

Writing

How to write a sentence for radio: Keep it short and fast!

Every second counts. Write short sentences with one basic idea in each. We are trying to cram information into peoples' ears, one short line at a time. Long, complicated sentences full of big words don't make you sound smart. Say what you mean, throw away all unnecessary words, and try to maintain a conversational style.

Put the subject at the front of each sentence, using the formula:

(subject) + (verb) + (object) + (...all other stuff)

"The White House + denies + the charge."

"Mrs. Williams + says + the police + (are lying about her son's death)."

"Hamil Schlomo + sprints + the path to Jericho + (every morning, worried he might be shot by a sniper or run over by a jeep)."

Long, newspaper-style sentences should be broken up into smaller sentences:

"For the fifth night in a row, denizens of the tunnels underneath Penn Station, the "Mole People", are worrying that the police might barge in and evict them for trespassing on City property."

...is not a bad sentence, but it's a mouthful to read and understand. It should be broken up into smaller ones:

"The so-called "Mole People" under Penn Station are worried. They say the police want to evict them from the tunnels where they live. Technically they're trespassing on city property."

Sentences should be written in the positive, as opposed to the negative sense, as often as possible. Avoid using "not", "no", "don't", "doesn't", "won't", etc.

"The union leadership doesn't accept that version of the story."

...can be rewritten in the positive:

"The union leadership says the story is a lie."

"Union leaders refuse to accept that version of the story."

Write in the present tense, whenever possible:

"The White House denies the charge," is easier for the listener to understand and faster to read than these common alternatives:

"The White House is denying the charge."

"The White House has been denying the charge."

Writing Suggestions:

Write around your sound. The actualities are the most important part of your story, so after you've chosen them, (see *Choosing Actualities*, below) transcribe them word-for-word onto the page. The rest of your writing task amounts simply bridging the gaps between your bites.

Start and end your story with a person, a personal story, an illustrative anecdote...something that the listener can understand and relate to immediately.

"Karen Conejo knows the names of most of the guards at Yamfee prison. They're old friends. Her son Ellis has been here since he was 16, and now he's 23."

This is an overused device in radio news, but it's better than the way-too-often-heard alternative:

"The capital punishment rate has gone up in Nevada, from 9 executions last year to 19 this year."

The latter is no way to invite the listener into a story that's going to last 3 or 4 minutes. It sounds like the reporter is reading a textbook.

Remind your listeners of the subject of your story as you go along, and again near the end.

If you are having a hard time coming up with a definitive general statement for the conclusion of your story, conclude by telling the listener what they can expect to happen next. Example: In a story about an ethics investigation into the conduct of Senate clerk Johnny Kelley, you could conclude with:

"The Senate ethics panel meets Thursday, where Mr. Kelley will have to prove his claims. In DC, I'm Ricky Chalk for Free Speech Radio News"

When you are done with your script, make sure you have answered the "Five W's": Who, What, Where, Why, When. It's easy to forget one of these, and leave the listener wondering, "Who are they talking about?", "What country is this story taking place in?"

Note: For FSRN, the most important of the Five W's is "Why?".

Example: If you report that Congress has approved a plan that would let chemical plants dump their waste in the sea, it's important to tell the listener what some possible reasons might be. Find some evidence. [Founding FSRN editor Aaron Glantz calls them "fun facts"]:

"The chemical industry has contributed 15 million dollars to congressional campaigns in the last 5 election cycles."

"Chemical industry trade association director Michael Sludge formerly served as the head of the EPA, and he's now married to the president's daughter."

If you want to talk about how people feel, put the feelings into the source's words:

"He's worried about his mother."

Since you can't read his mind, you can't confirm this statement, so you shouldn't use it. Instead you should say,

"He **says** he's worried about his mother."

Note: This may seem like a small matter, but in many instances, drawing this

distinction can keep you from buying into a spin effort, or unconsciously manufacturing consent. For example, when the president says,

"I'm worried about this budget deficit."

A typical newswire headline will read,

"Bush Worries about Budget Deficit"

The headline basically repeats what he said, as a fact. But isn't it just possible that he's not worried about the budget deficit? Purposely running up a massive deficit could be a strategic maneuver, a way to starve entitlement programs which Republicans are ideologically opposed to. Since it's possible Bush's statement is simply designed to create a false impression, and since the reporter can never confirm what a person thinks, it's more accurate to report that Bush **claimed** or **said** he was worried about the budget deficit.

Words to avoid in radio writing, whenever possible:

All forms of the verb TO BE (is, am, are, were, will be, have been, being, will have been, etc.)

*"Raines **is asking** the officer for his one phone call."*

...can be written with more color, without "is":

*"Raines **pleads** with the officer for his one phone call."*

"Get"

The most common word in spoken American English is also one of the least interesting. Use an action verb:

*"Moreland tried to **get** the tiger in his net, but he couldn't."*

*"Moreland tried to **snare** the tiger in his net, but he couldn't."*

"There is" / "There are"

*"**There is** always a plainclothes officer posted out front of her house."*

...should also be rewritten with action verbs:

*"Plainclothes officers **patrol** the front of her house around-the-clock."*

*"Plainclothes officers **case** her house at all hours."*

Adverbs, those words that usually end in -LY. (easily, happily, angrily, etc.) Adverbs are usually unnecessary, they often convey information you cannot confirm, and they tend to betray the reporter's allegiances to one side of the story. (Note the last sentence contained two adverbs, sorry!)

*"The White House **hastily** issued a denial."*

...would be better written,

*"The White House issued a denial **15 minutes later**."*

Note that "*hastily*" makes a value judgement for the listener--one that you cannot prove--

while "15 minutes later" allows the listener to make up her own mind.

"That" and "Which"

*"The dog **that** came in was covered in blood."*

...means the same thing as:

"The dog came in covered in blood."

*"Grimes walked into the hearing to find the same lawyer **that** he was granted in the first trial..."*

...has the same meaning if you omit "that". Plus it's faster to read:

"Grimes walked into the hearing to find the same lawyer he was granted in the first trial."

Avoid common cliches in your writing, overused phrases and sentence constructions:

"...in the wake of September 11..."

"This, as police announced..."

"...against the backdrop of clan violence..."

These are often referred to as "groaners", because they make many radio listeners groan to hear them. A groaner can't be easily defined, and some cannot always be avoided. Many lists of these terms can be found on the web.

Choosing Actualities

Let the sources give the examples, and (if possible) draw the conclusions. The reporter should state the general fact/trend/phenomenon, then the source should illustrate:

[Reporter]

"...funding has been slashed nationwide, but Clampett says Nevada prisons are worse than most."

[Clampett]

"The other day i saw an inmate eating spiders, calling himself "Spiderman". We need a mental health professional out here, like we used to have."

No matter how important a source's point, if it's not well articulated, don't use it. Explain it yourself, and next time get better tape!

Make sure the background sound doesn't overpower your actuality.

Once you have chosen a bite you want to use, avoid editing within that bite, especially if it's full of background sound that would be interrupted with your edits.

Note: Digital editing makes it possible for you to build soundbites using several different comments that may have been spoken minutes apart. You can really make people say anything you want them to say. This is of course immoral, inaccurate, and probably illegal. A good rule of thumb when cutting and pasting various statements into a soundbite is to ask yourself, *"Would this person approve of the edits I have made? Does it accurately express what they were trying to say?"* If the answer is no, then don't use it.