

Writing for radio: the basics

by Brian Edwards-Tiekert

Structure of a radio news story

Sound. Generally, radio news stories split their time evenly between narration and sound bites. You want soundbites to be 30 seconds or less, but you want to use them often to break up your narration--if you read for much more than a minute uninterrupted, your listeners will start to get lost in the drone.

Conflict. Most stories, in fiction and news alike, build their narrative around a central conflict. Protesters versus police. Workers versus management. Community organizers versus government officials. Even more "human interest" stories have conflicts driving the narrative—a homeless person's struggle to stay warm, a poor mother's struggle to get healthy food for her kids. When you're conceptualizing your story, trying to figure out what the central conflict is--it will make it much easier to decide who you need to interview, and how you need to write it.

A typical three-minute radio story will be built around three 30-second soundbytes: one from each side of the immediate conflict, and one from an expert or analyst who's able to either arbitrate or put the conflict in a larger context.

The lead is the most important part of your story. It needs to grab the listener's attention and make them want to listen to everything that follows. You can either: 1) do a quick summary of the who, what, when, where, and why of your story, 2) throw out a provocative piece of information that you'll then go on to explain, 3) pose a question the story will try to answer.

The lead must give the listener a sense of what the rest of the story will be about, and make them want to listen. Here's a tip: after you've finished writing your story, go back and rewrite your lead. You'll often find the story took you somewhere you didn't expect to be when you started it.

The end is the best place to give your listeners information about what comes next—are there more demonstrations planned? Will there be an appeal? When does the new law take effect?

Process for composing a radio story

1. Research your story

Check out the web sites of the players involved. Look for recent news clippings on related issues. Make a note of who other reporters have spoken to---you may want to use the same sources. Make a list of the questions you need answered to do the story well, then try to figure out who has the answers and set up interviews.

2. Gather sound

Record the interviews and other audio (e.g. ambient sound) you'll use. Take notes and mark times during the interviews---it will make it easier to go back and pull soundbytes later.

3. Log audio/pull soundbytes

Mark the cuts you think you'll use for your story. If you have time, transcribe them.

4. Write

Decide what cuts you'll use, put them in order, and then write your script around them.

5. Check your facts

Go through the script and see if you can independently confirm the facts and figures your sources gave you.

6. Re-write

See if you can get someone with a fresh set of eyeballs to read your script and give you feedback. Then, do any structural changes you need to. Next, clean up your sentences. Finally, re-write your lead.

7. Record your narration and mix your audio.

Broadcast writing

Writing for radio is different from writing for print. First, you have less “space” for information, so you will have to prioritize and summarize carefully. Second, your listeners can't reread sentences they didn't understand the first time--you have to keep your writing simple and clear. Finally, the ultimate product is not what's on the page, but what comes out of your mouth--it's okay to break some writing rules, as long as the result is smooth and easily-understood. With that in mind, here are some tips.

Write short sentences. Take a close look at long, complex sentences: chances are you can break them up into two or three smaller ones. Don't try to pack in more than one idea per sentence. Grammarians take note: broadcast writing should minimize the use of dependent clauses, relative clauses, parenthetical remarks, and compound structures. You can almost always come out with a clean sentence by putting the subject first, and the verb second. Here's an extreme example of how you might break up two sentences from a lead paragraph on the front page of indymedia.org:

Before	After
<p>As a delegation of over 30 workers and community members stormed through the employee entrance of the 350-room Hilton hotel in downtown Glendale, hotel security could do little more than grasp their radios and call for backup.</p> <p>Followed by a barrage of hotel managers, curious on-duty employees and about half a dozen security guards, the workers made their way through the winding corridors of the employee area and into the offices of the hotel's executive committee, where the concerned Hilton employees addressed their need for a union and insisted that management not interfere with their efforts to organize.</p>	<p>30 workers and community members stormed into the downtown Glendale Hilton.</p> <p>The hotel has 350 rooms.</p> <p>The delegation bypassed security by using the employee entrance.</p> <p>Security guards called for backup.</p> <p>The delegation made its way to the offices of the hotel's executive committee.</p> <p>Managers, guards, and curious employees followed.</p> <p>The workers said they need a union</p> <p>They also told management not to interfere with their organizing efforts.</p>

Summarize and prioritize. There are less words in radio stories than print stories. Think carefully about what information is essential, and which details can be summarized. Here's how you might pare down the sentences we just broke out:

Before	After
<p>Thirty workers and community members stormed into the downtown Glendale Hilton.</p> <p>The hotel has 350 rooms.</p> <p>The delegation bypassed security by using the employee entrance.</p> <p>Security guards called for backup.</p> <p>The delegation made its way to the offices of the hotel's executive committee.</p> <p>Managers, guards, and curious employees followed.</p> <p>The workers said they need a union</p> <p>They also told management not to interfere with their organizing efforts.</p>	<p>Thirty workers and community members stormed into the downtown Glendale Hilton.</p> <p>The delegation evaded security and confronted the hotel's executives in their offices.</p> <p>The workers said they need a union.</p> <p>They also told management not to interfere with their organizing efforts.</p>

Be conversational. It's okay to be less formal when you're writing for broadcast--do what it takes to make your copy easy to listen to. Here's how you might smooth out the flow of what we just summarized:

Before	After
<p>Thirty workers and community members stormed into the downtown Glendale Hilton.</p> <p>The workers evaded security and confronted the hotel's executives in their offices.</p> <p>The workers said they need a union.</p> <p>They also told management not to interfere with their organizing efforts.</p>	<p>Workers at the downtown Glendale Hilton are organizing a union, and they say they don't want management to interfere. So today dozens of them stormed the building and confronted the hotel's executives in their offices.</p>

Use statistics sparingly. It is easy to lose your listeners when you put too many numbers in a story. If the precise number isn't that important to the story, use words like "most," "more," "relatively few," etc. When you do use numbers, round them—i.e., substitute "about 5 million" for "4,850,326." When you're comparing numbers, try to use a plain-language fraction or multiple rather than giving two numbers:

Before	After
Today, just 11% of americans get lung cancer—twenty years ago, that number was 22%	Lung cancer rates have dropped by half since smoking was outlawed

Put attribution first. You listeners need to know who they're hearing from.

Before	After
"The attacks on Karl Rove are unjustified and immoral," said President Bush.	President Bush said, "The attacks on Karl Rove are unjustified and immoral."

Minimize direct quotations. Paraphrase what people have said, unless the exact wording is important to your story.

Before	After
President Bush said, "The attacks on Karl Rove are unjustified and immoral."	President Bush lashed out against the attacks on Karl Rove, calling them "immoral."

Read it out loud. If what you've written doesn't feel natural coming out of your mouth, then there's something wrong with it.

Read it to someone else. This is the best way to find out if your story is missing information your listeners will need to understand it.

In general, the principles of clean writing apply the same as always—here are some time-tested guidelines:

- **Kill adjectives and adverbs.** They don't usually do any work.
- **Use active phrasing**—i.e. "management locked out the workers," NOT "the workers were locked out"
- **Show, don't tell.** "he pounded the table with his fist" NOT "he was very angry."
- **Use non-judgmental language.** Present the facts and let your listeners make up their own minds. For instance, don't tell them a policy is "racist"-- show them how it impacts Latinos differently than Anglos.