

# Better Writing Through Radio

## Intro from Jay Allison

Nancy Updike speaks plainly. In her radio interviews, you can tell she's really curious; she's asking what you would ask if you had the presence of mind. She writes with the same honesty you hear in her interviews, and with what might pass for simplicity, if it weren't so tricky to do.

Now, she unveils some of her secrets on Transom. You will find them so concrete that you will print out her tips and keep them by you next time you need to solve a writing problem, which will probably be any minute now.

## Better Writing Through Radio, Part I

At a dinner party hosted by the head of a large public radio station, I overheard the host say at one point, "Writing doesn't matter much in radio stories, does it?" I thought: is this person drunk? Or do I need to get drunk because I've wasted the last several years trying to get better at something no one cares about? I mean, if the writing doesn't matter, then what's the difference between a good radio story and a mediocre one? Just the tape?

I would argue that a lot of flabby, barely-interesting radio results from expecting too much from the tape and not enough from the writing. Good writing can make imperfect tape good, and good tape better. It can create thoroughly satisfying radio scenes with no tape at all. It tells listeners why they should bother listening to the tape that's being played.

Writing for radio is also great discipline. I've always been a bit literal-minded, and until I started writing radio stories, I don't think I got what people meant by "voice" when they talked about writing. With radio, I had to stop writing the way I thought I should, and start writing closer to the way I think and speak; the words had to fit me, so that I could read them out loud.

I'd like to tackle, here, three aspects of radio writing: beginnings, writing into and out of tape, and writing a scene without tape. With those skills, a person can write a radio piece that lasts a minute or an hour. But first let me lay out a few things I find useful to do before I start to write and as I'm writing, because they make the writing process go more smoothly. In radio, I find that being organized and obsessive pays off.

Over-report... Writing a radio story is much easier when you have more good tape than you can use. I always reach a point, in reporting a story, where I feel like I'm finished. I feel this finished-ness very strongly, and it makes me want to stop interviewing immediately and go home. I force myself to keep going beyond that point

because I almost always end up remembering another couple of questions, or one more person it might be good to interview, and something interesting often comes out of sticking around. A corollary of this over-reporting rule: be sure to ask your interviewee all those impertinent, inappropriate questions that float through your head as they're talking. If you think you might need to say in the story that you thought their ideas in a certain area were kind of crackpot, you will want to have tape from them responding to that.

2. Save your emails... As you're reporting a story, it's a good idea to email friends or family (or, if you have this kind of relationship, your editor or producer) about what you're getting. The emails will be a good, brief record of what you found most compelling during the reporting, and they'll help you remember how things looked and felt when you first saw and did them. Also, writing the story of whatever you're seeing, in an informal way, to one or two people who are close to you may give you good material for your script later on. Whether you email anyone or not, jot down at the end of the day the moments that stuck in your mind from the interviews you did.

3. Save earlier drafts/make an OUTS page... As soon as I open a page to start a story, I open another page and label it "OUTS." Anything I cut from the story, I paste into the outs page. Any time I start making major revisions in the script, I save it as a new version. It's hard to resist having a sort of Enlightenment view of whatever you're working on-it's getting better and better all the time!-but sometimes the way you phrased some bit the first time was best. And sometimes not. With the earlier versions saved, you can compare and choose.

4. Make lists... I always make lists of what I've got before I start writing, and the more material I have, the more lists I make. The headings are usually "Scenes," "Stories," (i.e. stories that an interviewee tells on tape), and "Ideas" (the big ideas and themes that are part of the story). I've also recently started putting a small list on the first page of my tape logs, noting what's in the log. The lists help me stay focused while I'm writing, rather than getting lost in the material.

# Beginnings

Here are the beginnings of three radio stories:

I was hired to interview men and women in the state of Utah who receive Medicaid support for treatment of mental illnesses generally diagnosed as schizophrenia. I had little understanding of schizophrenia before I began, and I have little more understanding now. I took the job because I had no other. I took the job because I'd just quit my steady job, my professional job, after realizing that what I wanted more than anything was to put my boss on the floor, put my foot on his throat, and watch him gag. Then my wife moved out, took the kids and everything. She said, "I've thought about it and I really think that this is the best thing for me at this time in my life."

—Scott Carrier, "The Test."

On a nondescript patch of desert in Utah live two neighbors who no longer talk to each other. Nuclear waste is the source of their disagreement. Leon Bear and Margene Bullcreek, with about a dozen others, live on the Goshute Native American reservation in Skull Valley. Leon Bear wants to rent out the reservation to store much of the nation's spent nuclear fuel. Bullcreek, who lives across the street from Bear, hates the idea.

—Dave Kestenbaum, "A Tribe Split By Nuclear Waste."

My name is Joe Roberts. I work for the state. I'm a sergeant out of Perrineville, Barracks Number Eight. I always done an honest job, as honest as I could. I've got a brother named Frankie, and Frankie ain't no good.

—Bruce Springsteen, "Highway Patrolman"

These are three very different kinds of stories: an essay, a news story, and a song. But in each one, right away, you have characters, conflict, place, stakes, and a story where you want to know what happens next. Each includes details - neighbors who no longer speak, a man who dreams of making his boss choke, a sergeant who tries to be honest—that stick in your mind and heighten your understanding of the characters.

Other details that might be interesting but aren't necessary are omitted. How old are any of these people? How many kids does Scott have? Is Frankie the younger brother or the older one? We don't know. Maybe we find out later, maybe we don't. It depends on what the story needs.

Writing, in a radio story, has to be tighter and simpler than print: the beginning should hook listeners fast and hard, the way a song does. A succession of straightforward, declarative sentences (like those in the beginnings above) might feel a bit too clipped in a print story, but it's just right for radio. A reader can always go back and re-read part of a print story, or stop for a minute to think about a difficult section, and then resume reading. Radio has to be clear the first time around. Also, a radio story has to be a little sluttier with its charms: it can't be coy and get to the most interesting stuff a couple of minutes in. It has to frontload the drama, and not be too subtle about it. Bullcreek, in Dave's story, "hates" the nuclear waste proposition. Hate is a nice, strong word. Joe Roberts, in the Springsteen song, does not beat around the bush: his brother, Frankie, is no good. We, as listeners, know right away that this story will end in tragedy, but that doesn't spoil the ending for us, just primes us for it. In fact, giving away the ending at the start of a radio story can be a great strategy, especially if the story itself is a slow build. In one beginning I wrote, I laid out the whole story before playing any tape:

This story is like one of those Russian dolls, where there's always a smaller one inside. The smallest doll, the core of the drama, is the fact that Mubarak, a childhood sissy, grew up to be a different kind of sissy from his father. His father is nerdy and bookish; Mubarak's gay. Everything around that core gets bigger and bigger until you can't believe the biggest and the smallest have anything to do with each other, the one is so bloated and the other so tiny. At the beginning of this story, Mubarak's parents are married and in love, and both prepared to live far from everything they know to be with each other. At the end of the story, they may still be in love, but they're divorced, and an ocean apart, and not speaking. And Mubarak is caring for his mother the way a husband might.

Now, in terms of the outcome, there's no reason to listen to the rest of the piece. But with a lot of stories, the interesting part is not what happened, but how and why it happened, and what role each character played in their own fate.

If you get stuck writing a beginning, go back to a story you like and dissect the way it starts. What did the writer do and how did he do it? The beginning of Scott's "The Test," for instance, is a little masterpiece. It's dense and gripping: in six lines, a man quits his job, loses his family and takes a job as a traveling interviewer of schizophrenics. It's not generic. Scott doesn't write: "I hate my boss' guts." He writes about a specific fantasy he had about torturing his boss. He doesn't just say that his wife left, he includes her parting line, so she becomes a bit of a character too. In fact, both of those moments — the line about the boss and the two lines about his wife leaving — are tiny, powerful scenes. He uses repetition to drive home an idea in a poetic way: "I took the job because I had no other. I took the job because I'd just quit my steady job, my professional job..." Every two sentences, he adds a layer, and some new aspect of the drama is revealed. He lays out the central question of the story that will follow—what is the difference between a healthy mind and a sick one? — in a very sly way, almost in passing: "I had little understanding of schizophrenia before I began, and I have little more understanding now." Think of the beginning of your story as the start of a first date: you want to put your most fascinating, original, honestly seductive self forward. One last dorky tip for writing beginnings: try writing a host intro before starting to write the opening of the story. That will help you sort out what should go in the story's set-up, versus how the story itself should start.

Compiled By Rich Culbertson