

## Radio Stylebook (updated March 2009)

### Preface

This stylebook is the result of a collective effort on the part of several generations of journalists in the English service. I want to thank Tony Cross for adding pertinent comments and ideas, collating the suggestions of his colleagues and updating an earlier edition of the book.

Presentation and good writing are at least half the story of accurate reporting for radio, and the only way to be effective on the airwaves. You are writing what someone else may end up reading on the air. You have to be logical and clear. Copy should be tight. Every word should count, with the most important facts (the who, what, when, where and why of the story) at the top. Ideally one should be able to cut the story down, as time permits on the air, from the bottom up, without destroying its sense. This “inverted pyramid” in straight copy should be the rule.

You will find, as you go through this handbook, that suggestions for other forms of radio writing are also laid out. Writing news copy is not the same as crafting a sound-rich wrap or a highly-produced radio feature.

Please remember that the Radio France International English Service Stylebook remains a work in progress.

Barbara Giudice  
Head of the English Service

## Introduction

Writing for broadcast is a different skill to writing for print media. The reader may reread complex or unfamiliar phrases to make sense of them but the listener does not have this luxury. If he or she does not understand what we are saying, his/her probable response will be to switch off, possibly never to tune in again. At best, we'll have failed to communicate what we wish to say.

The secret of communicating with an audience is to speak as though you were talking to one person and to imagine yourself doing so when you are writing. Don't think of writing the story, think of telling it in everyday language - something to remember in voice work, too.

When in doubt over the use of a word or phrase, put yourself in the listener's place: "Would the man on the Ouagadougou street understand what I'm writing?"

Writing news for radio demands that the copy be tight and accurate. One of the main rules to remember is that your copy will be read aloud, perhaps by someone who has not seen it before going on air. The meaning should be clear, without using unnecessary words which obstruct comprehension. Every useless word means a second wasted - too many unnecessary words will result in whole stories being dropped. But, if it comes to a choice between more words and confusion, use more words.

The principle sources of our stories are news-agency dispatches. But the agency journalist's task is different to ours. Agency copy is presented so that it can be reproduced in the written press and is often not suitable for reading aloud. Cutting and pasting from dispatches is not a good idea, unless in extreme urgency. Some of the written press style is almost certain to filter through; sometimes quite a lot of it does.

The listener cannot hear punctuation. Your copy must speak for itself. So inverted commas, capital letters etc. are only useful as a guide to the reader and are sometimes more of a nuisance than a help.

Always think of the sound of what you write. This is important not just for style but for clarity - avoid words which slide into each other, for example if there are a lot of "s"s. Listen to what you write and read your copy aloud to yourself if it helps.

English is not the first language of many of our listeners. They may even be listening partly in order to improve their understanding and use of the language (what a responsibility!). So copy should be simple and clear.

Our listeners are scattered over several countries. Political, historical and cultural references which are obvious to someone in one country are not necessarily clear to someone else. Don't take prior knowledge for granted.

Sentences should be short and to-the-point. Journalism teachers recommend a

maximum of 14 words per sentence on the basis that the attention span of a listener for one idea is 20 seconds. Don't worry about unnecessary adjectives to convey meaning. The reader's voice can convey nuances and a good newsreader will use the voice to convey gravity, frivolity etc.

Vocabulary should be as simple as the meaning allows. Like the tabloids, when faced with the choice of a short or a long word, choose the short one, unless too-frequent repetition means that you need the synonym. Elegant variations (e.g. *the Middle Kingdom; the language of Molière; the language of Shakespeare*) are unnecessary and obstruct understanding. They're also usually clichés.

Consistency is important. Changes in style from one story to the next sound sloppy and are confusing. The main purpose of this style-book is to ensure consistency.

Whenever possible, use verbs in the active rather than the passive voice. The active voice is stronger and makes the news more immediate.

*The gunman shot five students before fleeing the scene*

has more impact than:

*Five students were shot by the gunman who then fled the scene.*

The passive voice also often gives less information by allowing one of the crucial "w"s (who) to be omitted.

*Police shot five students during a demonstration*

tends to become:

*Five students were shot during a demonstration*

To help reading, break copy into paragraphs, either for each sentence or according to closely-related sets of information.

Start down the page to facilitate late changes or hand-written changes if a story moves while on air.

Read your copy over before saving it. A missing word can cause the presenter to fluff or try and guess the word, perhaps wrongly. Omitting a word like "not" can have disastrous, even actionable, consequences.

Try and keep "married" words on the same line, e.g. "election day", "boat ride" and a person's full name. Hyphens are often useful to this end, especially but not exclusively, when creating composite qualifiers to a noun, e.g. "He visited his bed ridden aunt" - if the line breaks after bed, the reader may be confused.

Don't give irrelevant information. If the Minister of Finance says "X,Y and Z", we don't need to know that he did so at a press conference. The details detract from the message. And they're boring.

*See also: Appendix 4: And if you don't believe us...*

## Our format

The format of RFI's English-language broadcasts allows for a news bulletin, consisting of copy written in the office, sometimes with sound elements, or reports sent from outside. Magazines with varying timings follow that. Headlines are read at the quarter-hour and the half-hour.

Voicers written in-house or reports sent from outside should be 40-50 seconds, up to 1 minute 10 seconds if they contain a sound element. If the subject doesn't justify 1 minute 10 seconds, don't include sound or accept it from a correspondent.

Don't use more than one sound from the same person in a news piece; summarise the rest of what the person says in your copy. If there's more really good sound, consider giving it as a wrap. Don't allow the interviewer's voice to appear in a soundbite other than in really exceptional circumstances, e.g. you're talking to someone while they're in the midst of a dramatic event and their answers are, by necessity, short.

Sound from journalists or analysts in the news bulletin should be factual and not opinion. For a soundbite, try and get analysts to explain some aspect of the story which you would otherwise have to write into the copy (e.g. who the main players are, what the parties are, an important piece of background).

It is not compulsory to put sound from an interview in the news bulletin if there is nothing suitable or if an in-house voicer would explain a complex situation more clearly.

We don't use correspondents who report for other international radio stations.

The driver is editor of the bulletins on which s/he is working and is responsible for deciding priorities, for the quality of the copy and sound. S/he also ensures everything gets on air. These tasks will best be accomplished after discussing with co-workers.

The presenter should write part of the bulletin and reread copy written by other people, if possible. Sometimes events make this impossible, so make sure your copy is comprehensible.

The presenter will rewrite copy to facilitate reading but should consult with the original author if there's a risk of changing meaning.

When selecting a story, and what elements to include in your copy, ask yourself if the listener should care. If you can't answer that question positively, don't report it e.g. *"President So-and-so went to Dajar to meet President Such-and-such"*. If that's all there is to say, don't bother.

The format may be adapted (e.g. to extend the timing allowed to a package) in the event of major breaking news, someone sent by us to cover key historic events or good radio quality (e.g. lots of good sound elements on an interesting topic). This should be done

by the driver in consultation with the sound assistant.

Writing style in features can be more individual, while respecting the basic rule of comprehensibility. But please respect the timings.

## General rules in alphabetical order

### Abbreviations/acronyms

Most abbreviations should be avoided in copy as they are confusing to the eye. Write everything as it is to be read. Don't write "*Mon.*" for Monday, "*Jan.*" for January or "*Col.*" for Colonel.

United States may be abbreviated to U-S (especially in the case of "*United States Secretary of State*" and United Nations to U-N.

Some organisations with exceptionally complicated titles are best defined, rather than read out in all their glory, e.g. the international nuclear watch-dog, the I-A-E-A, Indonesia's former ruling party, Golkar.

In all other cases, the full name must be given on the first mention, followed by the initials or acronym, e.g. the African National Congress, the A-N-C.

If an abbreviation is not an acronym, write in upper case and put hyphens between the letters, e.g. A-N-C. If it is an acronym, write in lower case after the first letter, as you would any other title, e.g. Unscorn.

When working from dispatches in French (or any other language apart from English if you're that clever), make sure you find out and use the English name and acronym for an organisation, state etc. But if it's a group that Anglophones usually refer to by its non-English name or initials, use them before giving the full name in English or an explanation of what it is.

### Ages

Only to be given when relevant to the story, e.g. obituaries, someone being urged to retire because of age, someone who's been in prison a long time, someone who has been imprisoned exceptionally young etc.

### Breaking stories

Sometimes an important story breaks while the programme is on air. Readers must be able to improvise from dispatches when this happens. Announce that it's breaking news and the listener will forgive you if you fluff a bit (and it sounds exciting). Attribute to a source and promise updates later. Then make sure you give those updates.

### Capital cities

Some countries have capital cities which are not the best-known, largest or most economically important city, e.g. Switzerland (Berne), Australia (Canberra), Pakistan (Islamabad). Cities like Lagos (Nigeria), Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania), Karachi (Pakistan)

may be referred to as the economic capital.

## **Casualties**

As a rule of thumb, don't put death tolls, or similar figures which may change very quickly, in a report. Advise correspondents not to do so, either.

## **Catchlines**

Write the subject of your story in the running order file and indicate if it contains a sound element or is a module. Do the same at the top of the page of your copy. Short catch-lines are preferable to long ones, because more easily understood and replicated when necessary. If there's sound, make sure you use exactly the same words to name your written story and your sound file. Indicate the country in which the story is situated unless this is impossible, both for clarity and to help sorting afterwards for round-up programmes such as *Spotlight on Africa* and *Asia-Pacific*. If there's more than one story from the same country, it is obviously necessary to add extra detail in the catch-line, but try not to overdo it.

## **Content**

News reports should not express opinion. Correspondents and analysts will opine or analyse in the module section. Line copy should give facts. Do not pass off opinion or spin as reporting or analysis. Beware of hidden opinions in dispatches, newspapers etc. Could the subject in the phrase "*Analysts say*" possibly be the writer of the dispatch and his/her immediate social circle?

Anonymous sources, including unnamed diplomats, should be avoided if at all possible. The journalist who wrote the report may be able to judge their reliability, you can't. If there is only one source for an assertion, name the source first. Write "*The Israeli army says ...*", "*The Palestinian leadership claims ...*" etc. You're writing for radio, so name the source before giving the statement, since the listener will hear an unqualified statement as an assertion by the news-reader and may not take in the qualification that follows. It may be a bit duller that way but it avoids confusion.

Soundbites from players should be statements of their position on a question, i.e. they are likely to be statements of opinion or assertions that are open to question and should be presented as such, e.g. "*President Z accuses human rights activists of misleading the United Nations*" or "*General Y believes that he will capture the city*".

In news stories however, reporters or analysts must give the facts. If they're not hard news, they may be background, e.g. description of the main players, a summary of the sources of a conflict. An exception may be if you are talking to an authoritative journalist or commentator who is making well-founded charges which are the essential content of your story, e.g. Stephen Smith on the Rwanda enquiries.

Otherwise, if your interviewee is really so opinionated that it is impossible to get 40

seconds of facts, write a voicer and just use the interview in the module section, which is the place for subjective analysis or opinion.

## **Continuity**

Establish links between consecutive, related stories. Do not reintroduce someone mentioned in the previous story. Connected stories may be written by different people, so the presenter must check for continuity before going on air.

## **Countries**

Ensure that the country is clearly recognisable in the first reference. Do not refer to it by its capital ("*Washington says...*") in the first reference. If the adjective is not immediately recognisable (e.g. Dutch/Netherlands), do not use it in the first reference. We use the form of the country agreed by such international institutions as the United Nations. So, for example, the United States (not America, the Netherlands, not Holland, Côte d'Ivoire, not Ivory Coast).

## **Currency**

Currency should be translated into euros. Never use the sign for the currency (€/£), always spell it out (euros/dollars).

A useful site for currency conversion is [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com)

## **Dates**

State when an event took place. Dispatches sometimes neglect to make this clear. Try and work it out or find out.

Be aware of time differences, especially for running stories where "today" becomes "yesterday" in some places, notably the American continents.

Dates should be written as follows: "*November second, 2004*", or "*May 12<sup>th</sup> 2005*" not "*November 2*" or "*12<sup>th</sup> May*". Always include the "*nd*" or "*th*" etc. They make it easier to read.

We say "*two-thousand-and-four*", (written "*2004*"), not "*twenty-four*", until general usage changes. For preceding centuries, hyphenate where the break in pronunciation comes, e.g. "*19-95*".

## **"Franglais"**

... or its Anglophone equivalent. People living in a foreign country often end up speaking a bizarre argot which combines the host language with their mother-tongue. This is incomprehensible to the listener. It is your professional responsibility to keep abreast with English as it is spoken by native-speakers and to use it in your work. It's especially important to guard against false friends (in the linguistic sense).

See Appendix 2: False Friends.

## Headlines

Headlines give the event of the day in the present tense for immediacy. They must always have at least one noun and at least one verb. A headline is there to make the listener want to hear the story, so it's worth paying some attention to it and not writing it as an afterthought or cut-and-pasting the first line. It's not a summary of the whole story, but should give the strongest point succinctly. A headline should be as brief as possible without distorting the subject. It is the driver's responsibility.

Presenters: don't forget to update during the programme and, especially, from one programme to the next.

## Lead-ins

A lead-in should prepare the listeners for the report or soundbite to follow. It should also make them want to hear what's coming. Lead-ins to news stories should not be wordy but should include the who, what, where and when. They should be two sentences long, giving the presenter enough information to announce, in case the sound is not thrown.

Assuming that the journalist has done their job properly, a lead-in for a report or in-house voicer can be very succinct, although it may become longer as later developments are added to the copy. Listen to the correspondent's report before writing the intro. If necessary cut the first sentence and quote or paraphrase it as the lead-in.

Vary the cue. Don't go through the entire programme saying "*X has the story*", "*Y has the story*", "*Z has the story*". Try "*correspondent Girlie Linao says the new plans may come to nothing*" or, if they're where the story is happening, "*R-F-I's John Maguire is with the angry crowd outside parliament*".

Do not cue an in-house voicer '*X reports*' - it's not strictly true.

Only people employed by RFI are referred to as "*R-F-I's*". If a journalist is a very well-known expert on the subject, or broke the story, explain this. If an editor gives his/her services free, mention their paper/radio. Otherwise refer to them as "correspondent", unless they specifically ask you to mention their main employer. There's no need to make up fancy titles.

A lead-in to a soundbite from a player/analyst will almost certainly have to be longer, explaining the essentials of the story, the bare essentials of the context and any terms, initials or acronyms that the person uses. But keep it as brief as possible.

Explain who the person is. That doesn't necessarily mean giving their entire official title, if you can explain their function more clearly and more succinctly. You can also give a fairly vague introduction (e.g. "*analyst*", "*Korea-watcher*", "*opposition politician*") and give a fuller title in the outcue.

If you have a quote from a player (e.g. a well-known politician) which moves the story on, don't hesitate to lead your story around that, rather than the news-wire lead, e.g. *"Opposition leader ... gives the government 24 hours to resign or face a general strike"*.

Do not cue with the same words that begin the sound.

Make the lead-in suit the piece - a light-hearted report should have a bright lead-in. When a report begins with natural sound, try and cue some other way than *"X reports"*, e.g. *"R-F-I's Christopher Wells reports from the streets of Timbuktu"*, *"The rebel leader spoke to a crowd of thousands. Correspondent Dick Rossé was among them"*.

Write the subject plus *"son"* in the relevant line of the conducteur / running-order sheet.

Write *"plage"* in the text where the sound is to be thrown. Write in brackets and capitals the last words of the soundbite, e.g. *"... ARE LYING THROUGH THEIR TEETH"* to warn the presenter to be ready to read again.

The assistant notes the timing on the running-order sheet.

**Q+A lead-ins** Listen attentively to the interview/package to make sure that you explain any terms or context which the interviewee leaves unexplained (try and jump in during the interview with an explanation of anything important that the listener may not understand, e.g. political parties, regions, acronyms).

When introducing an interview, it's more interesting to highlight a salient fact or opinion, e.g. *"Author John le Carré told R-F-I's Salil Sarkar that the secret services have resorted to dirty tricks"*.

Write *"plage"* in the text where the sound is to be thrown.

### **Lead-outs**

If a correspondent outcues him/herself, write this information in brackets (so that a hurried reader doesn't think it's to be read) where the outcue should go, e.g. *"HE OUTCUES"*. Otherwise write a brief outcue.

Outcues must always state where the person is. In the age of the mobile phone, this may necessitate asking them. If you forgot to do so, call back - it only takes 30 seconds.

An outcue is essential for a correspondent's report but unnecessary for an in-house voicer where the journalist in the newsroom is not really reporting.

A news story lead-out can add more to the story, e.g. an opposing point of view, brief context or a link to the next story, but it should not be long.

A Q+A lead-out need only outcue the interviewee. Packages should outcue themselves.

## Loan words

... from foreign languages, especially dead ones, should be treated according to the rules of English grammar, unless another usage has become generally accepted by English-speakers, e.g. medium/media, phenomenon/phenomena, opus/opera.

Do not try to put nouns taken from ancient Greek, Latin, Akkadian etc. into the plural. Unless you have a degree in classics you are likely to get it wrong and even to make a wrong guess as to which language is the source of the word. It also sounds pretentious to many people.

*See Appendix 5: A pedant writes*

## Metaphors

If you use them, don't mix them, as in "*He smelt a rat and nipped it in the bud*". You may wish to ask yourself if the phrase you are thinking of using has been used so often that it adds nothing to the listener's understanding or interest.

## Names

Read dispatches or press articles attentively to find out general usage in English-language news-media, preferably those based in the region, and follow that. Try and spell them phonetically and pronounce correctly - see below: pronunciation. (Don't forget that you can consult with RFI's other language services for pronunciation checks).

**Arabic** names often have "al-" as a prefix. Use it only in the first reference, so Bashir al-Assad becomes Assad. Some letters ( L, N, T, Th, D, Dh, R, Z, S and Sh) are elided with the following letter, which is a particular problem with names beginning with "al" (the). The rule is too complex to apply in day-to-day copywriting. Readers may wish to apply it, if they feel they can do so coherently.

"Haji" is not a name, it's a title given to someone who's done the Haj pilgrimage and therefore doesn't need to be given.

*See Appendix 2: Don't call me Al*

**Afghans** sometimes only have one name, e.g. Najibullah.

**Chinese** is generally transcribed into Roman letters using the pinyin method. It uses some redundant Roman letters to express sounds which don't have a single letter in Roman. There are some other variations from English reading of Roman letters, usually making distinctions between sounds which are difficult to hear for an English-speaker. Thus (approximately):

C = ts  
Q = ch

X = sh  
Zh = dj  
Zhi = ger  
A before final n = e  
E = u or a French-style e, as in le  
Ui = way

Family names come first (unless a person has taken an anglicised name, e.g. James Soong), so second reference should use the first name, e.g. Hu Jintao becomes Hoo and Wen Jiabao becomes Wen.

**German, Vietnamese, Turkish** are written in Roman letters with accents, umlauts and/or other indicators of pronunciation, which are never used in dispatches or English-language written press, e.g. *Recip Erdogan = Redjep Erdo-an, Bulent Ecevit = Byoolent Echevit, Gerhard Schröder = Gerhard Shrerder*. There is no alternative to checking out each name as you come across it.

**Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Sinhala, Thai, Lao and Khmer** use “h” after “t” and “p” as an aspirant which is scarcely audible to the English-speaking ear, e.g. *Thai = Tai, Phuket = Pooket*.

**Korean** family names come first. Goh Kun becomes Goh. Lee Hun Jai becomes Lee. In South Korea, R is pronounced N, so Roh Moo Hyun becomes No. The North Korean leader is Kim Jong Il, not Kim Jong the Second.

**Malay, Singaporean and Indonesian** family names are complicated. If the person is of ethnic-Malay origin, the family name usually comes first. But, unfortunately, that’s not always the case. If in doubt, try and check from another source, e.g. *Jakarta Post, New Straits Times*. Some ethnic Malays only have one name, e.g. General Wiranto.

The letter c is used to transcribe the sound “ch”, as in Aceh (Acheh). The letter k at the end of a word becomes a glottal stop, i.e. it’s hardly pronounced at all to the European ear, e.g. *datuk* becomes *datu’*.

**Spanish-speakers** usually have three names - a given name, followed by the father’s surname, followed by the mother’s surname. Drop the mother’s surname. Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero is an exception to this rule, apparently because Rodríguez is such a common name.

## Nationals

Check the correct term for the citizen of a country. People from Niger are not Nigerian, since that’s already been taken, they’re Nigerien. People from Madagascar are Malagasy, people from Monaco are Monegasque. Inhabitants of Laos are Laotians, a member of the majority cultural/ethnic group there is a Lao and their language is Lao.

Similarly, a Croatian is citizen of Croatia, a Croat is a member of the cultural/ethnic group after which the country is named. But Serbs are Serbs in both senses.

Scots and Welsh are not English, although they are British.

## Numbers

Write out numbers *one* to *eleven*. Use figures for 12 to 999. Write *thousand*, *million*, *billion*, etc. Thus:

*6-thousand, or six-thousand - not 6,000*

*Two-thousand five-hundred - not 2,500*

*4-thousand and 25 - not 4,025*

*15-hundred - not 1,500*

*3-million 8-thousand - not 3,008,000*

Try reading the last figure as if it was in a body of text and you will see that long numbers written out are likely to trip up a reader.

Avoid figures like *2,500,000* - write *two-and-a-half million* or *two and a half million*.

Round off large numbers. If the US agrees to give \$6,512,000 in aid, call it *six-and-a-half million dollars*, unless those \$12,000 are absolutely vital to the story.

Try to find inventive way to communicate numbers if there are several in your story. If there are too many, the listener is likely to tune out. E.g. Instead of saying "*50 per-cent of Americans between the ages of 13 and 18 are overweight*", say "*one out of two American teenagers is overweight*".

An RFI billion is the same as a US billion or French milliard, i.e. 1,000,000,000 or one thousand million. If the source is British, check. A British billion is one million million, but some media have changed to the New World definition.

Use the metric system - kilometres, not miles; kilograms, not imperial measures.

## Parliaments

Different countries have different names for their legislative assemblies. Except for the US Congress (upper house: Senate, lower house: House of Representatives), always refer to them as the parliament or the national assembly on the first mention, along with the local term if you intend to use it in later references or if the correspondent/interviewee uses it. Thus: "Russia's parliament, the Duma,".

Other commonly used examples are:

Iran  
Indonesia

the Majlis  
the Majlis

Taiwan	the legislative Yuan
India	the Lok Sabha
People's Republic of China	the People's Assembly

Don't use "parliamentarians" unless all houses of parliament meet together or there's only one house. "Members of Parliament" is okay but long. Use shortened versions where they are in common usage: Britain has MPs, France has deputies.

## Percentages

Spell out and hyphenate - 20 per-cent, not 20%, which confuses the eye. Don't over-use; two-thirds, three-quarters etc. can be used instead and are perhaps easier on the ear.

## Places

If there's an established English-language version, use it, e.g. Milan not Milano, Antwerp not Anvers. Some place names have changed fairly recently. We try and conform to usage in English-language news-media in the region. Thus, Myanmar for Burma; Yangon for Rangoon; Mumbai for Bombay; Chennai for Madras; Ho Chi Minh City for Saigon, Beijing for Peking.

The changes may excite political sensitivities, so any new ones should be decided after discussion between people who generally cover the region in the office and, perhaps, with correspondents. (Usage by international bodies such as the United Nations should also act as a yardstick). For us the essential question is consistency - to adopt a house-style and stick to it.

An interviewee may use a different name to our house-style. Listen attentively to see if this is the case, and, if necessary, clarify in your intro, e.g. "*in Myanmar, formerly known as Burma*".

In order to avoid repeating the name of a country, you may use the formulation "*Tehran/Baghdad*" etc. when referring to the government, but only when the capital is well-known.

## Prepositions

Prepositions are useful for breaking up cumbersome phrases into more manageable parts which are easier on the ear and the mind, e.g. "*a plant for manufacturing tool-dies*", rather than "*a tool-die manufacturing plant*".

## Pronunciation

Where there's a long-established and still current English pronunciation, e.g. Orleans, Rio de Janeiro, use it. Otherwise, when using people's or places' names, we try and get as close as possible to local pronunciation. (See **above Names**).

Presenters should listen attentively to our correspondents'/interviewees' pronunciation and RFI has 19 language services which employ mother-tongue speakers. Why not ask them for help with words in their language?

Inevitably, your pronunciation will be approximate, especially given that you have to talk about several different countries, even continents, in the same broadcast. But we can hope that the names that we mention will be comprehensible to people living in the area concerned.

People writing stories should break up difficult names, using hyphens, and spell names phonetically. Remember to use English sounds, rather than French, although "é" can be helpful and shouldn't be confusing. However, few journalists are trained to read or write proper phonetic spelling, so it may be helpful if the writer checks with the presenter verbally, and vice versa, if time allows.

But don't worry if you don't get every regional variation right (See *Appendix 3*).

## **Punctuation**

Use punctuation carefully. A generous use of commas, for example, can help in identifying places where the reader has to pause. What is grammatically incorrect or superfluous in print journalism is often useful for broadcast. Insert a comma after phrases like "*In Beirut*", "*Here in Washington*", "*At the United Nations today*", when they begin a sentence.

Dashes are useful to mark a pause for effect. Do not use several dots, thus ..., as some readers find this confusing. But unnecessary punctuation is confusing.

## **Quotes**

Whenever possible, avoid direct quotes in copy. Paraphrase instead. Only particularly dramatic or sensitive declarations should be given as quotes and must be clearly presented as such, e.g. "*In the words of the president: 'The terrorists will not prevail.'*"

If a short phrase is quoted within a sentence, the presenter's voice should help identify it as such. But indicate it, nevertheless:

*The Palestinian Authority has rejected the Israeli offer, calling it 'a stalling tactic'.*

*This is, he said, 'a dirty war'.*

## **Seasons**

You may be chilled to the bone in a draughty studio in Paris, but many of our listeners will be pumping up the air-conditioning. So specify the month rather than talking about spring, summer, autumn or winter, unless it's important to the context, e.g. "a spring

offensive”, “an election before the monsoon”.

## **Sexism**

Beware of gender-specific terms, there are usually neutral alternatives. But when a president or prime minister is a woman, try and get the word “she” into the copy, thus avoiding patronisingly spelling it out.

Some useful alternatives:

Businessman - business people, executives, entrepreneurs  
Newsmen - journalist, reporter  
Mankind - humanity, the human race  
Manning - staffing, staff levels, personnel  
Man-made - synthetic  
Spokesman - official, representative

## **Sign-offs**

When sending a report from outside the news-room, the sign-off is:

Daniel Singleton, Radio France Internationale, Tiziouzou

Judith Prescott, Radio France Internationale, at the Winter Olympics in Surabaya

## **Slang**

Bearing in mind that we broadcast to many different regions, don't use slang, or phrases from a specific part of the English-speaking world, which will not be understood by all our target audience.

## **Sound-alikes**

Be careful when using words which have homonyms. Think how this sounds:  
*Arsenal scored five goals and Ipswich Town won.*

Other sound-alike words to watch out for:

*Sex - sects*  
*Through - threw*  
*Accepted - excepted*

## **Soundbites**

Soundbites should be c. 40 seconds long, maximum one minute. A report including a soundbite can be a little longer, as long as the subject merits the time. Don't use two soundbites from the same person in a news story. It's your job to decide which is the key

statement and give it prominence. If you have more than one good soundbite, use the others in a wrap in the module section. Even then, it's preferable to have more than one voice, unless your story is based on a key speech or someone contradicting themselves.

When choosing a soundbite, make sure it is:

a) relevant

b) audible - you may have spent four days tracking down a guerrilla leader hidden in the jungle with just a satellite-phone for company, the listener doesn't care and just wants to know what the person has to say. If it's important but barely comprehensible, paraphrase it in the copy, making sure to specify that the person "*told RFI*".

c) properly packaged. Don't say irrelevant things like "*we contacted so-and-so by phone*", avoid duplicating the sound in the lead-in, e.g.:

*(announcer): ...The prime minister said that reducing the budget deficit would be his top priority:*

*(prime minister): Reducing the budget deficit will be my top priority*

You can often cut the first sentence and summarise it in the lead-in. Or you can paraphrase, e.g.:

*(announcer): The prime minister said he would follow a strict economic policy*

## **Sources**

It's not usually necessary to name the news agency from which you've taken a story. But there are many occasions when it's vital to give a source. If a claim seems open to doubt, source it.

Even in the most supposedly respectable democracies, manipulation of the news has become a profession, officially recognised as spin or public relations, so the utmost caution is necessary.

Police, military and government reports are often manipulated, especially when it comes to casualty figures, numbers on demonstrations, etc. Handle such information with care and if you use just one source which is not impartial, name it, in case it turns out to be wrong.

News agencies, like other media organisations, sometimes make mistakes. Read dispatches with a critical eye and, if an item seems dubious, get the opinion of your colleagues. And, of course, two sources are better than one, if you can find them. The internet can be a considerable help in this.

Learn about news-media around the world. Is a newspaper controlled by the government, or a faction of the ruling party? Is a radio station allied to an opposition party? This may affect your decision as to whether to use the story and, if you do, attributing a story to its source and explaining that source's orientation will help listeners to decide on its validity.

Think-tanks, NGOs, etc. also have their own agendas which affect the orientation of their activity. Many receive funding from the US State Department, the EU or other interested parties. Some are financed by political factions or parties. Does this affect their public statements and/or their fields of enquiry?

Beware of repeating figures given by aid agencies and other NGOs unquestioningly. They are often guessing. If there is no exact figure for the population of sub-Saharan Africa, how can we say that 25% have Aids, are starving or drink Coca-Cola?

When mentioning an NGO, try and give a more specific definition. When you force yourself to explain what they do, you also force yourself to find what role they really play.

When quoting a source, put it at the start of the sentence, not the end. Never write: "*Iraq is on the eve of a new era of peace and democracy, said U-S administrator Paul Bremer.*" The mind will still be coming to terms with your first statement when you want it to take in the attribution. Also, even your deathless prose doesn't attract the undivided attention of every listener. Result: the emphasis of the report is changed and many listeners will attribute the questionable remark to RFI.

## **Station ID**

Give regular station IDs when presenting. Surveys have shown that listeners sometimes have difficulty finding out which station they're tuned to. The practice also breaks up the bulletin or helps lead in to a new section of the programme. It's also useful to give frequent time checks, in universal time.

## **Tense**

For immediacy, use the present tense whenever possible. If someone has explained their current stance on a question, write "*he says*", not "*he said*", both in throwing a sound and in reporting speech. If a situation still pertains at the time of broadcast, use the present tense, e.g. "*The U-N said today that the situation in Darfur is near crisis point*".

## **Time of day**

Be aware of the time difference between Paris and the place where a story is taking place or the listener's home. Only Africa is on the same time zone or near to it. So don't say "*this morning*" on the midday or 14.00 UT broadcasts because the time difference is too great. "*Earlier today*" is a lot safer.

If it's essential for the story, e.g. a dawn raid, a lunch-time meeting, make sure that the event really happened at the time of day you think it did (10 am Paris time is late afternoon in Tokyo, mid-evening in Auckland) and say where it took place. Or say "*a few hours ago*".

If the news is fresh - and it should be - bring the time element up high. Get "*today*" into the first few words, e.g.:

*The president today declared a state of emergency*

*Government advisers appear before the enquiry in two hours' time*

For morning broadcasts, or others where there may be confusion, use *yesterday, Monday, today, Tuesday, tomorrow, Wednesday*. But don't use "*today, yesterday, tomorrow*" in elements which will be used the next day.

NB production for the early morning programmes and *Focus on France* or any other magazine which is broadcast on a day that it isn't recorded.

The grammatical rule is that if someone "*has done*" something you don't say when: that's specified when using "*did*". It's usually preferable to use the latter formulation, precisely because it's more specific.

A useful website is [www.timeanddate.com](http://www.timeanddate.com)

## **Titles**

In the first reference give a person's full name, don't give Mr/Ms etc., you may use professor, doctor, General etc. Reserve Doctor for doctors of medicine.

In later references give the family name without a title (or s/he or "*the president*", etc.).

Use shortened versions of military ranks: *General* rather than *Brigadier-General*, *Admiral* rather than *Vice Admiral*, *Colonel* rather than *Lieutenant-Colonel*.

British knights: we don't say Sir Leon etc. Sir Leon Brittan becomes Leon Brittan and simply Brittan in the second reference.

## **Value-loaded terms**

Words are not always as neutral as some people would like us to think. Terms used are often weapons in political or cultural battles. Don't accept terms put into circulation by states, politicians or interest groups without examining them. Some examples:

**Terrorist** No-one has voluntarily called themselves a terrorist since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its use today will always be contested by somebody. Were the French Resistance liberation fighters or terrorists? If they weren't the latter, why not?

What does that tell us about our use of the term in today's context? Don't use the word "*terrorist*" unless quoting someone. The term "*terrorism*" is more difficult to avoid but should be used judiciously. "*Political violence*" is often an acceptable substitute.

**Extremists** Whatever their literal meaning, "*extreme/extremism/extremist*" are terms generally used to stigmatise opponents and "*moderate/moderation*" is usually code for the "good guys". Try and avoid using them by explaining more clearly what defines the people or groups that you are talking about. "*far-right/far-left*" etc. can be a less loaded substitute in many cases.

**Community** has become the vogue word for referring to an ill-defined group or implying respectability where it is not necessarily appropriate. One can legitimately talk about a "*Chinese community*" in Indonesia but what is the "*international community*"? Everybody in the world? Or could it just be the big powers? "*The intelligence community*" is a euphemism for spies, or, if you prefer, intelligence agencies.

**Islamic fundamentalists** is a contentious term but difficult to avoid completely. Many scholars apparently regarded it as a crude transposition of concepts relating to the history of Christianity onto contemporary Islamic reality. "Muslim extremists", "jihadists" etc. are also controversial. Of course, context or explanation often makes labelling unnecessary but journalism, especially radio journalism, still needs to name a political, social or religious trend sometimes. Use *Islamist* for someone whose politics is defined by his/her conception of Islam. Use *hard-line Islamist* for someone who wants the strict implementation of Sharia law to everyone in an existing or planned state.

## Voicers

A voicer serves three purposes.

It gives more emphasis to an important story for which we don't have other sound;

It allows a journalist to give more details and explanation for an important or complex subject;

It allows for a change of voice from that of the newsreader.

So it shouldn't be line copy with the first sentence hacked off and read by the presenter and someone else reading the rest. It should be written differently, with more explanation and background. That doesn't give you licence to go on forever and a day; 40 seconds is enough.

## **Voiceovers**

Sometimes we use soundbites in another language, with translation voiced over. It is not always necessary to give the whole sound. If you're preparing a short report with just one sound, you may want to limit the foreign language to five or six seconds, then fade under your own voice, paraphrasing the statement.

## **Wraps**

A wrap should be well-crafted, not just the stringing together of more-or-less related sounds. Use natural sound, where possible, to give a feeling of context, if necessary explaining what it is. Use the present tense if describing a scene-setting event e.g. *"Thousands demonstrate against the European Union directive banning rhinoceros hunting ..."*.

Be succinct. Often your sound can replace words. A wrap's structure differs from the inverted-pyramid form of a news-story, since it tends towards a feature. The lead-in explains what the wrap is about and why the listener should be interested. It's part of the story, so don't repeat information given at the start of your wrap. In the written press quotes reinforce a statement, in radio a soundbite takes the story forward. Don't end with a soundbite but with your voice wrapping up, although natural sound under your voice and continuing for a few seconds can be a very good thing.

## **Appendix 1: Some frequently misused terms**

### **American**

Refer to United States in first reference, U-S or American in second reference.

### **Between**

*Between* refers to two people; *among* to more than two.

### **Britain**

Use Britain, not Great Britain - it's snappier. Do not use United Kingdom. Britain refers to the landmass of England, Scotland and Wales. If you are also including Northern Ireland, you must say Britain and Northern Ireland.

The natives of Britain are the British or Britons, although British people is probably more radio-friendly - unless you know them to be English, Scottish nor Welsh.

### **Charged**

You can be charged an amount of money, or with a legal offence, or with carrying out a task (in journalese, at least). Don't use in the last sense if there is danger of confusion.

### **Hang**

People are hanged. Meat, or a picture, is hung.

### **Historic**

... refers to making history. *Historical* is an event in the past. Don't overuse historic.

### **Holland**

Use *the Netherlands*. *Dutch* is the adjective.

### **Loan**

... is the noun. *Lend* is the verb.

### **No-one**

With hyphen, not caps or in two words.

### **That**

**As a conjunction:** It's often dropped in radio writing, as in conversation. But in

some cases omitting it can cause confusion. Better to overthat than to underthat and let the presenter take the word out if s/he wants to.

**As a relative pronoun:** In speech “that” is used more often than “which”, so “that” is okay for radio. But don’t drop “which”. “Which” is correct when the relative clause is non-defining, “that” when it defines, e.g.

*One of the nations that emerged was Vietnam, which was later partitioned.*

## **Ulster**

... is one of the four provinces of Ireland and comprises nine counties. Only six of these make up Northern Ireland. Don’t confuse the two.

## **Unilateral**

Unilateral refers to one person or party. So a unilateral ceasefire is decreed by only one side to a conflict - not to be confused with a bilateral or complete ceasefire. Similarly with unilateral decisions.

## Appendix 2: Arabic names, “Don’t call me Al”

1. There are 14 "sun letters" in the Arabic alphabet which elide with the "l" of the definite article "al".

Since some letters that are distinct from one another in Arabic are transcribed by the same letter in the Latin alphabet (such as the Arabic letters "dal" and "dod", which have different sounds but are both transcribed by the letter "d"), this won't come out as 14 in the list of Latin letters. Basically, you should elide "al" with all words beginning with:

L, N, T, Th, D, Dh, R, Z, S and Sh

Hence: Az-Zarqawi (Qaeda bogeyman in Iraq), *Az-Zaman* (Iraqi newspaper), *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat* (Saudi/international newspaper), Izzat Ibrahim Ad-Duri (former number two of Iraqi regime), Mahmud An-Nuri (Kuwaiti Finance Minister), Faruq Ash-Sharaa (Syrian Foreign Minister), etc.

2. Since you will mainly be concerned with proper nouns, watch out not only for family names prefixed with "Al" but also for names (can be given names or family names) that include "Abd" or "Din". Abd (slave or servant) is frequently paired with one of the 99 epithets of God to make a name, such as Abdulaziz, Abdullah, Abdulqader etc., when the epithet in question begins with a sun letter, the normal rules apply (Abd us-Sattar, Abd ur-Rahman, Abd ur-Rezzaq, Abd un-Nur, and so on). There are also a lot of names that are compounds containing the word "Din" (religion, faith), and here the rule always applies since the Din bit is always preceded by the definite article (so as to give things like Salah ud-Din, "sword of the faith").

Hence: Ala Abd us-Saheb al-Alwan (Iraqi Minister of Health), Jamal Abdun-Naser (Nasser, remember him?), Salah ud-Din Al-Ayyoubi (Saladin; Salahuddin is also the name of a province of Iraq), Ala' ud-Din (Alladin, but also quite a common given name), Burhan ud-Din Rabbani (Afghan politician), Jalal ud-Din Rumi (medieval Persian Sufi poet, the "Sultan of Love" and founder of the Whirling Dervishes).

3. Don't be fooled by the princely Bedouin families of the Gulf, whose family names often begin with an Al that is not the definite article! This should be free-standing, have a long "A" (sometimes transcribed "aal") and is written differently in Arabic, and is a clan thing that means something like "family of" (or Mc). And you pronounce the "l" as an "I", in all occasions and combinations. So watch out for the ruling families of Saudi Arabia (the Al Saud), Kuwait (the Al Sabah), Qatar (the Al Thani), Abu Dhabi (the Al Nahyan) and, I think, Oman (the Al Said), not to mention the prominent Saudi religious family, the Al Ash-Sheikh.

Hence: Muhammad as-Sabah as-Salim Al Sabah (Kuwaiti Foreign Minister)

4) The Maghreb countries (and sometimes Lebanon), having been colonised by the French, tend to transcribe their names differently, often taking account of the elision in a

manner which is maybe a bit more user-friendly (at least for French speakers). On the other hand, the Egyptians pronounce the letter "J" as a hard "G" (as in 'a great gaggle of giggling geese'), and sometimes treat that as if it were a sun letter. But did you really want to know that?

— Peter Cross

### Appendix 3.1: Asian alphabets

"Travellers' Tales. It's as Easy as ABC". By Nury Vittachi, from *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 May, 2004.

Cursed by illogical systems of romanization, Asian languages are divided by a common alphabet.

I was in Vietnam recently, when a young Ho Chi Minh City woman approached me in a bar. "My name is Yum," she said. "Spelt D-A-N-G."

Oo-la-la! Was she indulging in some sort of suggestive wordplay? Yum, as in "delicious," would certainly have described her. But then I remembered something. In southern (but not northern) Vietnam, "d" is pronounced "y." So Dang probably did pronounce her name "Yum," and was not trying to hint at how delectable she was. (If you are heading to Hanoi, ignore the above. There, Dang would be pronounced "Zum.")

Conversely, my name baffled her. In southern (but not northern) Vietnam, "v" is also pronounced "y." It was bizarre to her that Vittachi started with a "v."

After years of sampling Asian languages, one thing is clear to me. People who set up romanization systems for these tongues should be boiled alive in tom yum (not "tong yam"). They have made cross-border communications nightmarish, causing millions of lost man-hours and productivity.

The romanization in my Hong Kong home town is particularly screwy. The Kowloon suburb pronounced "Wonggok" is spelt "Mong Kok." In most places, romanizers merely get the sounds mixed up, but in this case, they accidentally turned the initial letter upside down.

Last week I was in Korea (a society led by a man named Roh, pronounced "No"), and got the last room in a fully booked hotel. "Is Korean-style room," the hotel staffer told me. "Not bad." "I'm sure it will be fine," I replied.

Only when I got to the room did I discover that "Not bad" was his articulation of the English words "No bed." My wife, who is English, went into a grocery shop in south India and asked for a pound of butter. "What is butter?" asked the Trivandrum shop assistant in faultless English.

"Butter. Yellow stuff that goes on bread," my wife replied.

He shook his head. He had never heard of it. He called the manager, who also professed ignorance of the concept. After she referred to toast and marmalade, light dawned. "Ah. You were saying 'butter,' but what you really wanted was 'butter!'" the manager replied, before giving her an English lesson. "'Butter.' Pronounced 'but-ter.' Now you try it."

This exchange baffled her until I pointed out that the Indian languages have a generous variety of "b" sounds, and she had clearly used the wrong one.

An American friend was taught the Cantonese word for book, which sounds to my ears as a semi-whistled "szhu" sound, but is romanized as "su." He put up his hand in class. "Is it 'Sue' or 'shoe' or 'zoo'?" The teacher's forehead wrinkled. "It is not 'Sue' or 'shoe' or 'zoo'," she whistled. "It is 'szhu'." Indeed, the Cantonese word for book hovers somewhere in the middle of "Sue" and "shoe" and "zoo." It took me years to get it right, after which I started Mandarin classes, where I spent years un-learning it. (The Mandarin for book is pronounced "shoe").

My greatest ire is reserved for the evil monsters who created pinyin, the romanization system cursed daily by untold millions of scholars of Chinese all over the world.

The entire system is based on booby-traps. The letter "q" is pronounced "ch," while "c" is "ts" and "z" is "ds." Worst of all, pinyin includes one of the most difficult Asian language sounds to pick up: The letter "r" represents a sound which is "j" and "z" spoken simultaneously. Why why why? Because the originators of pinyin hated us and wanted to ruin our lives.

Some scholars think it was Marco Polo's inability to master this "jz" sound that turned "Nippon" (or "Nihon") into "Japan." Chinese speakers pronounced that country's name in a way which sounded to his Italian ears as "jzrrrpn." Being unable to do a "j" and a "z" together, he romanized it to "Chipangu," the possible root of the English word Japan.

Anyway, those are the thoughts that went through my mind in rapid succession in that Ho Chi Minh City bar as the scrumptious Dang/Yum lost interest in me and wandered off. "Yum," I thought. And then: "Dang."

### **Appendix 3.2: "A pedant writes" (*London Review of Books*, Letters, 4 October 2007)**

In his masterly (not 'masterful', as Dinah Birch in the same issue would have it) survey of the current state of the European Union, Perry Anderson twice uses the word 'referenda' (*LRB*, 20 September). But as every schoolboy once knew, or should have known, *referendum* is a gerund, and in Latin – once the lingua franca of the decrepit continent Anderson so brilliantly anatomises – there is no plural form of the gerund. It could conceivably be a neuter plural gerundive, though in that case it would denote a plebiscite on a number of issues, rather than a number of plebiscites. As bogus Latinate plurals go, 'referenda' may not be quite as egregious as, say, 'quora'. Still, accuracy aside, 'referendums' is surely preferable, for much the same reason that no one in their right mind would talk about 'watering the gerania' (From Martin Sanderson)

## Appendix 4: And if you don't believe us...

... here's what the International Women's Media Foundation (<http://www.iwmf.org>) says

### Writing Broadcast Copy

Those who get their news from newspapers, or even on the Internet, can go back to a story and re-read it to check facts or increase their understanding. But viewers or listeners to broadcasts do not have this opportunity. When you write broadcast copy, you are "writing for the ear". Use these 10 tips to help you write broadcast copy so that viewers and listeners can get the main points right away.

#### 1. Did I write in the active voice?

One way to write for the ear is to use the active voice. In most cases, the active voice will make your story clearer and will force you to write in a linear order: subject, verb, object. Often, the active voice will also make your story shorter. When precious airtime is involved, a few seconds really do matter. (Note: Sometimes writing in the active voice means you will need more information.)

Passive:      The man was arrested.

Active:        The Park Patrol officer arrested the man.

#### 2. Did I write in my own voice or did I use the words of a wire service or officials?

Officials who are used as credible sources have their own jargon. These phrases can be meaningless to the average television viewer or radio listener. Does the average person really understand the difference between a felony and a misdemeanour? Between a 3-alarm fire and a 4-alarm fire? Between good condition and stable condition? Translate the jargon. Make the words your own. Explain everything in terms that would make sense to a child.

#### 3. Do I stick to one simple idea per sentence?

When "writing for the ear", keep sentences short. [...] Good broadcast reporters and writers have far more information than they can use in their stories. Good broadcast writing involves judicious editing. Lots of juicy details will be left by the wayside. If you've used a comma or an ellipsis in your sentence, you're probably trying to put too much in it.

Wrong:        The man, who was a graduate of Harvard, loved cats. (1 sentence with two ideas.)

Better:        The man graduated from Harvard. He loved cats. (2 short sentences.)

#### 4. Did I eliminate unnecessary information?

Just because you have lots of facts at your disposal doesn't necessarily mean they are essential or even relevant to your story. For example, when you're writing a story about

something unusual that has occurred a great distance from your audience, you can leave out details like street names or surnames. Ages of people in stories are often irrelevant unless the subject of a story is very old or very young.

Wrong: Rescuers discovered a 47-year-old Peoria man after he spent several days lost in the woods.

The man's age is a waste of words. Speaking of that man...

### **5. If I were telling this story to my mother or friend, how would I say it?**

Broadcast writers often write the way they think they should in order to make a story sound more informative. Good broadcast writers work hard to figure out how they would tell the story in casual conversation. Then, they clean up the story to get rid of bad grammar or inappropriate slang. So, I probably wouldn't say, "Hey Mom, a Peoria man was found in the woods!" Perhaps, I'd say, "They found that guy from Peoria. You know, he was lost in the woods for a couple of days!"

### **6. Did I attribute important facts to appropriate authorities? And did I make sure to put the attribution first?**

In your effort for brevity, did you forget a basic tenet of journalism? It's easy to get caught up in the quest for short and snappy and leave out who provided this information.

Wrong: Prosecutors charged a suspect with vehicular homicide. The man was weaving in and out of traffic before he hit a pedestrian.

Better: Prosecutors charged a suspect with vehicular homicide. Police say the man was weaving in and out of traffic and that he hit a pedestrian.

Also, naïve writers often lead with an outrageous or catchy statement and then attribute it in the next sentence. This leads to confusion for a listener or viewer. Remember linear order: subject, verb, object.

Wrong: America's economic slump is over. That's the word today from the chairman of the Federal Reserve.

Better: The chairman of the Federal Reserve says America's economic slump is over.

### **7. Do I overwhelm my audience with too many numbers or names?**

If your audience can't go back to hear a story again, then it stands to reason that you should keep numbers in a story to a minimum. Simplify whenever possible. For example, \$950,000 becomes "nearly a million dollars" in broadcast copy. Spell out any symbols like \$ (dollars) or % (percent). Also, ask yourself whether an unfamiliar name is necessary to your story. If the person is in your story because of his or her title, then perhaps you should use that instead.

**8. Have I used a sophisticated or intellectual word, when a common word or phrase would do?**

Hopefully, you're not in broadcast to impress people with the breadth of your vocabulary. When you're writing a story about a fire, you don't need to "mix it up" by changing the word to conflagration, blaze, spark or inferno. Likewise, you don't need to come up with other words for "says." The word is simple and unbiased. Stick to it.

**9. Did I leave any unanswered questions?**

All stories (broadcast or print) should have a beginning, a middle and an end. Sometimes reporters figure out a great way to start the story, add lots of facts and details to the middle, then find themselves with no space or time left at the end to wrap things up. In this scenario, you might be tempted to cut the story short and just stop writing, but that can lead to confusion and unanswered questions for the audience. Instead, you should know how you're going to end the story before you begin. If a story needs to be shortened, you can usually cut from soundbites or "extra" facts in the middle without hurting the story's essential structure or main points.

**10. Was I fair, and did I tell the truth?**

Truth is a funny thing. It changes significantly based on one's perspective. A journalist is trained to interpret events and characterize them for an audience. However, sometimes news writers stretch the truth to get a good lead. Was the mayor's victory really surprising? Did the event really shake up the quiet neighbourhood? And was it really a parent's worst nightmare? If you stay away from the clichés, you'll probably be a lot closer to the truth.

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## Appendix 5: Features. Reporting, Writing and Producing

The following are some rules of thumb for producing features for our programs. This is addressed to those of you who have not done features before and to those who need to refresh their knowledge of feature reporting. For those who have been doing features for a long time at RFI, this little packet can be useful.

### 1. What is a feature?

A feature (these rules apply to wraps, as well as to our mini-features, such as *Culture in France* and *Focus on France*) is, for all intents and purposes, a highly-produced, sound-rich radio “article”. It brings us to an event, recounts in particular (with examples, real people and sounds) a general trend, phenomenon or event in a logical order.

It should have an angle. You should ask yourself: what is this story about and why should the listener care? These are the two questions you should attempt to answer when you pitch a story to your editor.

A feature (and a wrap) is sound-driven. Your story will only be as good as the interviews and the sound that you come up with.

In a feature you are telling a story. Unlike an article for print, a radio feature does not have the form of an inverted pyramid. In a feature you are bringing the listener along from point A to point B to point C. You must continually ask yourself why the story is important, and never lose sight of your angle.

This of course means that a feature story is not anecdotal. We are not in the business of saying, “and now I am going to tell you about X....”. You must ask yourself why X is important to your audience.

Example: a journalist pitches a story to an editor. “I have been to Chinatown in the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. All the signs are in Chinese, everyone speaks Chinese. One would think one was in China. I’d like to do a story on this.”

So what?

This is not a story with an angle and of general import to a listener. It is just anecdotal. The journalist is only saying “and now I am going to tell you about Chinatown in Paris”.

The journalist digs a bit further, and finds that there are older immigrants from Portugal and Spain living in the 13<sup>th</sup>. They say they are frustrated because they can’t read Chinese. They say they have already learned one foreign language, do they have to learn another in order to function?

This, now, is becoming a story. It is not yet a story, but it has some important elements of a story. It has some tension, some conflict and characters.

The anecdotal is turning into a story with an angle. After more research perhaps the journalist will find the angle. Perhaps this will end up being a story about the conflict among old and new immigrants and their integration in France. The story started with an anecdote and developed into something that the listener can care about.

A feature must have tension, some conflict and characters who help tell the story.

## **2. Feature reporting, sound**

— Who to interview

After you have determined your subject, your angle, tension, conflict etc. you need to decide who you will interview.

There is always the classic approach. An interview in favour of a subject, plus an interview with someone opposed and an interview with an analyst. This is a good rule of thumb. If you dig deeper, you may find more and richer viewpoints. Space may not allow for all the nuances to be included, but you should try and look for more than the most commonly reported views on a subject.

— Sound

Remember: in radio sound is fact.

When you go out to do your interviews put on your “radio ear”. Ask yourself what in the things you are experiencing can help tell your story. Often sound can do it better than you can!

Tips on recording types of sound:

— Interviews

Try to do your interviews in a quiet place. When you walk into an office for an interview, for example, use your radio ear. If the air conditioner is on or if a radio is on, do not hesitate to ask the interviewee to turn them off until the interview is over. You can't edit these extraneous sounds out later.

Try to do your interview in a room that has drapes, carpets, soft sofas. That will cut down on echoing sound. For the same reason, you will want to avoid doing an interview over a table top.

Avoid microphone wire crackle. If necessary, hold the mic to your interviewee, without returning it to your side for your questions. Your questions will be recorded, but off mic. That is all that is necessary, since you will be editing your questions out for your final piece. Your questions are just there for the record.

When you are doing an interview on the street remain aware of sounds behind you, i.e.

use your radio ear. If a car honks, a truck changes gear, ask your interviewee to wait a moment or to repeat what s/he has said. It is almost impossible to edit out those kinds of sound afterwards.

If you cannot avoid a noisy market or street, ask your interviewee to move to a slightly less noisy spot – near the spot where the event is taking place. NEVER do the interview elsewhere and then report it as having been done on that noisy street or market.

#### — Natural or ambient sound

Natural or “nat” sound is sound from the place where the events you are reporting on are taking place.

Nat sound is extremely important. It helps tell the story and brings the listener directly to the place of the action. You can use nat sound as well to move from one aspect of your story to another, from one place to another, from one “chapter” to another (when you are doing a long feature).

Use your radio ear. Record as much natural sound as you can. You never know which bit will help you illustrate your point once you are back in the office and working on your piece. Record traffic, birds, market sounds, café sounds, laughter in a schoolyard, church bells, the muezzin call.

Tape the natural sound. When you are mixing your piece you will mix the nat sound in as well.

When mixing be sure that the ambient sound is shunted (gradually lowered) under the narration coming out of the sound, so that your voice can be heard clearly.

If you are on assignment, you may have to send the ambi sound separately, and indicate to the staff back in Paris that the réalisateur/trice will need to do the mixing.

#### — Verb Tape

Verb tape can be very useful. It is sound that you gather of someone doing something: a teacher teaching, a preacher preaching, a politician pontificating. You are not interested, with this kind of tape, in the content of what the person is saying, but rather in the fact that they are saying it.

You would use this sound to illustrate a person’s activities. For example, you may be doing a story on a scientific discovery. You have interviewed a scientist/professor. You have gotten permission to attend one of his/her lectures.

You record a part of the lecture and then use it to bring us to the university. Just a few seconds, which you would then shunt under your narrative, saying something like, “Professor Carrie Smith lectures on particle physics every Wednesday at X University.” You have used the taping of the lecture, not for its content, but to bring us to the scene.

With this little bit of tape you have set a scene, brought us to the place where the rest or part of your story is to take place. You have opened up the imagination of your listener.

#### — Room Tone

Once you have finished an interview indoors (in an office, in a church, in an auditorium), ask your interviewee if you can take a minute of room tone. This is just the sound in the room, with no one speaking. This is necessary to do a seamless job. Every room has its own sound. It may just be the low hum of the neon lights. Once you edit your interview, you will see that there will be a stark difference between the interview sound and the “pure” studio sound behind your narration. You need to use a bit of room tone at the beginning and at the end of your soundbite to bridge the gap between the interview sound and the studio sound. You will gradually shunt this room tone sound under your narration, so that there is no break in the sound. Try it. You will convince yourself of its usefulness.

#### — Watch for details to help you tell your story, to help you with your narration

While you are out reporting, use your eyes as well as your ears. Be sure, while you are reporting, to note scenes down that could be useful in your descriptions of a place. You can either write yourself a quick note about the gravel path leading to the schoolyard where the demonstrations are taking place, or quickly dictate a note to yourself on your recorder describing the scene. You’ll be surprised how these little details, these little notes to yourself, can help you bring your listener to the scene, once you set about writing.

### **3. Organizing and writing your script**

Your features should be sound-driven. Never, never write your script and then squeeze your actualities to fit into it. You must do just the opposite.

#### — Selecting actualities (soundbites)

This should be the first thing you do. Listen to your sound and pull out the best bits.

Remember one actuality = one idea. This is very important. If your actuality has two ideas, divide the actuality into two.

One way of choosing your actualities is to listen to all your interviews and take notes. Then circle the best bits in your notes.

Then pull the corresponding sound out of your sound files and put them all in one file up on your screen. Play around with the order so that the actualities tell the story. This will help you with the outline of the actual story.

Do not keep your questions in. Your actualities are not “modules” or mini interviews.

They are quotes in your report. (You would only keep your voice in your actuality in very rare occasions. See your editor about this.)

While you are selecting your best bits of interview, you should refer to your natural or ambient sound and constantly ask yourself how that sound can help you tell the story or bring you from one logical point in your narrative or one physical spot in the story to another.

— Writing your script

## 1. Structure

Generally we do not just plunk one interviewee down after another. If you do, it usually means you have not thought your script through in a logical way. Let us say you have three interviews and have chosen 5 really good actualities (soundbites) from those interviews (usually without your voice). You have two actualities from interviewee A, two from interviewee B and one from interviewee C.

You have played around with the actualities up on your screen and find that the most logical structure is: ABBCA.

Only once you have chosen your best actualities and have fitted them in the sequence that seems logical, can you begin writing your script.

For all of your packages (i.e., 2 ½ minute modules) done from the field you must write an intro. Remember, when you are on assignment you are responsible for your piece from the intro to the signoff. Do not send sound and ask your editor at the desk to “do it up” for you. You are the only one who is on the ground, and the only one who knows the story inside out.

Most of our features done in the office are self-introduced. But in the world outside a feature writer writes his/her own intro for the anchor. The intro or lede (spelled that way) should say why this story is important and why the listener should care. This is the only part of the story that is in the inverted pyramid form. Starting from the general and moving towards the particular.

The actual body of the piece starts from the particular and moves outwards in a regular pyramid form.

So, in a self-intro-ed piece you have to start with the general – why is this story a story and why should the listener listen – and then move very quickly to the particular, the main body of your particular story.

Your piece should then move from point A to point B to point C.

In general the piece should end with your voice. In print a story usually ends with a strong quote. You never, never do this with feature writing or the writing of wraps, unless

you have a very strong actuality – but it really has to be extremely strong, so don't think of breaking the rule unless you are sure of yourself.

In radio the journalist is the authoritative voice. The piece should end with you. We often call this the “and so” part of the story. You are moving the listener beyond the story. Example, a possible last line: “The demonstrators say they will be back on the street tomorrow.” You are handing the story on beyond the story, so to speak. You are saying, “and so ....”

## 2. Writing in and out of actualities

### — Writing in to actualities

Once you have chosen your actualities you will then write your script. Listen and re-listen to each actuality and find the best way to write in to and out of the actuality.

When you write into an actuality avoid just presenting the person in an incomplete sentence. *John Doe, President of XYZ company* is no way to write in to an actuality. Instead you should say something like: *John Doe, President of XY Z company says he will have to cut down his staff.* Then he comes in and says, “Times are hard. I can't keep up with the competition.” This is seamless.

Avoid repeating in your write-in to the actuality what the person will then say. Do not lead in with *John Doe, President of XYZ company says times are hard.* And then have him say, “Times are hard. I can't keep up with the competition.”

If you can't find a seamless way of writing in to the actuality, a good trick (not to be used too often) is to “shave” off the first sentence from your actuality and put it in your own words. For example, if your interviewee says “I will have to cut down my staff. Times are hard. I can't keep up with the competition.” You cut out the first sentence and quote him. In other words, you would say in your narration: *John Doe, President of XYZ company says he will have to cut down his staff.* You have cut this out of his quote, and you begin the actuality with “Times are hard. I can't keep up with the competition.”

### — Writing out of actualities

A good rule of thumb is NEVER to write out of an actuality by introducing the next person who will speak. In our example, if you come out of John Doe saying “I can't keep up with the competition” with your saying *Jane Smith says she is moving her company to China*, that is a bad transition. This sounds like you are saying, “so and so said this, and now I am going to tell you what so and so says.” This is not a constructed story. It is a list of soundbites. Very boring.

Find creative ways of writing out of an actuality. Example: our John Doe says “I can't keep up with the competition”. You may come out of that actuality by saying in your narrative: *Many companies in France have gone under because of the cheap Chinese products that have inundated the market.* Then you bring in your next actuality, with your

saying *Jane Smith has faced this trend by deciding to move her whole operation to China*. This flows, and we are not just “listing” sounds.

### 3. Using nat or ambient sound to help tell the story

— Why is nat sound important?

Natural or ambient sound brings us to the place you are reporting from.

It sets the scene.

It can also be used to move to a new “chapter” in your piece.

#### How to use nat sound

Set it up. It is extremely important to set up your ambient sound. Do not use nat sound as background noise. It is part of the story and should be treated as such.

Example: You open your piece with a church bell chiming. You must identify what it is and where it is, i.e. you must set up the sound. We hear the church bell and you say, as it is shunted under your voice: *A church bell at the Holy Savior Cathedral on the main square of the northern French town of Trouville. Mourners are arriving from all over the area to pay homage to the young boy who .....* Do not say *I am standing outside the Holy Savior Cathedral on the main square*. Keep yourself out of it.

Set up the sound immediately. Do not wait two sentences before setting it up. Do not let the listener figure it out for him/herself. That is confusing. This sound helps situate your piece. It brings your listener to the place of the action immediately. It is not just background noise. In other words don't begin your narration over the church bell by saying *Mourners are arriving at the Holy Savior Cathedral on the main square of the northern French town of Trouville. They are here to pay their respects to the young boy who....*

The sound helps to tell the story. If you do not set it up immediately, you lose your listener, who is stuck on trying to identify the sound. They are not concentrating on what you want them to concentrate on, but are groping around to make sense of a sound they have heard.

#### The sound must come from where you are reporting – we are not into sound effects

When you are reporting you are also gathering sound from the event, spot. The sound must come from that spot while you are there reporting. Traffic at la Place de la Concorde does not sound like traffic at La Bastille. And traffic at la Place de la Concorde at three in the afternoon does not sound like traffic at la Place de la Concorde at 8 in the morning. You cannot go back and get the sound later. Get it while it is happening. This is part of your reporter's job.

Banish the words “sound effects” from your vocabulary. We are involved in reporting, not fiction.

Do not claim, as your own, sound that you did not gather at the time of your reporting. Remember, you can only answer for what you as the reporter has seen, felt, inquired into. The same rule applies to something as anodyne as a French market as to something with great import as the scene of a shooting during a demonstration. The job is the same in both cases: you have been there, you have witnessed the event, you are reporting on it.

## **Music**

Music can be part of the story. There was a band on the square. You recorded it. It helps bring your listener to that very square at that very time. In this case the music is part of the reporting.

You may also have music you have recorded during your reporting which can serve as a jingle for your feature – especially for special features that don't have an imposed jingle.

Do not use music to “sex up” your piece, music that is there just to “fill out” the program. This is editorializing. If you don't think so, look at how music is used in movies, in other words, in fiction. The music is there to help set the mood. It tells you that now things are getting dramatic, or scary or funny. We are not in the business of creating fictional works.

## **4. Script Format**

### **What you must show your editor**

An editor should see your finished script before you record. S/he will make suggestions to improve your work. S/he is the person you can bounce ideas off before writing your script, the person you can talk to about the organization of the script, etc. Remember, your editor is your first listener.

The script should contain all narration and a clear indication of actualities and ambient sound. All actualities must be written out verbatim so that the editor can see their content and can see how you have written in to and out of them.

### **A typical script will look like this:**

**Intro or lede** (spelled this way): xxxxxxxx

The lede should start from the general. Should tell us what this story is about and why the listener should care. (In the case of our self-introduced pieces you begin with this info and segue in to your piece.)

XY reports from Timbuktu:

**AMBI:** (you give a description, so that the editor knows what the sound is). Sounds of women beating rugs in the sun.

**NARR:** xxxxxx (narr is often called trax, i.e. tracks. That is why we often refer to a wrap as ax and trax.)

**AX:** (for actuality) verbatim.

**NARR:** xxxxxx.

**AMBI:** market in Timbuktu; hawkers calling.

**NARR:** xxxxxx.

**AX:** verbatim.

**NARR:** xxxxxx.

**SOC:** standard outcue, i.e., XY, reporting for RFI in Timbuktu.

So, you see that you have to make the script clear for the editor. A good editor can take a quick look at a script to start with and tell you whether the rhythm is right. Whether there is too much narration before your first actuality, for example. The editor will then go on to critique in more detail.

### **A few final pointers on writing**

— Numbers.

In print the statistics, numbers etc., often go into one paragraph called the nut graph. You say how much the company is worth, how many employees there are, how many are being let off etc., all in one paragraph.

A radio listener cannot take all this in at one time. S/he cannot go back to page 2 to see those figures one more time. You needn't reduce the scientific quality of your piece by leaving those numbers out. You should, instead, pepper them throughout the piece, so that the listener can take them in, in small doses.

Also, think of creative ways of using numbers. Think of how we speak. How many of us say prices rose by 33 percent? We would say "prices went up by a third".

Round off numbers where possible. Don't say 1,968. Say just under two thousand. That is the way we speak, and you will be creating an image for the listener that is easy to comprehend.

— Vox pops

Vox pops are opinions from a cross section of people out there.

If you are doing a “collage” back-to-back of opinions – of no more than around 30 seconds, with, say, three voices, you do not need to give the names of those you have been interviewing.

But if you are giving a thirty second sound of one person from the general public whom you have interviewed you must give their first and last name. We do not have people floating around on our air waves who are unidentified. The only exception to this rule is a person who asks not to be identified because his/her life is in danger or because they will be compromised in some way if they are identified.

— Introducing an actuality

In general we identify the actuality beforetime. There are a few cases in which you may want, for stylistic reasons, to have a few seconds of the actuality, then your identification of the person, and then the rest of the actuality.

Example:

AX: “I’ve been in this town for ages,”

NARR: John Doe, of the XY toy factory. He says it will be hard for him to relocate.

“Where do I go from here. My whole family lives here.....”

This can be a nice effect if the actuality is strong. Do not do this often. Be sure that the first part of the actuality is very short. If the listener hears a “disembodied” voice that goes on too long before being identified, you have lost that listener. S/he begins wondering what they have missed. Who was that? Should I know who that was?