

A ten-stage guide to good practice in working relations between writers and producer-directors.

BBC Radio Drama has a long tradition of working with writers on productions which both serve the artistic team's creative ambition and satisfy the highest production standards. A writer and producer may work together on a number of productions over time, and it is also likely that a successful radio dramatist can expect to work with several producers over the years. No writer/producer is the exclusive 'property' of an individual producer/writer, however fruitful the relationship, and no producer is obliged to pursue new projects with any particular writer should circumstances, interests or artistic approaches differ.

There are several stages in the production of each drama, and at each stage it is important to engage in what is considered good practice in this important and exciting working relationship between writer and producer. These principles are based on collaboration, courtesy and mutual respect between producer and writer.

Good practice will of course overlap with the requirements of the *BBC Radio Drama Agreement* (RDA) and where relevant this is referred to below.

Stage 1: PROSPECTIVE OFFERS

Any writer may approach any producer regarding a prospective project (and vice versa). The producer should indicate his/her general interest (or not) within two weeks of the first interchange between writer/producer, so that, if necessary, the writer can try elsewhere.

Writers should not attempt to take the same idea through to offer stage with more than one producer at the same time. Producers should be aware that writers may be discussing different projects with more than one producer in-house and/or Independents. It is good practice for writers to inform producers if the prospective project has previously been offered elsewhere.

Producers should inform writers if any of their proposals have been rejected at a pre-offers stage within two weeks of the close of the pre-offers round.

Stage 2: OFFERS

If an idea is offered, the writer can often (not invariably) be asked, for no fee, to write about 150 words for the preliminary discussion and up to two A4 pages for a final offer; more if a project consists of several episodes. The formulation of the offer to commissioners is the responsibility of the producer and the producer may change the detail of the offer, particularly if the idea originated with the producer. It is good practice for the producer to show the copy to the writer before submitting it. In any event, producers should invariably inform writers which of their proposals have been offered and are therefore under active consideration within two weeks of the close of the offers round.

Stage 3: THE COMMISSIONING ROUND

Following the results of a commissioning round, the producer should undertake to inform the writer within two weeks of the close of the round, whether or not his/her work has been commissioned, together with all relevant feedback. The writer should not have to chase the producer for this information.

Stage 4: DRAFTS

In most cases, the producer also acts as script editor/dramaturg. The exact method of progress towards an accepted script will vary with each project and between producers. However, there are some general guidelines:

- a) The cast-size parameters as dictated by the budget should be conveyed to the writer before the writer begins to work on the script.
- b) Prior to first draft, producers should not insist on seeing work in progress from established writers.
- c) The producer will recognise that in the course of the actual writing (the creative process), the writer may deviate, or introduce material different from elements in the original proposal, which is an outline of intent. However, the BBC expects the delivered script not to differ substantially from the original proposal.
- d) Where an offer is producer-led, it may be assumed that the writer respects the producer's intent, and that the producer will respect the writer's interpretation.
- e) Writers should adhere to agreed deadlines for drafts and final scripts, to ensure that there is ample time for discussions about rewrites.
- f) Producers should adhere to the timescale indicated in the Radio Drama Agreement with responses to first and subsequent drafts, to give the writer sufficient time for any rewrites.
- g) When the draft script has been submitted, discussion between producer and writer may range from structural comments to detailed pen-on-paper questions/suggestions from the producer. Clause 16 of the RDA details the process.
- h) Any impasses over wording or rewrites before the script has been accepted and the second half of the fee is paid should be resolved in discussion with the relevant executive producer, in line with the RDA Clause 16.

Stage 5: CASTING AND MUSIC

It is good practice and the RDA in Clause 23 requires the producer to discuss the major casting of a play with the writer. However, the responsibility and final decision-making on casting rests with the producer.

If there is original music, or if the writer has particular requirements for music, this should be discussed in good time, before final decisions are made, so that the writer's aesthetic suggestions can be seriously considered. The final decision-making on music rests with the producer.

The producer should inform the writer of all the above decisions, and will ensure that a copy of the studio-ready script is sent to the writer at the same time as it is sent to the cast.

Stage 6: RECORDING, STUDIO/LOCATION

As set out in the Radio Drama Agreement, the responsibility for the script is vested in the writer; the responsibility for the production belongs to the BBC. This has consequences once a script has been agreed; just as the writer has personal responsibility for ensuring that the script is the best possible, so the producer (as the BBC's appointee) has personal responsibility for ensuring that the production which results from the studio process is the best possible. The following should be considered:

- a) Studio time is always finite, and the producer will have to balance considerations of time and budget with the artistic options. For this reason, it is in everyone's interest that the script should be as complete as possible before it goes into the studio, and that any further changes in studio are as minimal as possible.
- b) As BBC programme lengths are non-negotiable and scripts are more likely to be slightly over-long than over-short, cutting in studio or post production is normal practice. The need to expand material occurs less often but, if necessary and where practicable, may be required from the writer.
- c) Producers should ensure from their professional reading beforehand that any changes in scripts in studio will be minimal.

- d) It is good practice for the producer to invite the writer to attend at least the initial read-through, in order to make any fine-tuning to the script before rehearsal/recording begins. Amendments should be passed on to the producer by the writer after the read-through and these will be passed on to the cast by the producer, unless the latter specifically asks the writer to do so. If a writer is asked to address the cast, it is not considered sensitive or useful to suggest line-readings to individual actors.

The producer should treat the writer's views with respect and give them proper consideration. However, it is the producer who must decide what information should be passed to the actors, and how it should be given, as the producer is responsible for the process. In the final instance, all decisions during recording are the responsibility of the producer.

- e) In relation to reasonable access to rehearsals and recordings, Clause 25 of the RDA applies.
- f) Any sound effects directions suggested by the writer in the script should always be considered by the producer, but the final artistic choice and technical presentation are the responsibility of the producer.
- g) Timings, which are carefully noted during the read-through, are similarly logged during recording, in order for the producer to monitor at every stage the expected duration of the final recorded work. If cuts are required and the writer is present, the writer may make adjustments on the spot. If the writer is not present, it is the responsibility of the producer to make other small cuts and changes in studio. See section 17 of the RDA for further guidance on alterations and edits.

Stage 7: POST-PRODUCTION/EDITING

Unless specially agreed between producer and writer, it is not general procedure for writers to be present at post-production/editing sessions. If further substantial cuts have to be made at this stage, the producer will use his/her best endeavours to contact the writer. See section 17.4 and 17.5 of the RDA for further guidance should the author be unavailable.

Stage 8: BROADCAST/PUBLICITY/AFTERMATH

It is good practice for the producer:

- a) to inform the writer of the date and time of broadcast, as soon as the producer knows it.
- b) to send the writer copies of the final broadcast script and audio copies of the programme as per Clause 24 of the RDA.
- c) to include information about the writer in any publicity initiatives as a matter of course and to endeavour to give the writer an opportunity to comment on factual detail in any publicity material.

Stage 9: ALTERNATIVE PRODUCERS

The writer should be contacted if there is any prospect of moving the commission to another producer. The BBC will make the final decision about any new producer assigned to a project, however it is important that the writer and new producer should meet in good time to discuss the potential collaboration, and ensure that a rapport is established. If either writer or producer are uncertain about working on the project together, discussions should be set up with the executive producer to resolve the differences.

Stage 10: DISPUTES

If either writer or producer feels that any stage of the process has been conducted outside the bounds of reasonable good practice, based on these guidelines, each should first discuss these issues with the other. If this is not possible, or does not prove satisfactory:

- a) The writer should write or speak (in confidence) to the Head of Radio Drama.
- b) The producer/director should write or speak (in confidence) to the writer's representative body (WGGB, SoA), or to his/her agent.

c) If the matter cannot be resolved through such dialogue, Clause 12 of the RDA shall apply.

For information regarding schedule of payments and contractual details, please refer to the BBC Radio Drama Agreement.

These guidelines outline the practice and aspirations of the BBC Radio Drama Department only. Independent production companies may have different practices which are not covered here.

Produced by the BBC in consultation with the BBC Radio Writers Forum.

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