

The Transom Review
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Nancy Updike
(Edited by Sydney Lewis)

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.



Nancy Updike

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.

1. 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.

Viki Merrick – December 19, 2005 - #3

This is downright inspiring. I adore the dissecting of why I am grabbed by the ears and throat. Although this is not necessarily a new experience for me, you have cleared my editorial palate like sorbet between courses. I assume that if we stay at the table you will serve "endings"? and maybe, along the way, you will talk more about beginning with the end. Please.

Nancy Updike - December 21, 2005 - #7

More about ending with the beginning... well, i think it can help solve a potentially big problem: why should listeners care to listen to this story you want to tell them, especially if it's long? So, you tell them upfront why to care by laying out the tragic or bizarre or humiliating or unexpected result of the actions you're about to get into in the story. In fact, every beginning that i cited in this essay gives away some part of the end of the story, sometimes a big part, sometimes just a hint. Very few radio stories are whodunits, although one exception that comes to mind is This American Life's "the house at loon lake."

Magazine stories sometimes give away the end too by the way. There was a great one in GQ (I think) about a year and a half ago called "welcome to the occupation" that told the stories of several different people who went to iraq, and the title page of the story laid out what happens to each character: one gets killed, two make a lot of money, a bunch of soldiers get stuck in iraq way longer than they'd expected and not quite understanding their mission, and paul bremer ends up presiding over a growing mess. again, what drives us to read the story is not that we don't know what will happen, but that we do know, and we want to understand how and why it got to that point.

There's no need to fetishize one particular way of starting a story of course. Giving away the ending is just one way to answer the questions that i think anyone sitting down to write a story--radio or otherwise--should have in their mind: how do I make people care about this story? How do I make clear what matters here?

davy rothbart - - January 7, 2006 - #14

Thanks Nancy for busting so much wisdom! -- *just wanted to give credit to two folks whose work was mentioned, on account of these being two of my favorite pieces in the last few years.* -- Adam Beckman did "the house at loon lake" on TAL and Devin Friedman wrote that Iraq story in GQ.

Nancy Updike - January 10, 2006 - #17

Thanks for getting those names out there. Devin Friedman's GQ story is so worth tracking down, even though it was written a couple of years ago. The whole unfolding of the war is right there, even that early on, and the range of characters he profiles gives a really good sense of all the different kinds of people who showed up in Iraq.

Elsa Heidorn - December 20, 2005 - #4

How do you pick your characters? That is, how do you pick the people you will use to tell the bigger story?

Sherpem - December 20, 2005 - #5

How do you know or how does one decide what details to leave out and what to include in a story?

jjellis - December 21, 2005 - #6

It's good to hear how a literal minded radio storyteller encourages authentic reporting. Very helpful. One question, though. Out of the many stories that can be told, how to ID the most interesting one for listeners...programmers...powers that be? Perhaps it comes with experience.

Nancy Updike - December 21, 2005 - #8

Elsa, JJ and Sherpem -- For really good, detailed suggestions about how to pick characters and choose stories, check out Alex Blumberg's essay a few months ago in Transom. He teaches a class in radio at Columbia and he and his class, in the Transom essay, break down the whole process of deciding what makes a person or story worth pursuing. They give examples of ideas that work and ones that don't, and they explain why, in each case.

The most important thing to keep in mind in choosing a character or story is to pay attention to your own interests. This is harder than it sounds, because it's easy to get caught up in what seems like it's supposed to make a good story, rather than what truly gets under your skin. But there's a simple way to tell the difference. Pay attention to what you talk to your friends about—if you find yourself telling your boyfriend or girlfriend about some idea or some person, or if you bring up a story to your sister when she calls, that's a good sign you're hooked on something. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean it will make a good radio story, but you're over an important first hump.

Next, look into the idea a little more. Is this person game to talk about themselves? What are some of the scenes you might want to get for the story?

The last part of the process is writing up the idea as a pitch. This is where you'll find out if what interests you also interests programmers or editors. First, you have to know the kind of stories that the program you're pitching to likes (see again Alex's essay), and then you have to condense everything you think is great about the story into a paragraph or two. Pitching is hard and if you know someone with experience doing it, ask them very nicely if they'd mind looking your pitch over and giving you tips on how to make it better. Keep in mind that some stories and characters won't pan out, even if they do interest you. But plenty will.

Now, about which details to include in a story. Put in the most unusual and memorable bits, and the ones that move the story forward, and those that are necessary to know in order to make whatever point the story is trying to make. Visual details are good; try to make time for them. You, as the person on the scene, saw things that we, as listeners, will only see with your help.

I once interviewed a man who was covered in flour, and here's the way I opened the story: "A man is vacuuming the inside of a machine about half the size of a Volkswagen...that grinds wheat into flour. Every visible hair on Alex Melnikov's body—head, eyelashes, eyebrows—is dusted with flour, as though he's been cast as an old

man in a low-budget play." So, what's included: I mention what the man is doing, the size of the machine, and what he looks like. None of that would be clear from just the tape, and all if it moves the story forward, because it's a story about a flourmill. I left out that the man is a Russian immigrant, where he lives, how many hours a day he works, and how long he's had the job. Now if this were a different story, with a different point—a story about Russian immigrants, for instance—I probably would have written some different details into the story.

Other good things to include, in general....If a character makes a gesture—shrugs, grimaces, gives someone the finger—tell us. If there's a detail about the person's background that's surprising and would help our understanding of the story, include that. Anything that makes a particular moment more immediate or compelling is worth putting in. Some of what you like, you may end up having to take out for time, but that's OK. It only takes a few details to make characters and scenes more vivid than they would otherwise be.

Sean Cole - December 29, 2005 - #10

"Anything that makes a particular moment more immediate or compelling is worth putting in."

This reminds me of one of my favorite details in Nancy's astonishingly good documentary about private sector workers in Iraq. At one point she describes someone she's talking to as..."a tall, thin man from Oklahoma who needs to use more sun-block." I felt like I had a complete sense of what this guy looked like, and even a little bit of who he was, from just that one parenthetical phrase. He went from being a stick figure to a character in 12 words...

One of the things I love about that Iraq story, and a lot of Nancy's stories, is how well reported they are and how well she mingles storytelling with lots [of] solid facts and figures. Other radio stories that are as well reported, as full of facts, can sound dry because they're not written as well, and not woven with the stories of the real people that the facts and figures enumerate.

Nancy: You do print work too. Do you approach print stories differently from radio stories in terms of the writing? I was talking to this magazine editor one time who said that good radio writers generally make good magazine writers because they tend to write conversationally and flesh out visual details well.

Nancy Updike - January 2, 2006 - #12

Writing print stories is definitely different from writing for radio. Radio has helped my print writing, but they are different. The tape dictates the way a radio story lays out much more than quotes do in a print story. And radio writing is like haiku: you are trying to pack as much information as possible into as small a space as possible, without making the writing feel cramped.

In print stories, I usually write longer sentences that have more clauses. I take more time to set up scenes and to describe people. I write without necessarily knowing which quote I want to get to next, whereas in radio I almost always know which piece of tape is coming up. But I do record my interviews, even for print stories, and a lot of times I'll have a quote in a print story that is basically a radio moment that I've just transplanted to print.

I once did a story about a fad diet—this weird liquid that was supposed to make you LOSE WEIGHT WHILE YOU SLEEP!!—and I interviewed the diet company's "doctor" (a psychologist) about exactly what was in this miracle liquid, and why, in his quasi-medical opinion, it made people lose weight. He talked for a while about the importance of aloe

vera, which was in the liquid, and I put a small transcript of our exchange into the story:

Dr. Kaats: "The aloe vera extract appeared to act as some sort of carrier."

Me: "Carrier of . . . ?"

Dr. Kaats: "Some of the people in the aloe business say that the aloe vera extract serves as a way to make the product more bio-available."

Me: "What does that mean?"

Dr. Kaats: "That means that whatever you take, you're going to get into the system. But remember, this is all theory stuff."

Me: "Right."

Dr. Kaats: "On the aloe vera."

Me: "Right."

Print is a nice break from radio, because you can stretch out and because you can write stories that wouldn't work as radio stories. But I agree with the magazine editor you talked to, that radio writing is a good influence on print writing.

Robert McGinley Myers - January 6, 2006 - #13

I agree that the detail about the guy who needs sunscreen is great, but one of my favorite parts of the Private Contractor story is where you describe Iraq's electricity system as "that thing in your house that kind of works but is really falling apart and needs to be just taken out and replaced, or at least given a total overhaul, but unless it breaks down completely you're just going to keep it the way it is." One of the reasons this description is so great is that it makes something so distant and complicated feel so familiar and real, and part of that is the way you used the second person, addressing the listener directly. Can you say anything about when it's a good idea to address the listener in this way? Or when it's a good idea to make these kinds of conversational analogies between something in the story and something in everyday life? Or do you have any general dorky writing tips on bringing big ideas down to earth?

Nancy Updike - January 10, 2006 - #16

You know, it's gimmicky to address the audience directly but it works, if you don't overuse it. I think it can be especially effective when the subject matter is complicated and maybe a bit daunting for listeners—you take the edge off by sort of leaning in and talking like you're explaining the whole thing to a friend over a drink.

I always have a few specific people in my mind as my audience when I'm writing a radio story. I think: how would I explain this to Melissa? Or my dad? How can I make it clear without boring the crap out of them? A lot of times I'll write a line just thinking about one person it would amuse. Funniness is an underused tool in radio stories about serious subjects; it can quickly make something overwhelming, like Iraq's electrical grid, manageable and real.

Addressing the audience works because it harnesses the intimacy of radio—that feeling that someone is talking directly to you—and enhances it. Public radio fundraising is built on direct audience appeals. In stories, talking to the audience can be an invitation to step into the narrative with the writer, briefly.

Sarah Vowell has a very nice "you" moment in a story she did years ago, about going with her father as he fired a small cannon. She said that if anyone listening wanted to hear how loud the cannon really was, they should turn the volume on their radio all the way up, when she gave the cue. Then she gave the cue and played the cannon sound. It was funny and engaging.

As for analogies, metaphors, similes, they're great and I use them all the time. Radio

stories, as I mentioned earlier, have to be clear the first time around. Comparisons are a good, quick way to turn some object or idea from hazy to clear. The right details can do that too, sometimes. But other times, you need to reach for something bigger, like a metaphor, to get at the heart of whatever you're writing about.

Mark Elliot - December 23, 2005 - #9

I've been nibbling at the margins of documentary storytelling for years in my academic work...I think that there are parallels to be noted between academic storytelling and personal storytelling. Not least of which is process: what you've said here rings true to how I've experienced these radio stories, except that it is so much more difficult than you make it sound. That is, it's intuitive once you hear it explained, but I'm sure you will attest that it bears repeating....and repeating...and repeating for the novice...

I focus on public participation in planning and land use. I've always been attuned to the nuance of story, and when people talk about land use decision-making, I recognize they are telling their own stories - stories that often touch on race, class, or other deep-seated anxieties. Lots o' grist for the public radio documentary mill, though on first listening they appear to be about zoning, billboards, etc. The process you describe is similar to the most successful academic writing - and, I figure, to most story-based writing in general. Listen for the nuances, establish plot points, and most important, perhaps, tell people why they should care.

I'm curious, though, about two different forms of documentary storytelling. On one hand there is the personal storytelling that Transom (and your own work) trades in. Compelling radio. I'm interested in using radio as another extension of my work, and am considering an approach that is exemplified by Peter Day on the BBC. His shows, *Global Business* and *In Business*, each pursue themes such as outsourcing or business innovation, and use taped interviews (with narration) to sketch out the larger story: global capitalism as it drives, and is driven by, individuals within a larger structure. Big picture stuff. (My interests are more local.)

I'm curious if you have any opinions on the issue of scale in storytelling - how we tell small stories that hint at larger or human themes, and how we can tell big stories that connect us with the world on a level that speaks to our own experience - even if it's a garment factory owner in Thailand, or a market-stall merchant in Senegal.

Nancy Updike - January 2, 2006 - #11

I listened to Peter Day's show the other day for the first time, and I liked it. British radio is more adventurous than US radio, in part because they know how to be silly and serious at the same time, which American radio doesn't do very well, in general.

About scale... It seems obvious, but in a good story—whether it's personal or "big picture," as you say—you need to have both the characters' specific narrative and moments where you pull back and tell listeners what the larger point of this narrative is. I mean, I know what you're saying about personal and big picture being different kinds of storytelling, but I've actually shifted in the last few years from one to the other, and I don't think they're that different.

Reporting on the Iraq War wasn't so different from any of the earlier stories I did about family dramas or relationships or whatever, in terms of what tape I was looking for and how to construct the stories later. With issue/current events reporting there are usually more numbers and facts to track down, but the storytelling is the same: find good characters, get their story, explain what their story means.

One thing I would say about starting out with an issue for a story idea, rather than

starting with a person: an issue is a much trickier starting point. If you say, I want to do a story about globalization, or the problem with local zoning laws, or outsourcing, etc etc, you have to figure out what specific questions you want to ask in the story, and you have to find good characters. The process of finding the right characters to tell the story can take awhile. When Dave Isay was preparing to do Ghetto Life 101, he met lots of kids before he found LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman. He knew the kind of story he wanted to tell, but he wanted strong characters to tell it. Otherwise the story would be boring and sentimental.

Good characters make the difference between a story that's about an important issue but feels warmed over and meaningless, and a story that is memorable and great.

Jackson Braider - January 17, 2006 - #19

I've wanted to speak up but found my voice lacking; then, your story about the computer entrepreneur in Gaza hit the air. I know you've been on this story for some time, but it's a good reminder that if you pursue a story, follow a beat, stick around in a fixed locale -- eventually the stories start coming to you. I came away wondering: When did you realize what that smoking bad girl really had to offer? Has she affected how you're going to wade deeper into Gaza territory?

Nancy Updike - January 19, 2006 - #23

You're right: when you have a beat, stories are everywhere. They don't exactly come to you, but you have a much better sense of where to go to get them. Also, people are more willing to open up to someone who is knowledgeable about their general situation—that's what happened with the "smoking bad girl" you mentioned. I'm sure she wouldn't have been as frank with me about her unhappiness in Gaza if I hadn't spent big chunks of the last several months in Gaza, talking to her brothers and her sister-in-law, meeting her mother, checking out the place.

To answer your first question, I realized within the first five minutes of talking to her that she had a lot to say, and that she was saying things that literally no other person I've interviewed, in three years in the Middle East, has ever said to me on microphone: that she'd dreaded having to move to Gaza, was depressed as hell for the first several months of living there, and is still struggling with a lot of the restrictions on her behavior (she talks more about all this in the extra audio on NPR's website, by the way). But I had to press her to talk in detail about these things, to be specific.

Lack of specificity is a problem in lots of interviews: in this case, she started out saying provocative things like "I was really really depressed when I first came here" and "being a divorced woman here is the most horrible thing you can imagine," but she wasn't giving any details. And without details, maybe these provocative statements were just blather. So, I had to probe for details: Describe what you did every day when you first got here, when you were depressed—could you not get out of bed in the mornings? What did your family members say—were they worried about you? And why is being divorced here so bad—do people shun you? Can you date? Until she answered those sorts of more pointed questions, I wasn't sure how important a character she would be in the story.

Your other questions... 1. The vague deadline, in my experience, is always bad. 2. Sometimes there isn't a story, even with a lot of tape. 3. Any amount of tape is too much if you don't have a clear idea of the point of your story. Can you sum up the central idea of your story in one sentence? You should be able to do that. Really. For your own sanity. Even a very complex radio story should have one big, clear question or idea at the heart of it. If it takes you five minutes to explain what the story is about, you need to sharpen the idea. Once you are clear on the story, the tape will be easier to sort out. 4. I'm not sure what you mean when you say oodles of interconnectedness: you mean you

couldn't figure out where to end the intro and begin the story itself?

Jackson Braider - January 23, 2006 - #26

You asked about interconnectedness... I'm doing a story about science at a private girls school. It's a Quaker school...for every question I had to ask, they had someone for me to talk to. And as we talked, I'd find myself making connections between, say, the Quaker ideals and practices of the school and the enthusiasm the students show for peer mentoring. Finally, I couldn't stop myself from making connections between the lesson plans, the culture of the school, the reinforcing threads of the community that have root in the school, and the fact these young women are wildly above national norms as far as female participation in boy's club majors (engineering, math, etc.) goes.... But let's get this back to where you are and what you're doing. Communities at loggerheads, probably sharing more cultural norms than either side would care to admit. How do you keep things discrete?...How do you avoid the interconnectedness of it all?

Nancy Updike - January 25, 2006 - #29

You mean how do I keep stories discrete here, in the Middle East specifically? The hard thing here isn't separating one story from another so much as deciding how much backstory to get into. And which backstory, or backstories. It's one of the true clichés about the US that people there live very much in the present. That's not the way it is here. The past is on everyone's mind all the time. I think the hardest thing to write about here is Jerusalem—this is one complicated city.

katty - January 18, 2006 - #21

I'm a media communication student and we were given a class requirement to make a radio documentary. We've been at our documentaries for some weeks now, but almost all of us don't really know where we're going. Thing is, here in our part of the globe, radio documentaries aren't that common...

I've settled on an issue for my documentary. You say that issues as a starting point need great characters, and I've already got some. I know what stories and quotes I'm particularly interested in because they're the ones I tell to my friends. But then, NOW WHAT?!?!?! Maybe it's just because I haven't really jotted down bits of the facts, quotes, stories that I've got. Or maybe I'm so unconfident since it's my first experience at radio writing. I think I've got great material but I don't know how to shape the story. And by the way, if I narrate the story in first person point of view and add my thoughts, feelings, reactions, is that OK? Or, like journalism, should I withhold those things?

Nancy Updike - January 25, 2006 - #27

Now, you say you have good characters and stories and quotes already. Great. I'm assuming that means you've already recorded your interviews and have a bunch of tape. Have you listened back to the tapes yet, and typed up logs? That's the first step.

Once you've logged all the tapes (I put ***** next to the parts I like as I'm listening back), then you can organize the story. Like I mentioned before, I find it helpful to make lists of what I like from the tapes: good scenes (i.e. tape where we can hear something happening—someone gets into a car, or washes their face, etc), and good non-scene tape (a person talking in a quiet space).

Once you've done all that, there are a few different ways to proceed. The way I did it for years, which is hideously inefficient but is a great way to make sure you don't forget about any good tape, is to load every bit of tape that you like into your computer, edit each bit down until it's manageable, and then listen back to all of them. One piece of tape should stand out as the first one you want to play—in general, you should start the story with the very best tape you have. Sometimes you can't do that, for various reasons, but as often as possible, you want to get that really good bit out there right away. Starting with a scene is great, if you can do it, because a scene often has momentum that carries listeners along: they want to know what happens next. But it's not necessary to start with a scene if that's not your best tape.

Once you've decided what tape you want to play first, you can start writing the beginning of the story with that tape in mind. That piece of tape is your destination and you have to think about how to get to it. I'll talk in more detail about how to write to tape in my next Transom essay. But basically in the first two minutes of the story, you want to lay out the central idea of the story—or at least give listeners some sense of why they should keep listening—and get to a really good piece of tape.

Once you write that beginning, shaping the rest of the story should be easier; the central idea of your story should have a bunch of sub-ideas, or plot points in support of that idea, that you will lay out in the story in some kind of logical way. You just keep moving from one piece of good tape to another, hitting those plot points. That's a huge oversimplification, and makes the process sound clinical and boring, but that is the general idea.

Two other things to keep in mind when shaping a story: 1) chronological order is not always the most interesting order for a story, and 2) just because something happened in real life doesn't mean you need to include it in your story. In other words, most people, when they tell stories, include a lot more details and parenthetical clauses and digressions than would be interesting in a radio version of their story. So, without distorting their story, you should use only the parts you need, and leave the rest. As for whether narrating in the first person is OK, yes. Not everything has to sound like a newspaper story.

sarah levine - January 26, 2006 - #30

Thanks for all these useful guidelines. I work with a youth radio program in Chicago...Curie Youth Radio... All the kids are new this year. They've worked on two pieces so far -- personal narrative pieces, brief ones, focusing on something small but unusual in their neighborhoods. Then they worked on interview collages -- very simple pieces. NOW we start a slightly larger piece, and I'm trying to figure out what makes most sense to do. One thought was to explore a person that you've always been curious about but haven't approached, someone about whom you've asked, "What's it like to be that guy?" ...I'll ask them to collect little stories from these people about their lives, but it's easy to see how any of these "that guy" stories could really not be a story at all. But I'm working with kids, and if they have to head back to find another "that guy" too many times, I will lose them. Do you have any thoughts about good starting points and questions for my students, so that they don't have to get too far before they realize that they may not have a story?..

Nancy Updike - January 27, 2006 - #31

Good questions to start with, if they know nothing about the person: What's your job? (or, if they know what the person does: What's the hardest part about your job?) When did you start doing it? Do you like it? What do/don't you like about it? --OR --Where did you grow up? How many brothers and sisters do you have? Are you close to your family? Which sibling are you closest to? Why? (if they live far from where they grew up) Do you

miss it? What do you miss?

Each set of questions starts out with basic information about the person's life, and then tries to get from there to something more personal, about their likes and dislikes. If the person is open to talking about themselves, they'll give real answers; if not, they'll say yes, no, I don't know. And if they're a good talker, most likely they'll have something to say about their job or their family.

I do think it's especially hard for kids to do these sorts of man-in-the-street interviews—as you say, it's very likely that the person won't have a good story or won't want to talk. One way to deal with that potential problem is to send the kids out to a busy place with one question that they should ask a lot of people: Who taught you to drive? Tell me about learning to drive. Who was your first girlfriend or boyfriend? How did you meet them and why did you like them? What's the most embarrassing moment of your life?...Some question that has a good chance of leading to a story. Then, if one of the people the kid interviews is particularly interesting and talkative, he or she can just keep talking to that person, and try to find out as much about them as they can. So the question acts as a sort of screen-test to see who would be a good interview.

Better Writing Through Radio, Part II

Writing to Tape

Ok, writing to tape. Notice that an impulse often comes over you as you start to write into a piece of tape. You begin to summarize what's in the tape. Rather than setting it up, you start giving away what we're about to hear, upstaging it. This impulse feels natural, and therefore good, but it's a storykiller. It drains all the excitement and momentum out of the story. So, the first rule of writing to tape:

Don't repeat the tape.

The writing that goes around a piece of tape—right before and after it—should work with the tape, as one unit, like a good comedy team: neither one stepping on the other's lines, and both trying to maximize the audience's pleasure (or horror, or whatever emotion you're trying to provoke). Here's an example of how the script-to-tape relationship sounds when it's working. This is Ira Glass' opening to a *This American Life* episode called "Kindness of Strangers."

Ira: Brett was standing on a subway platform. Afternoon rush hour, it was crowded. And he noticed this guy... didn't seem homeless, decent clothes. Stopping in front of each person, looking into his or her eyes, saying something, and moving on to the next person. Turns out the guy was telling people:

TAPE—They could stay or they had to go. They were in or they were out. LITERALLY WHAT WOULD HE SAY. Literally it would be: You? You're out. You're gone. You're gone. You're OK. You can stay. AND THEN DO PEOPLE LEAVE? No! Not at all. And

no one argued with him.

The very last line before the tape, combined with the first line of tape, is sort of a call-and-response package. Listeners get the feeling that Ira and Brett are telling the story together, which they are—but only because Ira is deliberately writing to the tape in a way that creates that feeling. He also wrote the whole opening in a way that emphasized, and drew out, the tension of the scene—what is this guy saying to people?—and then he allowed the tape to come in as the punch line. A quick word about how to choose tape, since it's easier to write to good tape than to bad. Use tape where a person is being expressive, or saying something surprising, or being funny, or maybe where you have some interaction with the person you're interviewing (like in the segment above). Whenever possible, avoid using "explaining tape," where a person is droning on about statistics, or background information, or giving some long backstory. Unless the person you're interviewing is great at explaining, YOU should do any explaining in the script, and let the tape be dynamic and emotional. When you take on the drudgery of explaining, you can control it: cut out all the draggy parts and write it as interestingly as possible. Then go to tape. Here's an excerpt from a story Alix Spiegel did about EMS workers dealing with suicide attempts in one part of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. This excerpt starts in the middle of the story, with Alix laying out the statistical evidence suggesting an increase in suicide attempts.

Alix: Jefferson Parrish EMS records show that the number of suicides in October this year was the same as in years past, even though the population was significantly diminished. But anecdotally, supervisor Mike Yoyad, second-in-command, estimated that the service was seeing as many suicides in a day as they usually get in a week. Another EMS worker reported that on his shift, the rate had doubled. And many, like Matthews, say they're struggling to keep afloat themselves.

TAPE—Honestly, I try not to think about it cause otherwise I'll end up in the same state as everyone else.

Alix: But some on the force find it more difficult to push emotions away, like crew chief Paul Corello. Corello is a 20-year EMS veteran, with no history of mental disorder, who says he finds himself in an unprecedented position.

TAPE—I cry every day. Every day. I'm at the lowest point in my life that I think I could ever be. Like I said before, my worst enemy is me. Cause when I have idle time, that's when I...I start to feel real bad. Sometimes I find myself out in the street, knowing I got some errands to go run. And sometimes I can't even figure out why am I here? Why did I end up in this area here? Why did I come here? What did I need to do here? And I can't remember.

So, Alix covered the nuts and bolts in her script, and then got to a great piece of tape. The second rule of writing to tape: **Let the tape have the money shot.** Something else to keep in mind, as you're writing to a piece of tape, is: what exactly do you want to tell listeners about the person they're going to be hearing from in the tape? Remember that you know a lot more about this person than any of your listeners, and you need to give them the information they need to find the tape you've chosen as compelling as you do. For instance, right before Alix plays the second piece of tape above, she tells us that the guy we're about to hear has been doing his job for 20 years, without ever getting dragged down by it. Then when she plays the tape, and the first thing we hear is this guy saying "I cry every day," and his voice starts to catch, we know that this is a big deal; this is not a man who has been crying every day for his whole life. Third rule: **Tell listeners what they need to know to get the most out of the tape.** Here's an odd truth about radio stories: a lot of tape is not that gripping, taken strictly on its own merits. If you heard it without any set-up, it wouldn't be that interesting. Of course you should always try like mad to get gripping tape, and you want to use that tape whenever you can. But not everyone you interview is going to sob or be hilarious or tell you the most fascinating story you've ever heard. With careful writing, though, you can tell a memorable story with

tape that is only decent. Here's a scene from a show I did about American private contractors working in Iraq. The guy in this scene went to Iraq to help rebuild its electrical grid.

Nancy: Mike, from Texas, starts out on a small tear. He's 30 years old, with dark blue eyes and a blond moustache growing down the sides of his mouth. He instigates the brothel conversation, then orders a bottle of Captain Morgan rum. For himself. But the evening, surprisingly, gets less rowdy as it goes on. It turns out Mike is a geek, though a kind I've never encountered before: a power-plant geek. He's really, really into what he does: the job, the tools.

TAPE—Absolutely. I wanna see the kind of equipment they got. Not only plant equipment and power-producing equipment. I want to see what kind of cranes and logistical equipment we've got on site and that sort of thing.

Nancy: He wants to see the *cranes*. The conversation gets more and more inside: shimstock, couplings, pipe guys versus mechanical guys.

TAPE—And then you got civil guys that want you to set the pipe and set the machinery to the grade of the concrete. And it's like, no, it don't work like that. (laugh)

Nancy: There are guys who come to Iraq who know guns and do guns. And then there are guys who come to Iraq who are technicians or specialists in some area: geeks. Sewage geeks, water geeks, refinery geeks, electricity geeks.

Now, neither of these pieces of tape is that great. But if they're framed right, they give a strong sense of this person, Mike. So even though this scene is short, it was hard to put together, and I had to rewrite it several times, with help from Ira and from Sarah Koenig (who produced the Iraq show), because we wanted to pull off a kind of trick: turn the tape's weakness into its strength. Here's what we did. We realized that the first cut of tape is only interesting because it's surprising that *he* finds what he's talking about so interesting. So, instead of not using that piece of tape because all the equipment he talks about sounds kind of boring, I used the script beforehand to set up the idea that this man loves his job so much that he loves even what we would find unlovable about it. The second piece of tape is even less promising than the first, on the face of it: it's an inside joke, and we, as listeners, are not on the inside. But in the writing leading into the tape, I tried to set it up so that the tape's incomprehensibility itself becomes the joke. You know who's really good at writing to tape in a way that always makes it interesting? Alex Chadwick, the host of Day to Day. Here's a snippet from a recent show—a promo that's less than a minute long.

Alex: Later this week, those space scientists who sent the rover robots to Mars two years ago finally get out of the lab and go to the movies... where they see an IMAX documentary with enormous images from the wide, red plains of a distant planet. And the scientists—the calm, quiet, serious scientists—go wild.

TAPE—It shows me Mars the way I've always known it looks. You know? I mean I saw those scenes and it's: Yeah, that's what it looks like! TAPE—The only thing that would be different if you were there you'd be wearing a space suit. But that's exactly what it'd be like to be there and experiencing what are rovers have been experiencing, and continue to experience, every single day, even now.

Alex: Exploring Mars by rover. The scientists and the filmmaker, later this week.

Alex's script seems so breezy and offhand, but it's actually quite pointed, and it makes this tape so much more compelling than it would be if he just led into it by saying something straightforward, like: "Later this week... scientists who sent those robots to Mars a couple of years ago... talk about the documentary made from the robots' footage." Wouldn't that make your mind start to wander? Instead, he really sells the story, in a simple, direct way he helps us, as listeners, understand how exciting this film must be for the guys who sent the robots up to Mars—and then we get caught up in their excitement. How does he do this? He tells us that these guys almost never leave their lab, and now they have a chance to finally SEE MARS, a place they think about all the time but have never before seen close up. And then he very slyly adds the part about the "calm, quiet, serious scientists" right before he says that they "go wild," because the thing is, the tape is not wild, it's pretty subdued. But Alex is saying, look, this is what "wild" from these guys sounds like. Fourth rule: **You are in control of your story: you make the tape work, even if it's so-so.** A caveat to that rule—in fact, an outright contradiction of it—is that sometimes a piece of tape isn't working because it really is the wrong piece of tape and you should use a different one. Or maybe it's cut wrong. I tried about 10 different ways to write into the following piece of tape, about a Palestinian man who grew up in London, then moved to Gaza a few years ago:

TAPE — I've put on over 20 kilograms of weight since I've come into Gaza... you'd go to the biggest gym, called Rosy, and they've got two treadmills. The last gym I joined in London was about... you'd be standing on one treadmill in a line of 50... you'd have remote control on your neck connected to your speakers... you'd be watching MTV or CNN while you're jogging. Here you've got the local stereo put on the side and one guy wants Arabic music while the other guy wants dance music (laugh)...

I was making myself crazy, trying to find a way to explain the kilograms-to-pounds conversion (one kilo = 2.2 pounds, so the guy put on more than 40 pounds) without giving away what he was about to say. I had it in my mind that the line about putting on 20 kilos absolutely had to come at the start of the tape—I liked the idea of getting the dramatic weight gain in first, before you hear about the lameness of the gym. But look how much easier it was to write around, once I moved that line to the end of the cut.

Nancy: Four years ago, Hadi Abushahla left London, and a successful career as an export manager... To move to Gaza City and start a computer store. When he arrived, he wore cufflinks every day. His Arabic was marginal, and had the wrong accent: he'd copied his mother's West Bank style, not his father's Gazan one. He was 27 years old and he'd been visiting Gaza since he was 18. Living here, he found out, is not like visiting.

TAPE—You'd go to the biggest gym, called Rosy, and they've got two treadmills. The last gym I joined in London was about... you'd be standing on one treadmill in a line of 50... you'd have remote control on your neck connected to your speakers... you'd be watching MTV or CNN while you're jogging. Here you've got the local stereo put on the side and one guy wants Arabic music while the other guy wants dance music (laugh)... I've put on over 20 kilograms of weight since I've come into Gaza.

Nancy: That's 44 pounds.

By moving the weight-gain tape to the end of the cut, I not only had easier tape to write into but also had a clear line out of the tape—I could make the kilo-to-pounds conversion there, and give the drama of the weight gain even more emphasis. So, another rule: **Consider re-cutting a piece of tape if the writing isn't working.** Now I'd like to contradict myself again and say that there are times when it's good to repeat what's in the tape—you can do it before or after. If you want to lean on a point in the tape, for instance. I did that in the Iraq scene above, repeating what Mike said about wanting to see the cranes. Another reason to do it would be if the person you're interviewing says something great but is off-mic. Jack Hitt did this

in a This American Life story called "Dawn," about going home to Charleston, South Carolina to find out what happened to a male-to-female transsexual who lived there in the 1960s, named Gordon. Here, Jack is interviewing his mother.

Jack: She's lived in Charleston all her life. We poured some iced tea one afternoon, and sat at her dining room table.

TAPE—When Gordon was still a guy, um... can you say that?

Jack: That's my mom, whispering. You can't really hear her. What she's saying is...can you say that on the radio? Here, listen again:

TAPE—When Gordon was still a guy, um... can you say that?
Yeah (laugh) I can say that. Ha ha Ok. Um, when Gordon was still a guy...

Jack: You see, good Charlestonians do not discuss private matters openly. If at all, we discuss them sotto voce. Sometimes literally in a whisper.

Jack's writing turns this piece of tape from a murky moment into a revealing one. It's important, during taping, to try to get everything on mic, and you wouldn't want to play off-mic tape too often in any given story, but the script can sometimes rescue tape that would otherwise be unusable. Another rule: **Don't necessarily reject good tape that happens off-mic.** A couple more basics. If the place where the tape was recorded is audible, you need to tell us, before we hear the tape, what that place is, and maybe describe it, and if necessary tell us why the place is important in the story. You might also want to identify any strange background noises we'd hear in the tape, so that we won't be distracted by wondering what they are, as we're listening. Finally, I'm sure you know this, but there are exceptions to every rule and suggestion I've laid out here. Radio can work in a lot of different ways. The main thing to remember, as you're writing, that it's your job to keep listeners interested in the story, all the time, and that the script can be one of your best tools for doing that.

Barrett Golding - February 1, 2006 - #34

This above is, perhaps, the best how-to on writing-for-radio ever writ. Ever. Lemme repeat just a few of Nancy's headers, cuz they alone are enormously instructive: ~ Don't repeat the tape. ~ Let the tape have the money shot. ~ Tell listeners what they need to know to get the most out of the tape.

Ronan Kelly - February 4, 2006 - #35

Thanks for the notes. A phrase I use when talking about the 'expressive' vs. 'droning statistics' is: "facts and feelings". The reporter carries the facts, the interviewee the feelings.

Paul McCarroll - February 14, 2006 - #37

In the piece she gives her commentary and then says, "and this is what he said"...then she proceeds to say what he said rather than cut in tape of him talking. She does that numerous times. I as the listener was waiting to hear him speak. Could it have been done differently? Was the way she did it legitimate? No criticism intended. There's many ways to do the same thing.

Nancy Updike - February 19, 2006 - #38

If I remember right, the reason Alix did that in the story was that the man she was talking to in "Pray"--who later became a central character--was originally just her liaison to talk to other people. So she didn't record him. It was one of her first reported pieces on TAL, and she hadn't planned on making her own experience so central to the final story; she only figured out that that was at the heart of the story when she got back and started putting it all together. So, having tape of him would have been better, but she was able to tell a compelling story without it.

Daniel Costello - February 26, 2006 - #39

I've been trying to improve my writing to tape since reading your manifestoes. If it's not too late, here's an attempt from a recent story I did. This is from a series of daily reports I do from the legislature in Colorado. Any analysis you can provide would be appreciated. *****Host Intro: Another bill to remove the statute of limitations on sexual abuse crimes is moving forward at the state legislature. This bill would allow victims of sexual abuse to bring civil charges against institutions during a short period. The Catholic Church is lobbying heavily against the bill, saying that it is unfairly targeting them. Daniel Costello reports from Denver.

Narration: The hearing on the bill, sponsored by Senate President Joan Fitz-Gerald, lasted more than six hours. Supporters of the bill say that because of the shame that comes with sexual abuse, they are not usually able to come forward before the statute of limitations expires. Tom Coldway and his brother say they were abused by a Catholic priest about thirty-five years ago. It took Tom more than thirty years to come out as an abuse victim, but under current law it is too late for him to bring a suit.

Actuality: In regard to the statute of limitations, should I have come forward long ago? Of course I should have. I should have come out immediately. I guess... I was ten... I wasn't brave enough when I was ten. Now, it's time to get it out, and make it stop. If this bill allows others to come out, and heal their wounds, how can you not pass this bill?

Narration: Witnesses traveled from around the state and around the country to testify about the bill. Most of those testifying, both for and against, had some current or past connection to the Catholic Church. Abuse victims say that they can't get any information from the Church about their cases, and that lawsuits are their only alternative. They say that the Catholic Church covered up the abuse and protected the abusers. Tom Coldway says that he went to see Church officials a few years ago to confront them about his case.

Actuality: I wanted to know what they knew, and when they knew it. And I was abruptly denied any information. The only way that I can get that information is with your help. There's documents at the Chancellory that will condemn the church.

Narration: Senator Fitz-Gerald's bill was modeled on a law passed in California in 2002. The proposed law would allow abuse victims to file civil suits during a two-year window, even if the statute of limitations has expired. Because of federal constitutional protections....

*****If it is crap, please say so. The full text can be found here:

<http://hccrc.org/pickup/021306.doc> Audio from the full report is here: <http://capcov.org/cgi-bin/showpost.cgi?117>

I took a crack at tweaking the beginning of your script below. It's not crap at all. Overall I did two things:

1. Frontloaded the interesting information in every sentence, wherever possible. Literally I said to myself: OK, what are the words in this sentence that might make people prick up their ears. So, for instance, I moved the words "sexual abuse" to the very beginning of the host intro. It's crude but the words "sexual abuse" definitely make my ears more attentive than the words "another bill."

2. Added and/or emphasized details and language that upped the drama. So the church is no longer "lobbying heavily," it is "fighting tooth and nail." And I moved the idea about people coming from all over to testify, to the beginning of the story, and tried to give a boost to that nice detail about how the hearing lasted six hours. Wow.

What else.... I trimmed both pieces of tape. In the first piece, it's much more compelling to start with Coldway going straight to his self-question, without the blah blah of "in regard to"—we know what it's in regard to. Also, I think the tape is better shorter because Coldway is so emotional in his tape that a little bit goes a long way—if the tape goes on for too long, the urgency and quivery-ness of his voice starts to be off-putting rather than compelling. And I cut the parts, in both pieces of tape, where he sort of appeals to listeners directly: "how can you not pass this bill," "with your help." Again, it's off-putting. I feel manipulated.

One last thing: do you read your scripts aloud to yourself as you're writing them? That's a good way to make scripts more lively, and to get them into your own voice. If something sounds awkward or stilted as you're reading it out loud, change it. Say it the way you'd explain it to a friend, or better yet, someone you want to be your friend—someone you are trying to impress with all the interesting tidbits from your day. Then write it that way.

Host intro: Sexual abuse crimes are once again the subject of a bill in the state legislature; senate President Joan Fitz-Gerald sponsored the proposed law. The bill would remove the statute of limitations on reporting sexual abuse....and allow victims to bring civil charges against institutions. One institution fighting the bill tooth and nail is the Catholic Church, which says the law would unfairly target them. Daniel Costello reports from Denver.

Narration: Witnesses came from all over Colorado, and from as far away as [fill in furthest place] to testify about the bill... so it's no surprise that the hearing went on for more than six hours. Supporters of the bill say that because of the shame that comes with sexual abuse, they're not usually able to come forward before the statute of limitations expires. Tom Coldway and his brother say they were abused by a Catholic priest about thirty-five years ago. Under the current law it's too late for him to bring a suit against either the individual priest [if this is true], or the Church as an institution. TAPE—should I have come forward long ago? Of course I should have. I should have come out immediately. I guess... I was ten... I wasn't brave enough when I was ten. Most of those testifying, both for and against, did have some current or past connection to the Catholic Church. Alleged victims of abuse say that lawsuits against the church are often their only way to get information about what happened to them. They say the Church covered up the abuse and protected the abusers. Tom Coldway says that he went to see Church officials a few years ago to confront them about his case.

TAPE--I wanted to know what they knew, and when they knew it. And I was abruptly denied any information. There's documents at the Chancellory that will condemn the church. The Chancellory is [fill in what this is, exactly]. Senator Fitz-Gerald's bill was modeled on a law passed in California in 2002..... etc.

Thanks so much for this. Especially your address about finding that clear line into and out of tape by repositioning content. Brings color, packs a punch. Always a bit tricky if it risks changing the meaning or intent, but. I'm leading my radio kids here for your

excellent straight-ahead info.

Nancy Updike - March 1, 2006 - #44

Yeah, moving tape around can be delicate. Like with plastic surgery, one doesn't want to go too far.