
FEATURES AND PACKAGES



Definitions

- A story told for radio – using audio from several sources.
- Lengths can vary. For our purposes, we'll consider features or packages to be between 2.5 and 15 minutes long.. but whole programmes can be put together as one enormous feature.
- Features and packages are often inserts into larger programmes.
- Much thinking can be done about whether something is a feature or a documentary. Basically, a feature is more poetic and more about telling a story. Documentary is more concerned with exposing the facts.
- It's not too helpful to get hung up on labelling things though. Labelling can confine your thinking. The most important thing is to tell your story!



The Possible Ingredients of a Feature

What are the possible ingredients on the shelf?

- 1) **Interviews** – Perhaps on location, perhaps in the studio, by phone, or on ISDN. For a feature, you would edit and set aside those nuggets of the interview that you want to keep – typically as bytes of up to 30secs, but there are no rules!
- 2) **Voxpop** – Well-executed voxpops liven up many subjects, but don't automatically think every topic needs a voxpop!
- 3) **Music** – to illustrate what you're doing. Or to provide interest and mood.
- 4) **Your Narration** – This is called "links" - linking all the parts together.
- 5) **Sound Effects**
- 6) **Archive Material**



Capturing the Listener

HOW CAN WE ENSURE WE CAPTURE THE LISTENER AND ENTHRAL THEM.. GETTING THEM TO STAY GLUED TO THE RADIO.. HERE'S A FEW THOUGHTS...

- Choose compelling Subject Matter.
- Create a script that isn't wooden but rather, is vibrant with emotion and imagery?
- Ask yourself if music will enrich your tale?
- Ask yourself if your Listener is alienated by any part of your feature? Remember, you are making this feature for the listener, not yourself. For instance, you may think Dance Music is the most captivating thing in the world, but if your listener is over 50, they're likely to be repelled.
- How about a few surprises? An unexpected sound effect.. Some music, a "stopdown" etc..
- If appropriate, consider humour.



Getting Down To It

- 1) Clarify **who the Audience is**. (Old/Young. Christian/Non-Christian, Male/Female.) And roughly how long your feature aims to be.
- 2) **Research** your subject, crystallise your thinking and sketch out the story for your piece.
- 3) List your potential **“ingredients”** including all potential contributors. Then phone them, set up meetings, and organise yourself.
- 4) Consider the **style** of your feature, but be adaptable.. your ideas may change as you gather the material. Should it be fast-paced/slow-Paced? A Montage or with Narrated links by you? Links on location or back in the studio? When making these decisions remember who the listener is, the style of the broadcasting radio station, and the subject you're covering.
- 5) **Plan out your interviews and other recordings** before making them. Realise exactly what you'll be needing from each contributor. Good focus at this stage will help you loads later on! Ask yourself “How will I interview, to get exactly what I need from this” eg) “Do I need my interviewee to introduce themselves? Will my questions in the interview be kept in the end product? Do I need to record pieces to mic myself on location or other effects?”.. For instance you could record yourself walking to a place or ringing a doorbell, or you could record your reflections to mic on what you're seeing or experiencing and include that in the end product. It can all add to 'Theatre of The Mind'. Also consider if you'll need 'Wildtrack'.
- 6) **Collect your ingredients**.. adapting your initial plan if new information or opportunities arise that you didn't foresee. Respond to all the sounds and experiences you're taking in on a location and consider if they can be incorporated into your end product. Be bold with interviewees and don't be afraid to order people around a bit to get what you want. You'll regret it back in the studio if, with a bit of effort, things could have been better.
- 7) **Edit**. The key here is to hold in your mind what you're aiming for. Ask yourself what should be included rather than what should be edited out. You will always have to throw away more than you thought. Aim to have all your elements as separate parts that you can then chain together to tell your story.
- 8) **Write your script** and narrate it. (If there is a script!)
- 9) **Assemble your piece. Mix it**. Beware of the balance of all the sounds – the “levels”.
- 10) Write a **“Cue Sheet”** if needed.



Dangers to Avoid.... and Things to Remember

It's For the Listener. Your treatment of the subject should be determined by what the listener will find most compelling.

Different Stations, Different Styles. Have a listen to radio stations with critical ears. What features are they making? How are they doing it? Would you do it differently?

Does your feature, like all good stories, have a **start, a middle and an end?**

'On Location' Interviewing Tips

Draw alongside people to interview them, don't stand in front of them.. they'll back off.

Don't interview people on location across a table. You'd be surprised how often you'll have to put your foot down about this. Drag your chair round the table and sit next to them.

Get the Mic Close enough

When recording on a location, **check your recorder settings are right** and the recorder's working before leaving. I've had some embarrassing failures here!

Be aware of **Background noises**.. babies crying, music playing, people shouting, doors slamming.. things that mean you may need to re-record or edit.

Be firm with interviewees. Don't be afraid to tell them where you want them to stand or sit.. Also if they need to re-phrase something for you.

Pitfalls on Location

Check you've captured the recording before you leave your interviewee.

Take spare batteries for the recorder!

When recording on location, listen for interrupting noises, background music or other things that will make it hard to edit later on..

Overload - The danger of getting too much material. Always ask yourself how the material you get is going to be used in the piece.

Maintain Perspective. Remember that your clips serve the story of your piece, not visa versa. Your feature is not just a random collection of great clips and sound effects. It's a story to be told. The worst features are those which have a meandering excuse for a script just so it can link together the clips you've managed to get...

A good feature has a **rhythm** all its own. It's sometimes an unconscious thing, but the speed of narration, music chosen, interview clips selected and sound-effects can all work to form a cohesive whole... similar to a poem or a piece of music, with a start, a build up.. a tempo of its own .. some surprises... a triumphant or reflective finish. Consider the journey.. the unfolding story.

Be Creative when introducing contributors in your script. You can integrate their name into a sentence that hints at what they'll be saying in the clip. You can give the name before.. or after.. the clip.. or even mid-clip!



The Ballad of the Radio Feature **(on accompanying cd)**

I hope you can catch something of the art of the feature.. of the power you have to craft something that means something to someone..

***“At it's best..feature-making .. is Poetry
Sifting through.. and finding the essence..
Distilling.
Creating a universe into which the listener is drawn but not
imprisoned.
With a few smokey chords.. the bland re-telling.. comes alive...
It is like Mosaic-Making.. we chizel away..
Making something that is greater than the sum of it's parts - a
convincing composition.
Aspiring to leave a trace in someone.. ... to affect someone...
Someone you don't even know.
What a privilege!!”***