

Writing for Radio - The Basics

Good writing is good writing. Whether you're writing for radio, print, TV or the internet, a lot of the same basics apply. Clarity, good organization of your thoughts and themes, and a vocabulary that your listeners/readers/viewers will understand are all important.

But there are a few things which are specific to the medium of radio because of its unique nature:

- Unlike print, radio listeners can't go back to the part they've missed. It has to be clear the first time, because there is no second chance.
- Unlike TV, there are no pictures to reinforce your words. That means your script has to do all the describing. It also has to grab the listener's attention. You can't back into the main point - you have to get to it quickly without a long preamble.
- Unlike Internet, it's not available for weeks at a time. You have one, and only one, opportunity to make an impact.
- Radio is conversational. Think of the most boring lecture you have ever attended. For starters, the presenter probably read it. And it probably sounded like a term paper, full of jargon and long-winded sentences. Does anybody really talk like that?
- Radio is personal - you're talking to one person at a time. That's why your writing has to sound like it is "talked", not read. Lectures don't work on radio. Your script can't be just "read". It has to be performed.

Radio writing has to be tight and clear, and above all, interesting. Over-the-air radio has been called the theater of the mind, because good writers can conjure up images for listeners. But most radio news is heavily formatted into tiny story slots, so you need to be as clear, descriptive, and direct.

1. *You must be descriptive.* Obviously, the visuals aren't there, so you have to add words that speak of sights, sounds, aromas, and whatever else contributes to setting the scene. Ambient sound is often a big help to accomplishing word pictures.
2. *You must write tightly.* Scripts are short. Commercial radio network newscasts are brutal, with stories ranging from 10 to 30 seconds. This demands that you winnow out the excess material and include only what is necessary to tell the story. Noncommercial newscasts are longer, but are often also formatted into tight patterns.
3. *You can write with more style.* Your vocal presentation must be gracious and authoritative, and your personal warmth must come through in your reports.

Mechanics: Formatting Tips for Written Copy

These tips are especially important if you are writing copy for others to read. These will help a script reader to read more easily, and will help listeners to hear and understand more easily.

- **Double space** all copy for easy reading. Also, use a large enough font for easy reading – 12-point minimum.
- Exaggerate where the paragraph begins by spacing.
- **Round out all numbers.** Most people can only remember one or two numbers at a time, so keep them to a minimum. Round the ones you do include in the copy.
 - A \$1.47 million budget becomes “about one and a half million dollars.”
 - Pollution in 312 state waterways becomes “more than three hundred waterways” or even “hundreds of waterways”
 - **Exception to this rule:** When the story doesn’t exist without the exact numbers – e.g. “Gas prices will rise to two dollars and eighty-five cents by next month, an increase of more than...”
- **Don’t use abbreviations.** Spell out words like “street” and “versus.”
- **Don’t use acronyms,** except for the most widely known terms.
 - Spell out specialized acronyms that not everyone will understand. For example, “Federal Trade Commission” instead of “FTC”
 - Many others acronyms are very common, but should probably be spelled out the first time used in a story. For example: “University of Wisconsin-Madison” the first time, “U-W Madison” each time after that in the same story.
 - Some acronyms are common enough that they probably don’t need to be written out. E.g. “N-B-C News” or “F-B-I agents.” But you should put a dash between each letter.
- **Indicate proper pronunciation** of difficult words or names in brackets. Set apart the syllable to be stressed.
 - e.g. “Dave Cieslewicz [Chess-**LEV**-itch]”
- **Titles go before names**
 - e.g. “Pacifica Network Programming Coordinator Nathan Moore”

Mechanics: 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."

Mechanics: 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. (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 clichés 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.

Mechanics: Common beginner mistakes to avoid in writing

- Stating the obvious with a lazy cliché ID:

“...Janie Yablonsky describes the situation.”
“...Janie Yablonsky explains.”
“...Janie Yablonsky tells us what that means.”

The reporter never, ever has any reason to tell the listener that the source is “talking about”/”describing”/”explaining” something. Once the source starts talking, we know the source is talking.

You have at least nine hundred ways to identify someone, the most obvious being simply to state the name and title right before (s)he starts talking. Another easy way to avoid the Janie-Yablonsky-describes cliché is by paraphrasing something the source said:

[Reporter]
“Union representative Janie Yablonsky says the time was right for a change.”

[Janie]
“We really thought the old regime was getting lazy and finding excuses not to confront the company.”

- Introducing a cut with the same information that follows in the cut. It shows the reporter hasn’t listened to the cuts she is using. (This one is tied with #1 for most annoying radio news writing mistake):

[Reporter]
“Janie Yablonsky says the time was right for a change.”

[Janie]
“It was time for a change. The old regime was doing things wrong.”

- Making statements which cannot be confirmed:

“Nobody thought Lambert was innocent, but some would have liked to see him get a lighter sentence.”

You cannot prove that there is not one person in the world who thought Lambert was innocent. Therefore as a journalist, you cannot report it as fact. This is a common mainstream media mistake which leads to the omission of minority viewpoints, and one we should avoid. What if there’s a compelling case for Lambert’s innocence, but you just didn’t have time to talk to enough people with the right information? Play it safe and report just what you know for sure.

Style: Authenticity, Perspective, and Language

Research check: Is it plausible?

As a journalist, you should have a good idea of the authenticity of the claims made or news presented in the story. Your story is only as good as your sources. It is always wise to ask: Do you have the strongest sources for this information? Are you using reliable primary sources? **Some newsrooms have policies about how many sources should be cross-referenced to validate information.** Even with the deadline pressure of broadcast and the uncertainty of many untested facts, accuracy should be relentlessly pursued.

Now add perspective

A shared objective in both print and broadcast involves the injection of perspective – the overview – into the story. Journalists do this by tying in old stories, historical facts, new angles, sidebars, and their own personal memories of the same story. Relating the newest breaking events to trends is essential to good reporting but must be undertaken with caution. Faulty memories, slipshod filing systems, or untrustworthy Internet information can add unbalanced perspective and can damage the story's credibility.

Sensational language/loading words

The addition of opinionated adjectives, sensational adverbs, powerful verbs, zany bits of narrative, or the bizarre opinions of secondary sources – all these constitute dangerous ground for a responsible journalist.

Unfortunately, many broadcasters fall into the bad habit of using adjectives in front of the name of a company, organization, or country; e.g. “the troubled Hillview bank” or “Communist Cuba.” Similarly, broadcasters often repeat loaded comments by others; e.g. “Neighbors said Wilson was strange and often crept through front yards like a burglar.” These are misrepresentations we wouldn't want used against ourselves, and responsible journalists should avoid this kind of language.

Sensational language is more of a danger for broadcast journalists who must write in colloquial language, which tends to be less precise than most printed text.

Style: Attribution of Sources

Below are suggestions to help you determine when attribution is appropriate:

- ***Use It for Credibility.*** By naming your sources of information, you enable your viewers or listeners to judge the value of your facts. The audience knows a foreign policy statement that originates at the White House has more credibility than a foreign policy statement from the manager of the local supermarket. In stories with contested facts, attributions let the audience decide about credibility.
- ***Use It to Show Doubt.*** Similarly, if you have doubts about the quality of the information, it is traditional journalistic practice to alert the audience to this fact. Anonymous telephone information inserted in a story should be identified as such. Exclusive stories from other media should credit those organizations, unless you can cross-check the information. Also, the source for any information from a suspect organization, one with a big name but only four members must be identified.
- ***Use it to Support Opinion.*** Attribution is clearly needed if what you are reporting is opinion or speculation.
- ***Shorten Attribution or Discard It to Save Space.*** Use of attribution in broadcast is not the same as in print. Because story space is severely limited in newscasts, it is often necessary to condense the source of information or to eliminate it altogether. In broadcast, long government titles are often shortened, e.g. “State Department officials,” “Police spokesperson,” or “lawmakers,” especially when that information is of routine value.

Often, a writer might exclude the reference altogether, as in the case of routine sources that mean little to the outcome of the story. If the Consumer Price Index goes up or down, there is little question where the information comes from, so why bother with the attribution?

However, always use attribution in crime stories. Make a point of using attribution to demonstrate that you are relying on authoritative sources. When describing a crime to which a person’s name may be linked, it is irresponsible not to use attribution.

Where to put attribution

Although newspapers and wire services traditionally put the attribution at the end of a sentence, broadcast puts it first. Here is an example of print placement.

“The United States and France will soon meet in new negotiations over the GATT trade agreements, according to a highly placed State Department source.”

In broadcast, the attribution always goes first.

“A State Department official is saying the U.S. and France will meet to discuss trade agreements.”

Placing the attribution first gives the audience a chance to judge source credibility as the facts are heard, rather than waiting for a delayed attribution.

Writing Suggestions

These apply especially to writing in feature-length stories.

- Write around your sound. The actualities (sound bites) are the most important part of your story. 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?”
- If you want to talk about how people feel, put the feelings into the source’s words. 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.

Writing sample – news headline

These headlines aired Free Speech Radio News on July 19 and July 23, respectively.

Host intro:

Federal regulators have ordered Equistar Chemicals to start reporting leaks that violate clean air and water standards. The company must now install equipment to monitor pollution at seven of its petrochemical plants. FSRN's Renee Feltz reports.

Reporter:

After being cited for air, water, and hazardous waste violations, Equistar consented to spend millions of dollars on pollution control and cleanup. Environmental Protection Agency inspectors found Equistar repeatedly broke the law by failing to report spills and the release of hazardous substances to emergency response centers. Benzene (linked to cancer) and asthma-causing compounds were among the chemicals leaked. Three Houston-area facilities, as well as plants in Iowa, Illinois, and Louisiana will be impacted by changes Equistar will have to make in order to comply with federal regulations. Equistar will spend about one million dollars on cleanup efforts that include installing a new wastewater treatment system at a Houston plant that it says will strip air pollutants by 26 tons per year. The Houston-based chemical company's violations stem from EPA inspections in 2002. Equistar is expected to portray itself as an industry leader for its correction of past failures and agreement to spend millions on federal and state environmental projects as part of a civil penalty. For FSRN, I'm Renee Feltz.

Host intro:

After six and a half months of contentious labor negotiations, Southern California supermarket employees have approved a new agreement, calling it a "win" for workers. Leilani Albano reports from Los Angeles.

Reporter:

Under the new agreement, employees at Albertson's, Ralph's, and Von's would receive their first raise in 5 years. The agreement would also eliminate the two-tiered system, which provided lower wages and fewer benefits to newly hired workers. Organizers welcome the changes but say the contract has serious flaws. Although the agreement would reduce the time period for workers to qualify for health benefits, their health plan would still be too expensive for recent hires, many of whom are barely making above the minimum wage. And while the contract has eliminated the two-tiered system, organizers say wage scales for workers are still low, and that pay raises are minimal. Ratification of the Southern California contract comes ahead of labor negotiations currently taking place in Northern California and Washington State. UFCW president Rick Icaza is pledging support for the grocery workers during contract talks in those regions, if needed. For FSRN, I'm Leilani Albano in Los Angeles.

Writing Sample – audio documentary

This sample comes from a Pacifica news documentary called, “The Day the Music Died: Web Radio in Peril,” aired on Pacifica stations in early July 2007 in response to the pending royalty rate hikes soon to go into effect. In this selection, the writing is a bit looser and more casual than in a typical news headline or feature, but the same mechanics of writing for the ear apply. Sentences tend to be short, direct, tight, and clear. Yet the writing is descriptive in spite of its brevity. Also note the interweaving of narration (the written sections) and the actualities (spoken spontaneously). As is the case in this selection, narration and actualities should build on each other.

Narration (Eric Klein):

Radio over the internet is about to undergo a big change on July 15th. That’s when new rates for streaming music online take effect, meaning bigger bills for radio stations like the one you’re listening to now if it wants to stay online. I recently spoke with my friend and colleague Michael Mandoocheri. He’s the web guy at KPFA.

Actuality:

Eric: How worried are you about July 15th? What are you working on?

Michael: I’m very worried. I’m already overworked as it is, but I have a lot to do by July 15th. I have to count up how many listeners we’ve had since 2007 and 2006. I have to figure out how... (fades down under narration)

Narration (Eric Klein):

Michael and I work at Pacifica station KPFA in Berkeley, California. KPFA was the first listener-sponsored non-commercial station in the country. It’s known for news and public affairs, but it also plays a lot of music every day. And the task of figuring out how the new rules are going to be followed has more or less fallen to Michael.

Actuality – Michael:

Well, on July 15th, royalties for webcasts will be determined by how many listeners are listening to a certain amount of hours. Basically, royalties are going to be charged per performance

Narration (Eric Klein):

Per performance means per song. The new rate is just a fraction of a penny per listener per song, but it’s turning out to be a very big deal.

Actuality – Michael:

And since with web radio you can actually count how many people are listening to the last person, or to the last computer I should say. We’re able to theoretically give a really accurate count.