
WRITING AND EDITING RADIO NEWS

Once a news story is found, it must be put in a form that, when broadcast, will grab the attention of the listener.

Writing and producing news is a skill that draws on other basic radio skills, yet is particular in many ways to news. All of the rules of general writing for Radio apply, but there are a number of guidelines specific to news writing.

GOOD NEWS WRITING STYLE

If a news story is to have good style there are four basic attributes that it must possess: Clarity, Unity, Colour, and Variety.

A news story must have clarity, after all the listener has no script, if it is not immediately understood, then it will not be heard again.

The news story needs to have a sense of completeness about it. The listener must not be left wondering if there is more, or if it was all one story or not. The story must make complete sense as a whole.

Radio makes very good pictures, and so radio news should take advantage of this. The news writer should add colour to the story by using word pictures. However, as a rule of thumb news should feel more detached than the rest of the programme.

No two stories are the same, and neither should they sound it. To keep the interest, variety should be used. It is only too easy to drop into a news-writing formula, and so into a predictable and boring style.

CLEAR FACTS

A news story is built of facts. These facts will normally include the 5 W's; Who, What, When, Where, Why. The rest of a news story is just an extension of these 5 W's. It is a good guide to make the first sentence of a news story contain at least 3 of these W's.

Avoid the use of long words and specialist or technical words, keep what is said simple and direct. If long words do not trip the newsreader, they will confuse the listener.

Avoid relative terms to describe time and place. Instead of saying "north of here", give an absolute description, the listener may live further north! The same applies to time, "in 5 minutes" should be replaced with "at 6.15 this evening" or whatever.

Where people are being quoted their quotes need to be made very clear. This can often be done in presentation by leaving a short pause. Quotes also need to be attributed correctly. This places the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of the person who actually made it.

OBJECTIVE TREATMENT

It is very easy to slip into the use of language that will compromise the objectivity of news. Adverbs and Adjectives should particularly be watched as they often signify an editorial or comment on the facts which is not the task of news reporting. While Adverbs modifies the verb (She moved quite slowly down the aisle). Adjectives describe or modify another person or thing in the sentence (the interesting lecture), but don't add much content. Where words can be used to add colour, without compromising objectivity then this can help.

News should not contain comment or implied comment. The only place for this is in the mouth of someone else. It would be quite wrong to say; "the Prime Minister was talking rubbish", but it could be said (if true) "The opposition leader accused the Prime Minister of 'talking rubbish'.

Verbs too can convey judgement by their use. So use a word like "Says" or "Declares", but avoid words like "Claims", "Pointed out", "made clear that", "insists", these all carry extra editorial meaning.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Sentences should not be allowed to grow long. Long sentences both hinder the newsreader in the attempt to read clearly, and also can confuse the listener.

Avoid dependent clauses, that is where one part of the sentence depends on another. For example; "England team captain Mike Gatting said today that if there was no rain, that the England side's hopes of victory were slim."

Also avoid parenthetical phrases, that is phrases in brackets (parentheses). For example: On the other hand (said Gatting) if it rains we may be in with a chance. The parenthesis may not always be shown as here, but this structure should be avoided as it can be unclear when spoken.

STORY STRUCTURE

A story should not be merely a collection of clipped sentences full of facts, it should have an internal structure which makes it flow. The sentences should all link together to produce a natural progression through the story. It is often useful to use guideposts in the writing, sometimes briefly re-stating the main point to keep the listener clear as to the subject, also pointing forward to further details that are to follow.

BALANCING A BULLETIN

The news editor has a whole bulletin to make, and cannot give all to one big breaking story. The overall programme has to have a balance within it. There may be some regular segments in a longer bulletin. Often there will be short features, or even a series of them.

The aim is to produce a well rounded bulletin, not too heavy, yet not too light. These should be a balance of story types if that is possible, and it is often good if adjacent stories contrast one another a little.

This balance will affect to some extent how items are ordered as well.

ITEM ORDER

In the main the order of items is judged by the news editor such that the items are in order of descending overall importance, as perceived by the audience.

There will also need to be an internal balance, and sometimes a very heavy story might be deliberately followed by a lighter one. Sometimes there may be an accepted structure with such things as a mid way headline summary. Often sport and weather news have a fixed location, usually at the end. Almost all bulletins begin with a summary of the headlines. This informs the listener of what is to follow, and also helps to hold their interest.

Throughout the bulletin the aim must be to catch and hold the attention of the listener. Each story should do this, but also there may be 'signposts' telling the listener about an interesting item that is to come later.

Increasingly, some News services use short, light, and often amusing news stories to round off the bulletin.

GOOD OPENING

The first sentence needs to grab the attention of the listener in such a way that they are held for the remainder of the item. The essential facts of the story need to be made clear in as brief a way as possible. A good guideline is to put the answer to at least 3 of the 5 W's in this sentence.

HOLD THE INTEREST

Having grabbed the attention of the listener with the first sentence, every successive sentence should add to the overall item. Remember that people are interested in people. Write to make pictures for the listener, but avoid the use of adjectives or adverbs that comment or editorialize.

KEEP IT SHORT

Time is precious and so writing should be concise and brief. Cut out all unneeded words. So “the army opened fire on” becomes “the army fired on”

USING CONTRIBUTORS

One voice used throughout a news bulletin can make for a rather boring sound, however good the writing. The use of contributors for interview can add much needed personal interest, as well as variety.

ETHICS OF JOURNALISM

There are four basic principles that form the essential guidelines that are used in producing news. These principles are Accuracy, Fairness, Sensitivity and Truth.

ACCURACY

To be accurate means that you need to be scrupulous with the facts. Every fact must be checked and re-checked. If you are reporting events it is important that the report is a fair and correct representation of what actually happened. When reporting speech and using quotes these should be treated with special respect, not only preserving the exact words, but also the context in which they are spoken; their intended meaning.

FAIRNESS

The journalist must always be fair. It is all too easy to approach a story with your mind made up as to who is right and who is wrong. The facts of a situation must be allowed to speak for themselves. The listener expects, and wants to hear an impartial and unbiased report of the facts.

SENSITIVITY

With some particular types of story, sensitivity is of great importance. This is particularly true when dealing with serious accidents and disasters.

TRUTH

It should go without saying that the task of the journalist is to communicate the truth. As Christians we know that Truth is powerful. It is self revealing, and it liberates.

THE NEWS 'ANGLE'

Often one news item has many different dimensions to it. Sometimes some news that may not actually be very recent, may develop a new angle. Major breaking stories often have a number of angles. In the handling of such stories a bulletin may carry a number of items, covering a story from different angles.

Take for example a major transport disaster, such as a passenger ship sinking in very bad weather. There may immediately be several angles to the story;

- 1) The account of the tragedy.
- 2) Current news of the rescue attempt.
- 3) Why the weather was so bad, and was it predicted.
- 4) Why the ship should be affected by bad weather.
- 5) Where anxious relatives should contact.

As the story develops, and as time passes, further angles may open up;

- 6) The story of a survivor
- 7) Reports into any inquests or inquiries
- 8) Reports about disaster relief funds
- 9) Reports on those who mourn or commemorate

CHOOSING AN ANGLE

It is important to know what angle to take in covering a news story. It is the news editors job to be aware of all possible angles and to arrange coverage as appropriate.

Sometimes on less important stories it is only appropriate to cover one angle, this angle can however be the key to a really good story, it can turn a routine item into one which may really grab the interest of the listener.