

PART 1

Writing the Story

► REWRITING

Be Original

As a radio-TV newswriter, it's mandatory that you understand the material and information you're writing about before you start writing. A great deal of radio-TV newswriting is actually rewriting—rewriting wire copy, news releases, scripts and handwritten notes.

Whatever information source you use, the important thing is to understand it. If you don't understand it, how can you hope to write a story that your audience members will understand? Look for the basic elements of journalism—the who, what, where, when, why and how. They'll help you begin to organize your story.

A good practice is to read over the source copy a couple of times, put it aside, and try to tell the story to another person or say it to yourself. After you've done that, then go ahead and start writing.

Try not to look back at the source copy. Tell the story in **YOUR OWN WORDS**, not someone else's. Every other radio station, television station and newspaper in your community will more than likely create stories using the same material. You want your story to sound different from all the others. The only way to do that is by telling the story in **YOUR** words.

Don't simply retype, rearrange or "cut and paste" the words and sentences used in the source copy. Tell the story in your own words. You can make it more conversational and easier to understand. Your version doesn't always have to be *better* than the original, but it should always be significantly *different* from the original.

Example: (Original): A violent crime surge in three U.S. cities has prompted the Justice Department to dispatch special anti-crime teams of federal agents to combat gangs and spiking murder rates in Phoenix, Ariz., Miami, Fla. and Riverside, Calif. The violent crime wave in the three cities contributed to the 1.5% rise in violent crime nationwide last year—an increase for the third straight year.

Example: (Rewrite): Violent crime in the U-S is up again . . . for the third straight year. Violent crime spikes in three cities . . . Phoenix, Arizona, Miami, Florida and Riverside, California . . . contributed to the one-point-five-percent increase last year. The Justice Department is sending special anti-crime teams to those cities to help reduce gang violence and murders.

► SHORT, LEAN SENTENCES

Short but Sweet

One way to improve source copy is to shorten the sentences. A good average length for radio-TV news sentences is about 20 words. But avoid the choppy and stilted style of "See Spot run. Run, Spot, run." Create a flow and rhythm to your copy—a natural, conversational flow and rhythm. Sentences should flow easily without abrupt changes in topic and without awkward pauses and phrasing.

Alternate long sentences with short ones. Alternate the simple declarative sentences with sentences starting with *and*, *but* or *because*. People talk this way, so you should write this way. As long as it *sounds* okay and as long as it's conversational, use it.

The subject-verb-object sentence is best for clarity and directness. Stay away from clauses and phrases that sound unnatural. Not many people start a sentence with a phrase. It just doesn't sound right.

Example (poor): Speaking before a group of Midcity University students, State Senator Sam Bergman today announced his candidacy for governor.

Does the above example sound natural to you? Probably not. You don't talk that way, so don't write that way.

Example (better): State Senator Sam Bergman told a group of Midcity University students today that he's going to run for governor.

Remember, write the way you talk.

Trim the Fat

Write lean sentences, NOT fat sentences. A lean sentence is one that's trimmed of all excess words, especially adverbs and adjectives and other qualifiers that can distort what happened or what was said. Let your verbs provide the action and the color in your writing.

Avoid such words as *beautiful*, *ugly*, *hurriedly*, *slowly*, *frantically*, *lazily*, *smug*, *excitedly*, *happy*, *sad*, *good* and *bad*. This doesn't mean your writing has to be stripped down to the bone. Just avoid the "value judgment" adverbs and adjectives. Your judgments might not match those of your audience members.

Be accurate in your descriptions. If a woman wears a "red" dress, and you feel you must mention the dress, write she was wearing a "red" dress. Don't write she was wearing a "beautiful, flaming-red, exquisitely designed dress." What is beautiful, flaming and exquisitely designed to you might be ugly, dull and tasteless to someone else.

Example (poor): Looking fresh and excited, Mayor Gonzales walked quickly to the podium.

Example (better): Mayor Gonzales raced to the podium.

► BREVITY

Make It Brief

Time limitations are among the greatest handicaps to the radio-TV newswriter. Not only are you often on deadline, but you also must keep your stories to less than 30 seconds. You simply don't have enough time to write all you'd like to write about every story. You have to get to the news, explain why it's news, and give as many important details as possible in the limited time available.

You have to cut out all the frills and get right to the heart of each story. Be as brief and concise as you can while still including all the necessary facts.

Tight but Not Constricting

In your efforts to trim the fat from your story and to be brief, be sure you don't omit necessary detail. Don't sacrifice meaning for brevity. Don't distort or leave out what's essential.

You have to be an editor. Decide what is important for your audience members to know and share it with them. Don't forget to explain WHY things are important and WHY things happen. Point out the significance. Explain the meaning. Tell your audience members how events, issues and developments will affect them. Answer the question, "So what?"

Include the causes and results of events, issues, policies and statements. WHY are phone bills going up? WHY are the garbage collectors on strike? WHY is the economy in trouble?

Be sure to give your audience members the reasons behind actions. Include all the important details. Your job is to explain complex events in a concise manner using understandable language. Do a thorough, professional job.

▶ HELPING LISTENERS AND VIEWERS

One to a Customer

When you're trying to report the complete story, don't cram your sentences with a jumble of separate facts. The old "summary lead" works reasonably well for newspaper and magazine stories, but it's rarely appropriate for radio-TV news stories. Limit most of your sentences to one idea, fact or image. It can become confusing when you start crowding different concepts, facts and elements of a story into a single sentence.

Take each part of the story one step at a time—one sentence at a time. When you limit sentences to one main point each, you give your audience members a chance to hear and understand all the elements of the story.

When you pack your sentences with a number of points, your audience members are bound to miss some of them. Remember, listeners and viewers can't easily go back and relisten as readers can go back and reread something they miss or don't understand the first time.

In most situations, listeners and viewers have to get the information on the first shot, or they don't get it at all. Taking the elements of each story one at a time—a sentence at a time—gives your audience members the best chance of getting the information they should get.

Example (poor): Governor Bonner says he paid only 50-dollars in state income taxes last year, because he suffered heavy losses in the stock market and donated his gubernatorial papers to Midwest State University where officials set the value of those papers at more than 300-thousand-dollars.

Lots of separate facts have been crowded into that one sentence. So many, in fact, that it's hard to understand them all. A rewrite of Governor Bonner's tax problems could help simplify the issue.

Example (better): Governor Bonner says he paid only 50-dollars in state income taxes last year for two main reasons. First . . . he suffered heavy losses in the stock market. And second . . . he donated his gubernatorial papers to Midwest State University. The University estimates those papers are worth about 300-thousand-dollars.

Nickel and Dime the Audience

Another way to help your listeners and viewers understand all the elements of your story is to use simple and direct words—the "nickel and dime" words. The big, impressive-sounding, multisyllabic, "10-dollar" words don't belong in radio-TV newswriting.

"The simpler the better" should be your motto, because the simple words are the ones more people will understand. Take a look at the following list of words. See if you don't agree that the simple words are the better words for radio-TV newswriting.

<u>Use</u>	<u>Don't Use</u>
anger	indignation
send	transmit

buy	purchase
show	exhibit
need	require
cuts	lacerations
bruises	contusions
dead	deceased
try	attempt
enough	sufficient
home	residence
give	contribute
question	interrogate
see	witness
use	utilize

▶ TELL THE STORY

Talking It Out

While writing your story, it's a good idea to say the sentences out loud before you write them on paper or put them into the computer. If you talk your story out—or at least say it to yourself—and it sounds simple and understandable to you, it's a good bet that your audience members will understand it, too.

After you've finished writing your story, read it out loud. Listen to how it *sounds*. Be sure it says what you want it to say. Be sure you sound as if you're *telling* a story, not *reading* a story.

Example: Taxi service in Midcity is going green. Mayor Ronald Moore says over the next two years all of the taxi companies in town will have to convert to fuel-efficient hybrids. The phase-in will work like this: Within the next six months, 25-percent of all taxis will have to be hybrids. This time next year, 50% will have to be hybrids. Two years from now, all our taxis will be hybrids. In addition to being fuel-efficient, the taxis will have to be painted some shade of green to emphasize their environmentally friendly nature.

▶ READ THE STORY

Eyeing It Up

Although much of the emphasis in radio-TV newswriting is on writing copy that's easy on the ear, you should remember that somebody—you, a newscaster or a sportscaster—has to *read* that copy. You have to make your copy easy on the eye as well as easy on the ear. You'll need to follow the rules we've already covered, plus all the ones to come in Part 2.

A little later we'll be going over some specifics on how to write words and numbers so they're easy for a newscaster to read. We'll also cover how to provide pronunciation guides and how to edit a printed script.

The important thing to remember is to write your stories so the newscaster can read them easily and the audience members can listen to them and understand them easily.

Example: Midcity is getting a new, downtown library after all. The Board of Supervisors approved the 25-million-dollar project this morning. Last week, the Board voted to delay the project for at least five years, but Mayor Ronald Moore agreed to some budget modifications that freed up enough money to fund the new library. The new 80-thousand-square-foot library will be built on city-owned land at the corner of Broadway and Market. Construction is scheduled to start next month.

► SUMMARY

Here's a quick summary of the general hints for radio-TV newswriting that we've covered so far.

1. Be original. Tell the story in your own words. Don't parrot source copy.
2. Use short sentences, but create a flow to your writing—a natural, conversational flow.
3. Trim the excess fat of needless words, especially adjectives and adverbs.
4. Be as brief and concise as you can.
5. Write tightly, but don't sacrifice meaning. Be sure to include the WHY, the significance and the meaning of the story.
6. Don't cram your sentences full of facts. Take the elements of each story one at a time—a sentence at a time.
7. Use the “nickel and dime” words, not the “10-dollar” words. Use words that are easy to say, easy to listen to and easy to understand.
8. Talk your story out. Make sure it *sounds* right.
9. Make your stories easy on the eye as well as easy on the ear. Make it easy for a newscaster to read your copy and make it easy for your audience to listen to and understand your copy.
10. Think and write the way you talk.