST FOR 20  
PAGES. AND CAN BE ANYTHING FROM A  
MONOLOGUE TO A COLLECTION OF BRIEF  
SCENES OR SOUND EFFECTS.

CHARACTER #1: Character names appear in all capitals with a colon. A character is designated by either their first or last name, but a role designation may be used instead with personal titles abbreviated. The designated character name should remain consistent throughout the entire script.

CHARACTER #2: Dialogue begins on the same line as the character name in normal upper and lower-case text with double-spacing.

IF TECHNICAL DIRECTION INTERRUPTS A  
CHARACTER'S SPEECH ON THE SAME PAGE...

Then continue the dialogue without repeating the character name.

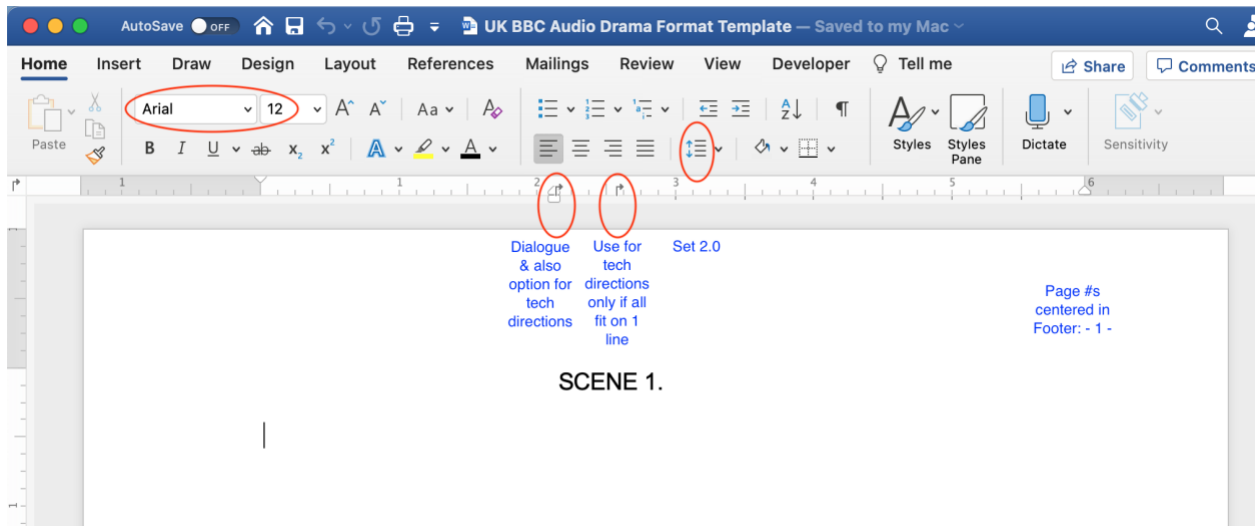
CHARACTER #1: Split dialogue between pages only if at least two lines appear on the first page, and only after a sentence.

(CHARA #1/CONT'D OVER)



## BBC SCRIPT FORMAT TEMPLATE – Dialogue Pages

BBC writers rarely use all of the “required” BBC radio play format because the indent specified for technical directions is difficult (and annoying) to replicate in word processing programs. That said, the writer who came closest to using the full format over the past several years was the winner of the first BBC Writers Prize (Sarah Hehir for *Bang Up*). The solution used by BBC writers: technical directions are either aligned far left with character names or indented with dialogue (in CAPS with or without underlining and sometimes in **bold**). Also usually ignored: the 4-space insert between characters’ dialogue. *What does not change from the format sheet:* font & size, character name placement, dialogue indent and width of lines, and double spacing. The template shows the Word settings for the BBC format:



### RICK TOSCAN’S

AUDIO DRAMAS have been broadcast by the BBC (Radio 1 & World Service), ABC (Australia), CBC (Canada), and in the US by Pacifica and NPR. He was executive producer and story editor of the original 13-episode *Star Wars Radio Series* for Lucasfilm, the BBC, and NPR, the first contemporary audio drama to attract significant audiences in the US and a production credited with increasing the audience for public radio in America by 40%. Other audio adaptations include work by Raymond Chandler, Damon Knight, and Ed Bullins, and docudramas on the Vietnam War and psychoanalytic case histories. He was an Armstrong Award nominee for Creative Use of the Radio Medium and a founding member of First Stage, the Los Angeles new play development program. His [Playwriting Seminars 2.0: A Handbook on the Art & Craft of Dramatic Writing with an Introduction to Screenwriting](#) is a widely used resource in the field.

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