

Radio Skills - Monday, May 13 – Friday, May 17, 2024

instructor: PETER SKINNER, former senior training producer, CBC

TAs:

<p>Monday, 13</p>	<p><u>morning</u></p> <p>Introduce Peter</p> <p>Audio - Stan Freberg</p> <p>radio training objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">-Understand how the medium of radio works for the listener-Understand radio’s strengths and weaknesses as a medium.-Understand how to best tell a story on radio-Be able to record, edit and mix sound to a broadcast standard of quality-Be able to write broadcast scripts.-Be able to present scripts-Understand basic broadcast principles.-to research, pre-interview, interview, record, edit, narrate, mix, & final edit a 1- to 2-minute radio news story (voicer) <p>Expectations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">-Be on time;-Professionalism. You’re all grownups. This is a real-world course to prepare you for the real business of broadcasting/podcasting. Deadlines.-No cell phones;-Participate; <p>-I expect you to talk about radio and podcasting. Share good programs, good podcasts, something you heard. Bring an example you can share. Radio is a collaboration. More eyes and ears on a piece improves the work.</p> <p>Be ready to present; radio is a performance medium.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">-Respect others’ opinions, work.-Proper, objective, professional criticism is not (and never should be) considered a personal attack. It’s not a
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judgement of your character or worth as a person. It's to improve the work for the benefit of the listener.

My approach:

-What I teach is a reflection of my path. This is how I learned, and I've refined this training through years of application and development with other trainers.

-I speak English, so what I teach about writing, especially, applies to the English language. If you can point out differences in how other languages work, I'm always interested in learning more.

-Different cultures tell stories in different ways; this is one way, and I believe it's the best way to tell a story on the radio. This doesn't mean it's the only way to tell a story.

-I talk fast. Interrupt me if you have a question or need clarification. I don't mind.

-At the end of each class, I'll ask what your major takeaway is.

-We'll have a parking lot for good questions I can't answer or aren't relevant to what I'm talking about. I'll find an answer and share with the person or the class as needed.

I loved being on the radio. Being paid to talk? It's like being paid to eat. - Rachel Maddow

[National Indigenous Peoples Day program for MBC: theme?, program elements, roles and responsibilities, deadlines]

Interview exercise:

-Who are you?

-What experience do you have in radio or podcasting?

-What are your expectations for this part of the training?

-What's one interesting fact about you that you would like people to know?

afternoon

Radio as a medium for storytelling

Radio's strengths and weaknesses as a medium.

-Radio is a medium of immediacy. Cell phone fire example.

-Radio is an intimate medium. It connects to the listener directly. Think about how and when and where we listen to the radio. Morning show example. Driving alone example.

-Here's what radio is good at: conveying a sense of place, of action, of emotion.

-Here's what radio is not so good at: statistics; complex concepts; math. Leave that to another medium that can illustrate or give a person the time to absorb information. And in this age of multi-platform transmission of information, you can provide a link to another medium that can carry those details your radio or podcast story doesn't have. Proviso: this isn't to say that everything on radio has to be simplistic or dumbed-down. It has to be simple, clear, direct, powerful.

-Why? Because radio is live, in the moment. If I don't understand something in your web story...

Listening to the radio, if you miss something, it's gone. If I don't get what you're saying, I can't rewind it and listen to it again. I suppose you could say that a podcast listener could do that, but why would you force them to? Be clear the first time.

-So here's the first most basic, important concept about radio: you're only talking to one person. Yes, you may be broadcasting, but you're only really talking to one person. We'll call that person 'the listener'.

-This will be important throughout this course, as it affects both your writing and performance.

-What's great about this concept is that it's already true when it comes to podcasts.

-Here's the second most basic, important concept about radio and podcasting. No matter what you're doing, even if you're doing a piece that's "journalism", remember that what you really are is a storyteller. I don't care if you're reading the weather or sports scores or the news or talking about the piece of music you're going to play. You're telling a story. As humans, we relate to stories. Because stories have characters, and actions, and

motivations and emotions.

-Here's the third most basic, important concept about radio and podcasting: some hard truths.

-Hard truth #1: Don't be boring. If I can choose from more than two dozen radio stations or more than 1,000,000 podcasts, not to mention cable TV, streaming TV, satellite TV, the internet, magazines, newspapers, books, social media or watching my dog do something stupid, why should I spend my time listening to you? So don't be boring. "But Peter," you say, "How do I not be boring? How do I engage and entertain/inform/move and keep the listener?" Tell good stories. Tell them well. Care about the stories. Care about the listener. Be authentic. Be yourself.

-Hard truth #2: This is work with deadlines. Radio is live, and if you're not ready, there's no do-over. If you're not sitting there ready to read the 7:30 news at 7:30, you likely won't get another chance tomorrow. And don't think it's easier with podcasts. If you can't deliver on a regular basis and meet the listener's expectation for a new episode, don't be surprised if the listener just gives up waiting.

-Hard truth #3: Every time you go on the air or release a new podcast episode, it's an audition. There might be someone listening to you for the first time. So you have to be ready to impress, every time. And remember, the listener doesn't care if you're tired, or don't really like the story you're working on, or had a fight with your partner, or you got yelled at by your boss. The listener doesn't care. It's not that the listener doesn't like you; they just don't care about you outside of your presence in their ears. So be your best.

And that leads to hard truth #4: Be your best. Do your best. Not perfect, because perfect just gets in the way of being your best. Do the work, and care about your stories. Understand what quality sound is and get it every time.

-What are the 4 elements of radio?

Radio is made up of just 4 things: voice, sound, music, silence.

Voice: The human voice is what we have evolved to hear. There is an inherent musicality to the human voice. Every voice has a tone, rhythm, texture, cadence, timbre, energy. The voices of elders are marked by time and experience. The voices of children sound like their energy and enthusiasm. Voices can command and cajole, whisper and shout, sing and cry. A single human voice can tell a story that carries us to places and introduces us to characters as real as we are.

Sound: Our world is filled with sounds. We ignore a lot of them or take them for granted; they form the background of our lives. We get used to constant sounds like traffic or wind or a refrigerator humming. We pay attention when a sound occurs as a surprise: a door slamming, a baby crying suddenly. Sound creates a sense of place. You can hear a certain sound and know immediately where you are. Or it can create a sense of mystery that draws you into a scene.

Music: Can be a powerful trigger of emotions, memory and time & place. It defines communities of people and culture. It can become the soundtrack of our lives. It can play right in the front of our awareness or fade into the background.

Then there's silence. Silence can speak as loudly as any of the other three elements of radio. Silence is necessary to contrast the other three in the same way that darkness contrasts light. Silence is the pause that allows the listener to understand and absorb an emotion. It's the moment when meaning becomes clear because of what isn't said.

Exercise: 10 minutes of listening:

-Share your results. What did you hear that you wouldn't normally pay attention to?

-Listening is important because we have to be active listeners when we interview someone, or listen to their story. We have to learn to listen to our environment for sounds that we want and sounds that we don't want, e.g., that refrigerator running in the room while you're recording.

Participation: What makes a good radio story?

Don't tell me about the bell ringing; let me hear the bell ring. Similarly: don't tell me someone's story; let them tell it.

Audio - Hindenburg

-A sense of place;

-A sense of occasion - what would have been another way to hear this story?

-Personal connection through emotion, shared experience, relevance;

-Why this story? Why now?

-Arrogance: you have something to say. Even if it's a story that's been told before, it's new because you are telling it. So - what's your take?

Students' stories review: pitch notes

-Engagement: Why do you care about the story? Why should I care if you don't?

Gathering quality sound

*****Most important*****

If your source sound is no good, it will cause you all sorts of problems later on. Get it right!

Technical training: field recording, mic techniques, studio recording, Audacity

Daily review

Tuesday, 14

morning

Writing for radio: Focus

A story is: Someone Doing Something For A Reason

Focus is Who + What + Why

A Focus Statement should include the word "because". You can't assume it's obvious why you are talking to someone, or why the listener should care what the guest has to say.

A strong focus helps your listeners remember what the story was really about.

A Focus Statement is a snapshot of the story. Imagine the story visually and describe the action.

The Focus Statement is based on research. Use the Focus Statement to build the interview questions.

When choosing a verb for the Focus Statement, pick a verb that can be seen as a picture. For example, "John phones" is stronger than "John learns".

The more vivid you can get a Focus Statement, the more useful it is to get a clear movement through a story.

Focus is the filter that tells you what's in the story and what's out.

Focus is the framework for the story that supports all the details that tell the story.

Focus is essential in writing for radio. The CBC defines "focus" as: Somebody is doing something for a reason.

Put another way: character, action, motivation.

Your story has to have a focus, even if the story is boring and bureaucratic, or seems to be nothing more than a process (e.g., land claim negotiations). Find the character, the action and the motivation for the action. As humans, we relate to people, their actions and their motivations and feelings better than we do to processes, institutions or concepts. That doesn't mean we don't do stories about those things, but it's crucial to find the human element, the character that we can relate to. Focus can also

help you pursue accountability in those process-y stories by getting you to search for the person responsible for a decision or action, i.e., by finding your 'character' or the 'someone' who is doing something.

Here's what a story is NOT:

-A story is not information, though it may inform you because it contains information.

-It is not explaining an issue, though it may do that.

-It is not a sermon.

The beginning of every story holds the potential for something unexpected to happen.

Be specific.

Make your story from scenes and pictures.

A good focus helps you ensure that your story has:

-context: Why are you telling this story? Why now? For ongoing or long-term stories, does it include information to remind the listener of where we are in the story and why this step is important. Does the story tell the listener something that he or she didn't know, or add to his or her knowledge of an existing story?

-relevance: How does this affect the listener?

-humanity/empathy: Is there some essential aspect of the story that the listener can relate to even if the story doesn't have a direct effect on his/her life?

"Writing well means never having to say, 'I guess you had to be there.' "

— Jef Mallett

Exercise: Students' stories focus

-If you care about telling your story, you have to care about language.

afternoon

Radio news formats

The Interview

-The purpose of the Interview is to LEARN the story. The purpose of the parts of the interview you choose to use is to COMMUNICATE the story.

-You want to get the Who, What, Where, When and How of the story. What's the story? Who are the characters? When did it happen? Where did it happen? How did it unfold/what led to it?

You leave the WHY for the final question.

-Tell the person you are recording. This protects you if they later say they thought the talk was off the record.

-Get the guest to pronounce their name clearly; have them spell it as well.

-What is their title (how will you introduce them to the listener?); do they use a different title for this interview?

-Use your question list to get the information you need. Make notes throughout so you know the key emotions, motivations, and turning points in the story.

-The first part of the interview is about Development: exploration, background, definitions.

	<p>-Listen for the emotions, the motivations, what's at stake. Listen for the clues that will help you figure out from the answers what your 'WHY' questions will be.</p> <p>-The last part of the pre-interview is about Mop-Up: pin down details, follow loose ends, take a few flyers or ask riskier questions (without jeopardizing the interview).</p> <p>-Wrap-up questions:</p> <p>What did I not ask that I should have? Who else should I talk to? What would that person tell me? How do I get in touch with you if I have any other questions?</p> <p>-Your next step is to schedule the interview(s).</p> <p>Work time: Book guest Daily review</p>
<p>Wednesday, 15</p>	<p><u>morning</u></p> <p>-record interviews</p> <p><u>afternoon</u></p> <p>Editing - focus</p> <p>-Editing is about listening to your piece for clear answers, clear thoughts, clear storylines and connections.</p> <p>-You listen, note the options, note where they are in the raw tape.</p> <p>-You make decisions.</p> <p>The key is to establish a clear focus (Somebody is doing something for a reason.) and use it as a guide and a filter. Then listen to the questions. In this case, I had a focus, and my questions came directly from that focus. So, listen to the</p>

	<p>questions, and listen to when he actually answers the questions. In some cases, he doesn't, at least not directly. In that case, get what you can, or, if the question didn't successfully get an answer, and the host didn't do his job of following up and getting an answer, take out the whole question.</p> <p>Or maybe he ends up answering the question later in the interview - in that case, find that answer and move it next to the question. And you'll know that because you listened to the whole interview and made notes about what he said.</p> <p>Spend the time at the start LISTENING and MAKING NOTES. That makes the rest of the work easier and quicker.</p> <p>-When you're finished editing, listen to the whole thing again. Make notes of any changes or fixes you need to do. Are the pauses natural? Does the information flow make sense? Is there anything unnecessary that you can take out? Go back and make the changes.</p> <p>Edit interviews for clips</p> <p>Daily review</p>
<p>Thursday, 16</p>	<p><u>morning</u></p> <p>Writing - focus</p> <p>Writing For Radio - TRANSCRIBE YOUR CLIPS</p> <p>The problem with writing for radio is that our years of schooling have taught us to write for the eye. Therefore, when we read to ourselves what we have written on paper or on a screen, we accept it because it was meant for the eye. The structure that we are familiar with isn't designed to be read aloud.</p> <p>Our task is to make speech, not writing. We write for something to be read out loud and heard, in real time. We write to tell a story. The challenge is that we aren't taught to write the way we talk.</p> <p>What we write for broadcast, someone has to speak. What we want to write is not conversation, with all of its digressions and hesitations. We want to write like we would want to speak: clearly, directly, simply, comprehensibly.</p> <p>Writing influences performance. Clear, simple, direct writing is easier to read, and easier for the listener to understand.</p>

We are all natural storytellers. The ear is designed to hear the human voice. Broadcast writing is specialized, formalized storytelling with a very specific purpose and style, but storytelling nonetheless.

Radio is an effective medium for telling stories that carry emotion, description and a sense of place. It is less effective for conveying complex ideas, statistics and details. The essential weakness of radio is that if the listener doesn't understand the story in one listen, it's lost. Unlike a web or print story, you can't go back over a point that isn't clear.

Writing for the ear

a) Remember radio's weakness: its ephemeral nature. How do you convey your story with The Listener missing any of it?

-a simple rule: One thought per sentence.

-paraphrase: If you can find a simpler way to say it by paraphrasing it, be simpler.

-Check what you've written against your focus.

-Read it out loud. Is it easy to perform? Does it make sense? Did you stumble? (A stumble will almost always indicate the need for you to rewrite that part of the script.)

Broadcast news is limited to short stories. The average copy story runs 20 to 45 seconds. A script/clip can be from 30 to 50 seconds. A voicer runs 55 to 75 seconds. You have to be able to tell your story in that limited time; that means deciding what your story is and how much of it you can tell.

Storytelling example: Even a 5-year-old and a 3-year-old can tell a story.

Two Little Girls Explain The Worst Haircut Ever

Some rules for radio writing

Common mistakes to look for in news writing

(based, in part, on notes from CBC trainer David Candow)

Below is a list of suggestions to bear in mind. By avoiding the following, you will enhance your performance:

-One Thought Per Sentence:

-There are three types of sentences: simple, compound and complex.

A simple sentence contains a subject and a verb.

A compound sentence is composed of two simple sentences joined by a coordinating conjunction ("and," "but," "or," "nor").

A complex sentence is composed of two simple sentences joined by a subordinating conjunction (which may be temporal, such as "when"; causal, such as "because"; or concessive, such as "although").

-The use of a conjunction such as 'and' or 'but' in the middle of a sentence indicates you are linking two thoughts.

e.g. "The use of a conjunction in the middle of a sentence indicates you are linking two thoughts and it is to be avoided at all costs in speech."

Better: "Don't use a conjunction in the middle of a sentence. It indicates you are linking two thoughts.
"Avoid it at all costs."

-The use of a participle or gerund (any word ending in '-ing') at the beginning of a sentence.

e.g. "Taking a page from his father's campaign book, Justin Trudeau ran from reporters."

Better: "Justin Trudeau ran from reporters.
"Years ago, his father did the same during an election campaign."

-The use of a participle or gerund halfway through a sentence. In this case, the voice will be passive and you will have linked two separate thoughts.

e.g. "The premier visited the areas affected by the flood today, hoping it would counteract charges that he was ignoring residents of the south shore."

Better: "The premier visited the areas affected by the flood today.

"He hoped it would counteract charges that he was ignoring residents of the south shore."

-The words 'which' or 'that' are strong indicators that you are about to write a subordinate clause. Put a full stop in front of them, and begin a new sentence.

e.g. "Human rights advocate Nelson Mandela visited the small hospital in Cape Town, which was the birthplace of a friend and longtime supporter."

Better: "Human rights advocate Nelson Mandela visited the small hospital in Cape Town. The city was the birthplace of a friend and longtime supporter."

-The verb "to be" is the only verb in the language that has no action in it.

e.g. "She is sick." (The verb indicates the state of being.)
How do you know she is sick? Write about how you know she is sick, as in: "She was lying on the floor. She was too weak to pull herself up."

-Active vs. Passive Voice:

A verb is in the passive voice when the object of the sentence is acted on by the verb. e.g.: "The ball was thrown by the pitcher." The same sentence in active voice: "The pitcher threw the ball."

Active voice is more powerful, more direct and more clear. (There are times when you may have to use passive voice, such as when the action took place without a defined character performing it, or the attribution is lost or unavailable.)

Keep in mind that institutions such as governments often use passive voice, specialized jargon, statements attributed to a department, etc., to diffuse responsibility and accountability.

-Titular or adjectival build-up:

Don't turn nouns into adjectives. e.g.: "A Yellowknife man" vs. "a man from Yellowknife".

Don't make a person's condition a defining characteristic. e.g.: "a homeless person", "the homeless". Better: "a person who is homeless". You wouldn't refer to a person with cancer as "a cancerous person".

Don't use someone's title or position as an adjective.

e.g.: "The assistant deputy minister of the department of finance responsible for fiscal forecasting John Smith says this year's budget analysis will be several months late."

Better: "John Smith is the assistant deputy minister of the department of finance.

"He's responsible for fiscal forecasting.

"Smith says this year's budget analysis will be several months late."

Better, still, if the person's title is not journalistically significant to the story, i.e., isn't necessary to establish his credibility or authority to speak: "John Smith is with the department of finance."

-Abbreviations, acronyms and jargon:

Because we cover certain stories over a significant length of time, we build up a knowledge of those stories that rivals that of the people involved. This is especially true in cases of the territorial or Indigenous governments, the mining industry or any other specialized industry or business. Sometimes we use abbreviations, acronyms or jargon (specialized language particular to the industry or organization), and wrongly assume that the listener understands what they mean.

e.g.: "The chief initialed an MOU regarding the IBA in advance of signing an AIP with the government."

The listener might not recognize the abbreviations for a Memorandum of Understanding, an Impact Benefit Agreement or an Agreement-in-Principle.

There is a tendency to shorten "government of the Northwest Territories" to its common abbreviation, GNWT or the government of Nunavut to GN. Now, what follows is less of a journalistic directive and more of an opinion about style. For radio stories that are heard only in the Northwest Territories, I prefer to say "the territorial government". It carries the inherent implication of which territory I'm referring to because I'm reading it here, in the Northwest Territories. For the web and television, where all three territories are mentioned, you should use the full name.

Why the full name and not an abbreviation such as GNWT or GN (Government of Nunavut)? To my ear the full name sounds and looks better. It's more precise. It doesn't carry any sense of being an insider and creates a nice feeling of journalistic distance. And yes, it takes longer to say or read. The difference is about one second or four syllables. In terms of duration, that's a small price to pay.

Jargon is a way of creating both a feeling of inclusion and exclusion. Groups and organizations use jargon to define who's in and who's out. Jargon also speeds up the processes we work with. That's why we say "Did you vet the green for that tape/talk?" By using the government's abbreviation, I feel we risk associating ourselves too closely with them.

"Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." -- George Orwell, 1946, *Politics and the English Language*

-Redundancies:

e.g.: back in (e.g., "back in 1985"; "in 1985" will do, as the "backness" of it is clearly implied); "safe haven" (a haven is, by definition, safe); first-ever ('first' means first); missed out ('missed' will do); up and running (running). There are more.

-Cliches:

There are hundreds of words and phrases that may have been novel and powerful when they were coined, but have long-since lost their novelty and effect because of overuse.

Applying the rules - cheat sheet

afternoon

1st drafts - vetting

Vetting routine

-to improve the story (not necessarily to improve the reporter)

-to create a story that will engage, inform, enlighten

-some stories don't get to the interesting "why"

-some reporters need to be told why we vet; some

assume it's change for change's sake, or the producer taking ownership of the story

-vetting is establishing an understanding, a contract, between the producer and the reporter that is based in the idea that everything needs a vet, that the producer and reporter are collaborating for the benefit of the listener/viewer/reader, that the work is professional, not personal.

The vetting process starts when a reporter pitches an idea or is assigned to a story. We talk about focus and what we want to get. Of course, the reporter has to be open to new and better stories but it's always nice to have a map even if she/he has to toss it.

When the reporter comes back I usually ask, "What do you have?" The response from the reporter lets me know what to expect for the next cast and helps the reporter focus before she/he starts to write. The conversation isn't very long. At this stage, if I see that the reporter doesn't know what her/his story is, I take a more active role and help her/him focus it before writing begins. It makes for an easier vet later.

Once the reporter has a story and clips all written, she/he comes to me for the official vet, we have another conversation and I ask three questions:

1. What's the story about? This helps determine if the person has a focus and story. (the who, what, why)
2. What do you like about the story? (sometimes it's sound, sometimes it's a clip, sometimes it's a turn of phrase.) I will not accept "nothing." If the reporter doesn't like anything about the story, then the reporter is wasting the listeners time and mine. In this chat sometimes I find that they've left out what they liked and the nub of the story.
3. What's the one thing the listener will remember when you sign off? This of course goes back to focus.

Then I get the reporter to read the focus statement, intro and voice reports. When possible I play the clips off the computer. If that's not possible I have the reporter read them. At this point all I do is listen and perhaps jot down a few notes. I am listening to make sure the story as a whole makes sense.

The intro has to set up the listener to understand the action of the story. The why of the main clip should be foreshadowed in the intro without giving away the whole story.

In the lead of the voice report I listen for scene setting, character, Action: what the story is about. It should build in tension, anticipation or conflict leading to the "why" or "insight" of the story in the middle. The end of the story should have closure. Stewart MacLean would say endings should a) sum up the story, b) point to the future or c) introduce a new fact to complete the story (but one that doesn't raise too many questions.)

Then begins what I call the negotiation between editor and reporter to improve the story so that the listener is better informed, entertained and enlightened.

I'll make sure the story is accurate, flows logically, the clips have opinion, example or emotion and moves the story along. I'll also nitpick grammar and sentence structure. It's the editor in me. I am always encouraging, but politely honest. I want to improve the reporter's story, not make it mine. That's the temptation of young editors. They want to take someone else's story and make it their own.

I am assuming that the reporter is open to vetting. She/he wants to make it the best story possible. I want my reporter to fight for their stories and not sit passively and let me make changes. I'm sure you've run into the reporters that refuse to play ball in vetting and do everything possible to avoid it.

Now all this presupposes that you have the time. This is what I do in ideal situations. When I'm coming up to a newscast at CBC and a reporter comes to me with a story all I can do is listen for sensibility but there's no way I can do a big structural vet. That's why I'm on my reporters all the time to do their work as quickly as possible. I'm more successful with some than others.

Daily review

Friday, 17

morning

-presentation

Radio presentation: how radio works as a medium for conveying information; physiology of the voice; engaging the listener in a conversation; presence; relaxation

- assembly

afternoon

- Assembly continues

Audio - Beaver Attack

Week review. Listening session