

RADIO NEWS

The art of the written spoken word

Most writing is produced for the page, whether it's for printed books and magazines or something online. Written documents allow for plenty of space; if a reader misses the point there's always the chance to go back and read the same words again.

Writing for radio is different.

The same ideas must be expressed, but with the minimum number of words. The listener only gets one chance to understand, and the script has to grab attention right from the start. And what you're writing has to be spoken out loud. So the normal rules of grammar and punctuation don't apply. You're writing 'stored speech'. Just like writing the script for a drama – you write the actors' words and they've got to sound right. If you've spent your whole life writing essays, this is different. It takes time and a bit of practice, but you'll end up with a valuable skill, not just for broadcasting but for any other written work.



KEY IDEAS

A typical radio news bulletin lasts about three minutes. An editor would like to include every story that might interest the audience, but three minutes only allows space for about 540 words, and every bulletin starts with tough decisions about what to include – there might, for example, be room for only six stories out of a choice of many. Once a story has been chosen each one has to be kept as short as possible – every single word has to be there for a reason.

To achieve this broadcast writers have developed a pared-down style, packed with facts, that mimics natural speech. Each story is analysed and broken down into its key elements: the latest development, background information and additional detail. These are placed in a structure that conveys the information as simply and clearly as possible.

Every word has to be present for a reason. Wasted words – those that don't add to the overall message – are passengers. If there are enough of them they may squeeze out an entire story from the bulletin. Vocabulary is kept simple. There's no point in using words or expressions the listener may not understand – the listener hasn't got a dictionary beside the radio. The writer must consider who the script is aimed at: their age, location, background. Each of these affects the choice of words. Would you choose the same stories and expressions for a 15 year-old as for a 60 year-old?

Sentences for the printed page can be long and contain lots of sub-clauses. On radio, the newsreader has to have somewhere to breathe. That's why radio script-writers speak the words out loud as they are written. It does not matter what it looks like on the page, the key question is – does it sound right?

The writer also aims to avoid on-air stumbles. Some printed expressions just don't work. Try saying this out loud: *SFr 34,723*. The radio writer adjusts it both for the reader and for the listener: "nearly thirty-five thousand Swiss francs".

Good writing is simple, structured and accessible. And short.

KEY READINGS

Chantler, P. and Stewart, P. J. (2009). *Essential radio journalism: how to produce and present radio news* London: A & C Black.

Hill, C.W. (2015). *Writing for radio*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

McLeish, R. and Link, J. (2016). *Radio production*. 6th ed. New York: Focal Press.

ACTIVITIES

1. Drop a pen.
 - i. Can you describe what just happened in 120 words, 60, 30, 15 10 and 5?
 - ii. What gets lost in the edit?
 - iii. Are there 'passenger' words that you cut easily?
 - iv. How do you retain the drama of the event?
2. Radio News is always written against the clock. Imagine a celebrity has been caught drunk driving near a local school. How fast can you create three sentences of accurate, attention grabbing news copy?
3. Not all written material sounds right when it is read out aloud. Pick a topic from today's newspaper and read it out aloud. How would you adapt it for the radio? Which words are 'wrong'?