

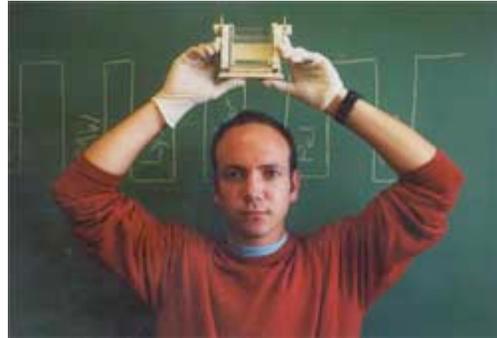
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David Kestenbaum

(Edited by Sydney Lewis)



David Kestenbaum

Intro from Jay Allison

David Kestenbaum is a good explainer. That's important in his work as science correspondent for NPR, and it's useful in his appearance as our new Guest on Transom. David got a PhD in physics from Harvard, but somehow got hooked on public radio. He worked for WOSU in Ohio, and "really just did radio and slept that was about it." He got very good at it, especially at the job of taking difficult subjects and making them interesting. In four minutes and thirty seconds. Part One of his Manifesto is called "The 4:30 FAQ" and it answers questions about how to make the most of that time slot on the radio. So read on, get an explanation, and ask questions.

The 4:30 FAQ

Try this experiment at home. Take a watch and stare at it for four and a half minutes. Don't let your mind wander, just watch it. Seems like a long time, no? I often hear people say that there isn't time to let a story breathe or get much across in 4:30. And I agree it's pretty hard to cover all the bases of the news and have character, scene and emotion in that period of time, but you can do a lot. I've kind of come to love the short piece as a form. It forces you to write economically, to distill things.

I'm actually surprised how often I'll hear a four minute story that feels like an eternity. Sometimes when editors say a piece has to be shorter, they're not being stingy, they are saying it's not working. Here, then, some thoughts on the workhorse of the radio newsmagazine, and how to make it gallop.

Q: *OK, Its fine to say let's be creative, but I have to cover a press conference.*

DK: Press conferences are a real problem. People sound like they're reading prepared remarks and standing at a podium, usually because they are.

Try to grab people afterward where you can have something like a more normal conversation or cover it as an event itself. Maybe the press conference is on a late Friday afternoon because the organizers don't want it to be covered. Maybe they've laid out fancy hors d'oeuvres to try to attract reporters because poll numbers are dropping. When reporters grill the president's press secretary - that's a scene, not just a place to grab audio.

Q: *Yeah but I'm not covering the president of the United States. And the press conference is about local water quality. Snore.*

DK: Consider skipping the press conference. I'm serious. If you know the gist of what's going to be said and you have a day's notice, figure some other way to cover it.

I was once assigned a press conference where scientists were going to unveil the genetic map for Arabidopsis, which literally is a common weed that has become the white lab rat of biology. The event promised to be pretty routine. So I called around and found a researcher who was flying in

for the press conference. His flight got in that evening, so I stayed late, biked over to his hotel and interviewed him in his room. It ended up being a pretty good scene, we went on a late night field biology adventure.

Listen to clip (MP3)

Q: *Right. Look, my editor told me to cover this press conference. I have to go.*

DK: Ok, possibly inspirational story number two: I was covering a press conference which happened to be on the latest picture from the Hubble telescope. There just wasn't any great tape. The audio certainly didn't live up to the image which showed galaxies at all angles, like they'd been thrown out of a cup onto a table. An hour later, I'm heading back to work on the train and am getting pretty depressed. Usually I try not to even make eye contact on the train, but I'm driven by the total fear that I will get back to my desk and not have anything great to work with. My fellow passengers are the only people around to interview. So I show the photo around. Six, seven, eight interviews go by, people saying what they think they should say, a little too earnest and dutiful. And then I try a guy at the end of the car. He takes the photo and just stares at it. "Amazing" he says "amazing!" (pause) "amazing!", he says it 15 times in this really heartfelt way. "You know what this means?" he says, "this means we all have to love each other."

Listen to clip (MP3)

Sometimes there's no genius to getting good tape, you just have to keep pushing.

Q: *Help, I recorded an interview and then I got back to my desk and there wasn't anything on the tape. Argh.*

DK: Ouch. This happened the other week and I punched a wall. Take a deep breath, explain to the person that you're an idiot and redo the interview.

Years ago I was interviewing a historian at the Smithsonian about the birth of digital electronics. It came out that he was a big fan of Morse code (kind of a digital language) so I had him take a sentence and translate it. It sounded great -"dit daah dit dit dit daah."

When I got downstairs I realized the MiniDisc recorder had been on pause. I cursed myself and called up from the front desk at the museum. The historian had to come down and get me again, which took about ten minutes. He wasn't overjoyed but we redid the interview.

The story doesn't end here unfortunately. During our re-interview I had gotten my cables mixed up and plugged the headphones into the mic input. Strangely the levels had looked OK when I was recording. It turns out (interesting but painful fact) that headphones can work as a microphone - well enough to get the levels moving on the recorder. I swallowed my pride, and went back over to do the interview a third time. Another lesson here: Always wear the headphones, even when you're in a hurry.

If the tape you lost was of the space shuttle taking off or of some moment you can't get again, realize it's not the end of the world. A good description by a reporter can be just as powerful. Newspapers seem to manage ok.

Q: *Help, my story is too complicated for radio.*

DK: Hmm, there was a time when this seemed to be the case for most of the big news stories. Enron collapse, Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal, Valerie Plame leak. Try talking the story through with someone who knows nothing about it, this often helps me clarify what's important and interesting. Maybe you can just dig into one aspect. John Ydstie managed to turn some recent Abramoff court documents into a nice yarn. It covers one incident in detail.

Listen to clip (MP3)

Q: *Help, the person I'm interviewing just used the word "pro-active" (or "hypoglycemia" or "grow" as a verb.)*

DK: John Nielsen, my colleague here, says that sometimes when an interview is kind of wooden

he'll say "do you have something to drink there?" The person will say "Oh.. sorry, let me get some water" "No," John says, "I was thinking vodka." Sometimes this works, sometimes it probably makes things worse.

The general problem is that as a reporter you end up interviewing smart people who know a lot about the subject at hand. But that knowledge means you're likely to get tape that includes complex ideas with unexplained assumptions, and jargon - word's you can't even use in scrabble. And sometimes in covering the news, you're going to have to ask pretty detailed wonky questions to make sure you understand things.

In general I try to make my interviews conversational. If I don't use jargon, they're less likely to. If I laugh, they may too. You can ask simple questions that are also intelligent. You don't have to play dumb. This comes up pretty reliably for me when the Nobel Prize's are announced, usually for pretty technical accomplishments. The Nobels can be like the class-five rapids of science reporting. Here's what happened once when I asked "Could you explain what you are getting the nobel prize for?" I got a very noble response.

Listen to clip (MP3)

"What the heck is superconductivity?" would have been better, or something less technical. "What are you going to do with the money?"

Listen to clip (MP3)

Break the ice, seduce, laugh, poke, cajole, whatever you have to do - but don't end the interview until you have something good or at least clear. You owe it to the person you're interviewing to help them be the best they can. If what they are saying is unclear, say "what do you mean?" Repeat as necessary. If someone sounds like they're reading from a press release ask "Are you reading from a press release?" That's guaranteed to get you some interesting tape. And if someone keeps dodging your question, say "I don't think our listeners will feel like you answered the question there." Keep saying that until you get a good, clear response.

Q: *That didn't work. My story is fundamentally complicated, it's about tax law.*

DK: There is nothing wrong with indicating in a story "hey this is complicated." Here's one of my favorite examples - Joe Palca is interviewing this guy about why eggs stand up when you spin them.

Listen to clip (MP3)

Q: *The person I'm interviewing is nervous.*

DK: Often people relax after fifteen minutes or so. If not, you can try the old "Fake end to the interview" trick.

Acting like the interview is over can take the pressure off. If you say "That's great, thanks very much - will you say your name and title for me just so I make sure I get it right?" THEN you can go on and ask another question in an off-handed way "Hey, so do you really think this bill will pass?" Often the whole mood will change, it's like you're suddenly after-hours.

A related example: I recently interviewed an economist who started off a little nervous - it came through in his voice. At some point I switched to interviewing his colleague who had come in to the studio with him and when I went back to him, he was much more relaxed. He actually said the little break had helped him, that he felt more himself.

David Kestenbaum - May 2, 2006 - #4

This came in by email. My reply is below.

Hi David, I'm a great fan and delighted you are here. Please tell us what you learned during your time at This American Life, and how you apply it in the 4:30 world. Do you ever feel like the guy who writes Cliffs Notes?

I kind of love Cliffs Notes. Or I would love them for those long non-fiction books that should have been magazine articles in the first place. When I write a one-minute news spot, then yes that feels like a stick-figure summary. But I like to think of the 4:30 news piece as a poem. There's a lot in there, but not everything said explicitly.

When I hear a radio news piece and compare it to a newspaper version the two are usually pretty similar in terms of information content. The print version may have more detail but I think those extra things wouldn't really stick in a radio piece, either that or you'd get bored. It's fun to try to read a New York Times story out loud – sometimes they work, sometimes they don't.

So no, I don't feel like doing a Cliffs Notes version of the news. A Cliffs Notes version of the world? Maybe that's a good way to think of daily journalism. But it's not as if the full book of the truth exists and we're summarizing it. What I'm creating (hopefully) hasn't been done before, or not in the way I'm doing it.

I learned a lot at TAL. One was that the immediately logical structure isn't always the best. Sometimes an emotional logic needs to drive the piece. I remember working on a story with Ira about how Israelis grappled with the fact that they were living in houses that in some cases had been taken from Palestinians in the late 1940s. There was a nice moment where Ira confronted a guy about it, and the guy pauses and has a nice response. For me, thinking in a 4:30 kind of way this belonged near the peak of the story, toward the end where you're reflecting on the whole thing. Ira felt like it needed to go early, because otherwise there wasn't an emotional/human moment for quite a while. He was right.

The staff at TAL are very good at juggling various structures for a story, and keeping their options open. I tend, partially from necessity, to pick something and go with it but I try to remember that I can tear the piece up and start it backwards or come at it from the side. Sometimes I'll try to sketch out 3 possible structures in my head just to make myself do it. But not as much as I should.

As one example, I heard a piece the other day by Kathy Schalch about a lawsuit over the safety of Teflon pans. Normally you start with the critics, so the listeners know what is potentially at stake. Instead she opened with the official from DuPont saying the lawsuit was ridiculous. A small twist, but very refreshing. It reminded me how formulaic we can be.

One other thing from my time at This American Life: We spent hours crammed in Ira's office listening to working drafts of stories, everyone with pencil and paper scribbling notes and reactions as the piece played. I wish we did this more in the newsroom. Typically my editor and I will work through my story. And then the next audience is over a million people. That's a big jump. And often I'll get reactions after something airs that, had I heard them earlier, would have led to a much better story. We need to get good criticism for our pieces. Too often people say they liked something just to be kind. My wife is my toughest critic. She'll say "Hey, that wasn't as boring as I thought it would be!" I love her.

Anyway I'd like to hear your thoughts – do you think we leave out a lot in a 4:30 news story?

Allan - May 2, 2006 - #5

It was my message that came in by email. I agree that 4:30 is usually enough to include the gist of the matter. But do you ever feel the narrative and emotional content is unduly squeezed?

David Kestenbaum - May 3, 2006 - #7

Yeah I definitely feel things have to break your way if you're going to get narrative, character, emotion and complex news in 4:30. But take the [StoryCorps pieces](#) David Isay and his crew have been putting together. They're 4:30 or shorter. And more than once I've gotten all weepy, and this is at six forty-five in the morning! These pieces are usually the highlight of my Friday, and they remind me that we don't get the voices of regular folks on the air nearly enough.

Ted Robbins - May 2, 2006 - #6

I've come to think that any arbitrary story length has inherent challenges. Shakespeare wrote in

the sonnet form: five lines of iambic pentameter followed by a two-line rhyming couplet. Talk about constraining! Yet he reflected some pretty big subjects in a single poem--love, death, nature. My point is, without a framework there's no challenge at all. I love 4:30 stories--the trick is to find a focus--a through-line--and stick to it. Don't let the story wander. A telling detail is not wandering--an idea unrelated to your focus is. When I have that focus I can concentrate on finding creative ways to tell the story. And it isn't often easy, at least for me. I've heard people say a short story is like the trunk of a tree--the farther away from the focus you climb (out on a limb, so to speak), the weaker the story gets. David's suggestions are terrific.

David Kestenbaum - May 3, 2006 - #8

I like the tree metaphor. When I came to NPR and had put together one of my first pieces, my editor sighed and said I'd put together a "Christmas tree" that is - lots of nice little baubles but all hanging off in different directions. It needed major revisions. I have to say when you let me out of the 4:30 box, I get a little agoraphobic. For a longer piece to really sing I know I'm going to have to have good narrative, and characters and scenes and interesting ideas. The news itself and its consequences isn't going to carry me for 8 minutes. It's got to be a good yarn to be longer.

Interesting to note that the lead *anecdote* for This American Life - the SHORT item, is usually something like eight minutes long. AND it's only making one point - it's just a little appetizer. Eight minutes on ATC I'd have to fight for. So yeah, it can be tough. TAL did do a 60 stories in 60 minutes show, I'll have to go back and listen to it.

Melissa Robbins - May 5, 2006 - #9

Your radio advice is as clear and user-friendly as your explanation of Arabidopsis. Thanks so much for manifesto-ing. You touched on this a bit, but can you talk a bit more about how you would approach an 8 or 10-minute piece? Which of your strategies do and do not apply?

David Kestenbaum - May 6, 2006 - #10

Sometimes I think 8- or 10-minute pieces can just be fleshed out versions of the shorter ones. Instead of just saying some people are OK with nuclear waste, you get to meet the farmer who lives near [a] dump and welcomes the jobs. You can get real characters and imbed the ideas in scenes and locations. Everything happens a little slower, and feels more real and sticks with you. But at 10 minutes you're really getting to the length where you're going to need something more propelling the story. In a shorter news piece I know I'm going to lay out what's going on and then have some tape of people reacting/interpreting it. Hopefully there is a scene or a little story or some character or surprise in there. I feel like I can do those in my sleep. For longer stuff I feel like I've got to make sure the wind doesn't go out of the sails in the middle.

Finding a person who has a great This American Life style story to tell is usually my first choice. The guy in [your Games piece](#) had a great surprising story. I recently did a piece on Intelligent Design which started with a scientist who decided to debate the creationists - and realized why scientists don't do it more often: They lose. (Not on the merits of course.) But often in news pieces it's hard to find that surprising, behind-the-scenes story. Or you know it exists, but it took place in private meetings, or back rooms, or over beers somewhere and the people involved know better than to talk to the press. So sometimes I try to make the piece into a kind of quest.

I remember a funny Y2K piece I read in the Washington Post back in 1999 where the reporter tried to track down the programmer whose "fault" it all was - who had written the textbook or whatever that recommended only using two digits to denote the year. These can turn out to be shaggy-dog stories - but in the best instances they give you a structure to imbed all the real stuff.

And certainly I think you can do 8-minute stories without narrative. Sometimes these end up being structured like a book of chapters, with unspoken cliffhangers. Each little segment makes a point, which then raises a question, which the next few minutes answer, which also raise another point. Or the scene at the beginning raises questions that don't get answered until later on.

Occasionally I think you can just muscle through if the piece makes interesting points every couple minutes. Alex Blumberg at TAL sometimes uses the "Flight or Invisibility" story as an example of this. (Wherein the hilarious John Hodgman asks people if they would rather be able to fly or be invisible.) There's no narrative arc, but it keeps making interesting, and deeper points about why

people choose one or the other. I should say that I don't usually approach a topic thinking it will be a particular length. More often I'm working on a story and I realize it wants to be 8 minutes, so I let it.

dale willman - May 8, 2006 - #11

David, great insights here. Could you bring the focus back to focusing for a moment though? I like the tree metaphor. But could you discuss a bit more what you mean by focus, and more importantly what you do to achieve it before you start writing? When I teach I talk about the "someone doing something for a reason" approach, which works most of the time. Are there any particular tricks you use? Frankly, I think this is the most important part of writing, yet so few reporters seem to talk about it.

David Kestenbaum - May 8, 2006 - #12

I like the test Alex Blumberg uses in his journalism class for whether you've got a focused story or not, which boils down to trying to say the sentence "I'm working on a story about X and it's interesting because Y." If you end up with something like "I'm doing a story about people who come back injured from Iraq" and can't put the second half together you're heading into uncertain waters. A story that is just "about" something isn't a story of course, it's a topic.

The usual advice for how to focus a piece is to write the introduction first, and I've always done that. If I have trouble writing it, it usually means what I've got doesn't pass the Blumberg XY test.

But I think you're asking about how to get focused, and I have to say I have a hard time with this. I especially did in the beginning – I'd get back with a bunch of tape, some of it interesting but I really had no idea what the story was. I'd have to work it out at my desk and then hope I had the tape to cover it. I'm a little better at it now.

I was doing a piece on email encryption recently (a sidebar to the NSA domestic wiretapping stories) and you see... there it is – no focus. "About encryption." I guess I started with some vague idea that it was kind of silly for people to complain about the government reading their email when there was a solution at hand. But I realized when I was out on my first interview, that even the high-tech advocates of encryption don't use it that often. And that became the focus of the story.

Also the other week I decided (inspired by Robert Krulwich) to do a story "about neutrinos"– since these scientists in Illinois have been sending neutrinos (subatomic particles) through the earth and detecting them way over in Minnesota. The results of the experiment were too complicated to be the focus of the story, so I made it about "what the heck happens to all these neutrinos?" since most of them will never interact with the world again.

I guess I get this panicky feeling when I'm working on a story if I can't feel the structure, if I can't imagine the intro. And that helps keep me focused. I was assigned a story "for the 100th anniversary" of Einstein's year of big discoveries. And again I had a problem there – what does it mean to do a story "about his big discoveries." I eventually decided to do a story asking the pain-in-the-ass question "Was Einstein Really So Smart?" To fit this into the XY format: "I'm doing a story about Einstein's amazing discoveries, and it's interesting because even though he's seen as a one-of-a-kind genius, scientists say someone else probably would have made those discoveries within the decade."

So.. I dunno. I guess I keep asking myself why anyone should care about the story. Do you have any tips?

Ted Robbins - May 10, 2006 - #15

There's a great book by Jon Franklin called "Writing for Story," which I read years ago at a Poynter seminar. It's about non-fiction print writing, but it applies to radio, too. His point was that a well-focused story could be broken into a three-word clause: "subject-verb-object." "Neutrinos crisscross Earth." It's simplistic (although Franklin applies it to two long stories of his -- one of which one a Pulitzer) but I find it's a great exercise when I'm stuck. Sometimes it works in the field...more often it works when I've just logged all my tape and I'm facing a blank screen. And it really works when I have trouble separating topics from stories. Not as doctrine--just as a way to

keep me from wandering.

Jackson Braider - May 8, 2006 - #13

A recent science literacy workshop held this piece of work up to the light and we all sang your praises, David. It would be lovely if you could post it here -- in part because there are so many ins and outs, twists and turns, complete with a little surprise at the end.

Still, I was wondering if you might talk a bit about simile and metaphor in science reporting -- for example, I went into that workshop with an eye slash ear for culling images and "real-world concepts" that would allow the scientifically illiterate (i.e., people like me) to understand the paths and processes, the intellectual journeys, the ah-has! of investigation and experimentation. And let me add another level to the discussion: We're focusing on science ("hard science") here, but there are other arenas of human endeavor -- for instance, the Dismal Science -- where reporters often have to report in images and metaphors, similes and fairy tales in order to convey the gist of the story. Where is the disconnect here? Why do we have to resort to sleight-of-hand techniques to tell what are basically stories about people looking, people thinking, people turning on the light on their bedside table?

David Kestenbaum - May 10, 2006 - #16

Thanks for the kind words. [Here's a link](#) to that story.

With regard to metaphors, analogies -- I remember early on when a veteran science writer advised me that these would be my main tools in covering science. I don't actually use them that often. It's a nice turn of phrase to say that neutrinos are "ghosts in the night" but I'd also want to explain the physics of why they can slip through a light-year of lead.

My instinct is to carry the story with narrative or amazing but-true facts. I want the listener to have real understanding not the illusion of understanding. If Robert Krulwich were reading this he'd probably take me out to the woodshed though. His greatest hits CD here has him explaining Fed monetary policy through an Opera.

I suspect the dismal science is harder than physics, both as a beat and a profession.

Robert McGinley Myers - May 13, 2006 - #17

I hope this isn't coming too late but... One thing I've noticed about the magazine programs like ATC is that all the pieces are either straight reporting or, if they are personal, are all personal. I'm currently working on a piece about being a prom chaperone, and I want it to be a mix of reporting on prom chaperoning in general as well as a reflection on my own personal experience.

Do you think it's possible to do a story with that kind of mixture of personal and informational content in 4:30? Can you suggest any examples to listen to? Your help (or anyone's) would be greatly appreciated.

Jay Allison - May 14, 2006 - #19

The border between journalistic and personal is indeed represented on NPR news shows from time to time, and often on venues like This American Life and here at Transom. Just do the piece the way it makes sense to you. David, do you find that you produce much work at that intersection? Do you use the a first-person POV very often in your reports?

Robert McGinley Myers - May 14, 2006 - #20

I guess I need to clarify this question. I agree that the journalistic and personal are often blended on programs like TAL and here on Transom, but I have been hard pressed to find a piece that does so in five minutes or less.

Since the topic at hand is the short piece, I'm wondering if David or anybody else can point me to any great SHORT pieces that accomplish that blending of personal and journalistic. Or to put it

more specifically, I'd like to hear how other producers have managed to combine interview tape and personal essay in less than five minutes. I just can't find many pieces like that out there.

David Kestenbaum - May 14, 2006 - #21

Go for it! It's true we tend to have either commentaries or reported pieces though sometimes they're not so far apart. I think fundamentally the reporter is always "in" the piece; sometimes you're transparent, sometimes not. In some stories I'm definitely a minor character, popping up, asking questions or making some observation. On occasion I've used some personal anecdote to kick things off.

This is about how air conditioners actually make the world warmer, and it starts with me riding my bike and cursing the guy in the car with his air conditioner pushing all his warm air out on me.

And this one on the future of computing starts with some embarrassing tape of me at age 12 or something prognosticating about the future of computers and getting everything wrong.

And actually people wrote in after that one to say that I'd mis-attributed the quote "Prediction is difficult, especially about the future" so I did **this story** which was kind of a personal quest to find out the truth and a reflection on the (in)accuracy of the internet.

These were all a long time ago, so maybe I've chickened out recently.

I kind of prefer to stay out of stories, because I feel like most of the time my job should be to find and bring out other people's stories. And you don't want to be self indulgent about it so sometimes this takes a light touch. But your idea sounds really great. It has the potential to be more than a commentary or a reported piece.

From the perspective of All Things Considered I think the only journalistic concern would be making sure you put together a balanced story. Probably not an issue with prom chaperone, but if you were taking a strong stand on some controversial issue then I'd say track down your worst enemy and interview them and put their thoughts or bits of your conversation in the piece. That would be some pretty fun radio. ATC and Morning Edition occasionally have commentaries that have ambience or people other than the narrator talking. We do these occasionally and should probably do them more.

Robert McGinley Myers - May 15, 2006 - #22

It occurred to me after reading your response that journalists are often being asked whether they should put more of themselves in their pieces. I guess that's the legacy of "new journalism." But it's less often that personal essayists get asked whether they should put more of the world into their pieces. Many a personal commentary would be greatly improved by a little footwork and a little interviewing.

Incidentally, one of the best short pieces that I did find that accomplishes that personal/journalistic combination was a piece from that show you mentioned, "20 Acts in 60 Minutes" on TAL. It was a story from Blunt Radio in which a juvenile prisoner tries to find out if he actually ate pudding that contained human urine. Hilarious tape, and fantastic economical reflection. He concludes the piece by saying something like, "If I actually did eat pudding with bodily fluids, I guess I'd rather not know." If only all commentators could be so succinct and unsentimental.

David Kestenbaum - May 16, 2006 - #24

I totally loved that story, it's one of the ones that stuck with me from the show. And while I cherish E.B. White and essays that find deep meaning in small moments, I also really value the well-researched and personal op-eds. Nicholas Kristoff's Darfur pieces for instance... I think you're right - for radio this is somewhat under explored territory - at least for Morning Edition and ATC.

Jackson Braider - May 15, 2006 - #23

Not quite the same domain as chaperoning a prom nite, and while it has much to do with science: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5014080>

It raises some interesting questions about personal involvement with a story and the quest for balance. David, I was interested to read you speak of a balanced story, and was glad to note the possibility of "taking a strong stand." I loved the air conditioner story -- beautiful and imaginative set-up, lovely writing. And a wonderful approach to the question of "balance." Balance, as you demonstrate here, is not always a matter of ideology.

But there are loaded-dice subjects in science. Whether it's ID or global warming or any number of ginned up science subjects (Plan B, for instance), it sometimes feels that when a story hits the air like we're actually on a field trip to the local sewage treatment plant. It feels like your way around such issues is to stick to the science and the data. Laudable, but when the societal facts on the ground have become so charged (electrically speaking), what do you do to "manage" (take that any way you choose) the story?

David Kestenbaum - May 16, 2006 - #25

You're right - I basically try to stick to the science. Just because there are two sides to the debate doesn't mean they deserve equal weight. For global warming stories we usually have some sentence which says something like the United Nations panel concluded that humans are playing a role. And when you hear from a skeptic, we try to point out that the critics are in a minority.

Intelligent design is a tough one. I had basically decided the right thing to do was to ignore it, but it became unignorable. I ended up doing a piece about why it was scientists didn't want to debate the creationists or the ID folks. [Here's a discussion](#) I had with On The Media about the perils involved. I told Brooke I liked covering scientific topics because - in the end someone was right and someone was wrong. She laughed at me.

[Here's that original story.](#)

[And here's one](#) on science and religion, which is another topic guaranteed to jam your inbox with angry letters.

Allan - May 17, 2006 - #27

What makes a good science story? How much coverage is driven by the latest articles in the big journals - Science, Nature, NEJM, etc.? Given the cumulative nature of science, there are few real breakthroughs - yet journalists seem to love their news "pegs"...When does science become worth talking about?

David Kestenbaum - May 25, 2006 - #31

The journals are a staple part of the diet. The plus side is that the research has been vetted by a group of experts, and the big name journals tend to have the highest profile results. If someone clones a chimpanzee they're going to submit the results to Science or Nature. And sometimes the journals will even get another researcher to write a commentary to go along with it.

The upside is also the downside of course. As journalists we're being spoon-fed. We're not going out there deciding what WE think is the most important thing for our listeners/readers - we're assuming the journals get it right. I've become more interested recently in the policy-side of things. The debate over nuclear power, NASA's struggle to figure out what to do with the shuttle and human spaceflight in general. The government is also spending billions on things like bio-defense, and is contemplating a new generation of nuclear warheads.

I'm also interested in places where science/engineering break down. The Columbia accident, the northeast blackout, the levee failures. These things don't really make it into the journals.

Jackson Braider - May 23, 2006 - #28

...How should we report on science stories where there is nothing at all that even remotely resembles our idea of what is news? And yet there are cadres of researchers out there trying to move the front line forward...

David Kestenbaum - May 25, 2006 - #32

I think about this a lot. The science that makes it into the press doesn't really reflect the bulk of the work being done. A physicist who studies condensed matter once asked me why there weren't any stories about the things he worked on.

I suppose the answer is that not everything makes a great national news story, and the job of the journalist is not to present an encyclopedia of research going on, but to pick something that is timely and interesting and new. Right now that means news organizations are running loads of stories about avian flu. And you're right - we've been through this before, with swine flu. What happened to that? Did the risk go away? Or did the press just get bored? I think the former, but I'd like to see someone do that story.

Jay Allison - May 24, 2006 - #29

David is on his way to South Africa--he may be there by now. He said he'd check in, but his itinerary included some donkey travel, so he may not be in regular touch with us. That said, stay tuned for Part Two of his Manifesto!

Manifesto Part 2

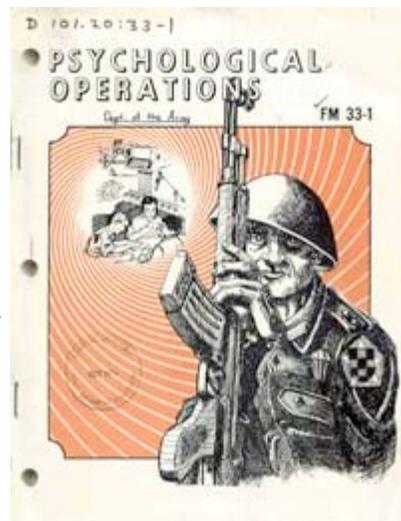
I found a surprisingly good guide to the craft of radio a while ago: The Army's Psychological Operations manual. In addition to tackling the problems of enemies jamming your propaganda transmission – it says this about writing scripts:

"Power of suggestion. The mind of each listener is a vast storehouse of scenery. The radio writer, through speech, music, and other sounds, enables the listener to visualize each scene."

It's a cliché that "radio is a visual medium," and my wife sometimes makes a gagging motion when she hears me say it. But I always think my pieces could be better if they were more visual and had real characters in them.

Q: *The story I'm working on doesn't have any scenes.*

DK: If there isn't a scene, make one. Take this story by Laura Sullivan on TASERS. And well...I'll just let you listen to the tape.



Listen to clip (MP3)

Much better than just describing it in words. And the whole scene is just so surprising. I love it.

And here's the story I mentioned earlier about how even privacy advocates don't usually bother to encode their email. We end up going door to door at this civil liberties organization to see if anyone encrypted their email, none did. An idea, captured in a scene.

Listen to clip (MP3)

Ideally I'd like EVERY fact in my story to be made visual by some image. I once decided to do a story about nuclear plant licensing (don't ask). On the wall, the reactor folks had a framed photo of a bunch of smiling guys in suits with their hands on a huge stack of documents – all the paperwork leading to a successful license. And when I went to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission – there it was again – the SAME framed photo, framed in the same way, same mounting. That one image made several points. A) You have to file thousands of pages of paperwork if you want to build a

nuclear reactor. B) The government and industry had close ties here – though the NRC is also supposed to be watchdogging the utilities. C) Energy is a business (men in suits). And you remember it – guys in suits with their hands on a huge stack of paper.

And here's a nice piece by Luke Burbank where he demonstrates the distance between Anaheim and Los Angeles in a totally amusing way.

Listen to clip (MP3)

In general, I beg people to DO something, anything.

Q: *The story is in California. I live in Illinois.*

DK: Non radio people sometimes ask me "so do you get to fly all around the country for your job?" Are you friggin' kidding me? I sit at my desk most of the time talking on the phone, reading through stuff. A scene doesn't have to mean you are there recording someone doing something.

I had a kind of revelation for how to do scenes remotely while on a treadmill at the gym. I was listening to a morning shock-jock show and they had sent a guy out to try to sneak into a secret corporate meeting somewhere. The guy had a cell phone and was wired somehow so it wasn't visible. He could talk to the guys in the radio studio and to everyone out in radioland but it was all hidden. So on live radio they were egging him on "tell the security guard you're looking for the rest room!" or "run for the elevator!" and then you'd hear the guy try it. It was completely hilarious secret agent stuff. And most importantly it was a scene with action. And because the guy was on a cell phone he was giving this kind of vivid running narration that we never get when we are standing next to someone with a microphone.

I tried something similar for this story on gravity waves. The audio quality stinks but its still pretty great radio.

Listen to clip part 1 (MP3)

Listen to clip part 2 (MP3)

Audiophiles hate cell phones, but I think there's something magical about them. I always overhear people giving wonderful radio-style narration, no-matter how mundane. ("Yeah. I'm at the supermarket. The woman in front of me has a really strange dog.")

Q: *Hey you cheated, that story was longer than 4:30 – signal characters*

DK: True. But sometimes all you need is a single line. I sometimes think of trying to come up with one-sentence biographies of people. My uncle, for instance, for years has thought about what the highest scoring Scrabble play would be if you could arrange the board before your turn however you like. That tells you a lot about him. Another friend of mine named Lars sets his clocks a full hour early ("Lars Standard Time") because otherwise he never leaves enough time for things.

A side point here: It really pays to take the time to find the right character for a story. I once did a story about how DNA was sequenced – and I had heard you could extract DNA in your kitchen. I talked to a lot of educator-types who were willing, but just didn't seem quite right. Somehow I got in touch with a researcher at NIH who said "hmmm we'd need a centrifuge. We could use my clothes dryer! Or.. my salad spinner!" Anyway – clearly he was the right guy, well worth all the phone calls.

I tried to make my wife the main character in a story but found she wasn't the right person. The piece was about software used to patch up people's singing. Professional studios use it with pop stars who sometimes hit a wrong note. My wife really can't sing. I think if I played two notes on the piano she wouldn't know which was higher, and it's somehow adorable to hear her searching for the notes. My editor argued that the listeners needed someone they cared about and knew, and she was right. In the end (Morning Edition host) Renee Montagne bravely attempted "Ain't No Sunshine."

Listen to the clip from NPR.

I think the key to all these shenanigans (as Ira Glass sometimes calls them) is that they have to

make a point that's essential to your story. The scenes or character details can't be gratuitous. Especially if you've only got 4:30.

Hillary - May 27, 2006 - #33

I'm two years out of college and I don't really know what I want to do with my life. I've decided to take two loves, photography & radio, on a trip around the country in a few months and the full weight of this decision is finally beginning to hit me. I want to do podcasts from wherever I end up but I'm not a journalist, reporter or producer. I don't even know how to podcast but I'm trying to learn as quickly as I can....

One of my problems is that when I get out there and I'm traveling around from place to place what do I talk about so that it's not just a bunch of ramblings about the landscape and the food? I know why I'm going but I'm not sure that I should be talking about how I'm afraid of living with regrets, living a life I never meant to live, and that even though the idea of traveling around the country by myself is somewhat terrifying it is thrilling and I know I want to go. I have to go despite by fear. Is that something that people would want to listen to? If it is then how do I talk about it from podcast to podcast so that they make sense together?

I don't even know how to ask what I want to ask. Focusing has always been a difficulty of mine. If you have any advice on how else I might approach writing these podcasts I would really appreciate it.

David Kestenbaum - May 28, 2006 - #34

Great idea. I'm wandering around southern africa right now and wishing i had a tape recorder. have you thought about doing short little audio postcards? maybe just 3 minutes long - but with lots of nice sound, and just telling a little story?

i was in a mud hut yesterday in swaziland meeting a traditional healer. i thought it could be nice to have a little story about the things people come to him for. in some ways it's the same as the U.S. people complain of headaches, insomnia, impotence. i asked him about my baldness and he shrugged though.

he wears monkey skins when he works and has a love potion, and a powder from the bone of a lion that could make me strong for boxing. "enough to fight mike tyson," he said. "could i BEAT mike tyson?" i asked. he laughed and said yes. then we talked about HIV - he tells the people he can't cure it. anyway it was a great little scene. he had a good sense of humor and it gave you a flavor for life in this little village.

i think those kind of moments from around the country would be nice. i don't have much experience with podcasts, but i think the shorter the better, especially if you want people to really listen. maybe you could make some just a short profile of interesting people. the conductor on the train - follow him around for a day. maybe you could post a photo for each podcast.

I'd stay away from longer stuff unless you have a good narrative that really builds to some kind of surprising moment.

Jackson Braider - May 28, 2006 - #36

...It's not that baldness is as critical a subject as AIDS, of course, but it seems that it's the question leaping unbidden from the lips that brings an interview (if not a story itself) to life. And that point leads to a question: How do you, as an interviewer, keep loose? It feels as if your spontaneity might invite a certain unguardedness on the part of your interviewee.

Jackson Braider - May 29, 2006 - #37

let me throw these further questions into the mix: a) Do you have a bunch of people who serve as your "first responders" -- a team you go to when you might not be entirely aware of what the subject really is to the proposed story? b) How much preparation do you feel you need to have to do a story?...

David Kestenbaum - June 6, 2006 - #41

I don't know if the baldness question would make it into a story about traditional healers (and AIDS), but I'd certainly think about it. I think the thing that you end up telling your friends when you get back from a reporting trip certainly bears consideration. It stuck in your mind for some reason, and it's likely to stick with the listeners.

And to answer your questions:

a) I certainly have a list of people I typically consult. They tend to be experts, but also people who don't mind talking things through. Hopefully they're insiders and they know the real story. Sometimes you can waste a day of reporting if you just talk to the easy-to-reach folks who have one point of view. I try to call the person who can shoot it all down. That helps me measure what I've got quickly.

b) Ideally I'll work on a story until I reach some sort of end-point, until I feel like I've talked to enough of the people involved to understand and document what's going on. One nice thing about having beats is that this process gets shorter. But then the lights will go out on the east coast and I'll realize I know nothing about how the electrical grid is operated, and the story has to be on in an hour. You report what you know, and no more. You attribute things that aren't established facts. And then you keep digging and advance the story the next day. I guess my instinct is to over-report everything - but you have to be careful. You don't want to spend an afternoon reading through some 300-page background report unless you think it's really likely to help the story.

Jackson Braider - June 6, 2006 - #43

I'm intrigued by the concept of scene-setting in radio and realized that as someone working somewhere other than the major radio magazines, I have become addicted to letting music define the scene. New tune = new scene. Incredibly simple...

In your work, is the concept of "scene" always linked to "place"? Another person can be placed elsewhere with a phone. But much of my experience of labs so far has been categorized by blowers and a/c and desktop computer fans. If you would, I'd love to hear more of your thoughts about what makes a scene in radio -- I'll note that I enjoyed the curious delay loop slapback in your audio sample. Now that was something that said that person wasn't *here*...

David Kestenbaum - June 12, 2006 - #46

I really can't use music in a news story unless it occurs pretty naturally. I certainly can't play it underneath the Energy Secretary announcing some new policy. But where it makes sense, it's certainly a nice way to change or set a scene. Or the end of a song obviously.

My limited experience scoring a story with music came during those few months at This American Life. I was amazed (and terrified) by how a story changed with different soundtracks. A sad ending became funny, or ironic. At its best I think music works like lighting in film. It can highlight something or set a mood.

Check out Jad Abumrad's session at the last Third Coast conference. "[Music: A Force For Good \(And Sometimes Evil\)](#)"

To answer your other question - yes I tend to think of scene being tied to something happening in a specific place, a scene you can paint in your head. I don't think you have to have ambience of blowers in a lab - if someone is telling a good story and it's set in a lab - that's enough. The ambience helps hold you there, kind of adds depth, but the story is the important thing.

Joecool - June 3, 2006 - #38

I just got hired at a local college radio station doing news stories, and I'm new at this. I tried using your techniques of creating scenes with ambient sounds, images, and humor -- and people have called in and really like the stories! The problem is, our news director doesn't like them, and she thinks the stories should be more sterile, in other words . . . more like strict news.

She doesn't want me to use the pronoun "I", or ever refer to myself. And she never wants my voice in any audio clips. For instance, if I were interviewing someone, and they said, "I hate cheese," I wouldn't be able to ask "why?" The taser story, for example, would be impossible for me to do. My question is, should news be completely void of personality?

David Kestenbaum - June 6, 2006 - #40

Ouch. I agree these things can be taken too far - and that when we try and fail it's particularly painful. But given the listener feedback it sounds like you haven't done that. Can you put a link up to one of the pieces? (Or email it to me if you want to be anonymous.)

My colleague John Nielsen has this rule about using one of his questions in a story - which is that it can't just be there to make YOU the reporter look clever. If you say something funny or illuminating - the person you're talking to has to come back with something even better. (Unless of course you're asking a tough question - in which case a long pause and a 'yes' or 'no' from them may work.) In general I think you are there as a proxy for the listener - and it is your duty to ask the "why do you hate cheese" question.

Can you sit down and have a discussion with your editor about this? Maybe play a piece like the Taser one and talk about whether it would be better with or without that moment. I can say that at NPR there is a big push right now to recommit ourselves to making better livelier radio, to vary the rhythm, and get away from the ax+trax drone.

Joecool - June 6, 2006 - #42

Here's my first radio story. It was about a boring subject -- \$3.9 million for renovations at the local college science lab. I tried my best to make it interesting, using your techniques of DOING something. I asked the science director to lead me around the building showing me lab rats and stuff. **Here's how it turned out.** Keep in mind this is for a college radio station, and our news director thinks it breaks too many rules. And also keep in mind that I'm a music major, and I've never taken any journalism classes.

David Kestenbaum - June 12, 2006 - #45

Nice job! Good radio writing and use of scenes. I think there's probably a happy middle ground between you and your editor. You (as a character) can keep a lower profile - instead of saying "I went to see where all the money is going" you could just say, "where is all this money going?" for instance. Or introduce Greg by saying, "Greg M is really happy about the new money. He's tired of plaster falling from the ceiling in his office," (or some detail like that) then go to the tour.

I would shorten the tour - you've got three scenes in there that all make the same point. Maybe just use the anatomy lab - it's wonderfully visual and kind of funny with your question about it being smelly. I can just picture him there in the hallway outside whispering to you while the class is going on. Then I'd simply mention the fact that the hallway had to be patched multiple times, and maybe a third thing that the money will fix. But you don't need a scene to demonstrate each. Maybe the patched hallway goes earlier - "we walk down a stairwell, where Greg M says the ceiling has been patched and re-patched for 18 years... and end up at an anatomy lab." Then have the anatomy lab scene, then the tape of him explaining that the college has been expanding but these buildings have not been updated.

I also wonder if there aren't other places you could take the piece. Bonds can cause real budget problems in later years, and as you point out the funding here isn't exactly a done deal. Did some lawmakers oppose the bond? Was it really a feat for your president to get this added in? If so - maybe the political back-story is worth more discussion - how the school lobbied to get the funding. And did some other program get cut to make room? Etc. etc.

Also did you consider putting the tape from your president closer to the top - he does a nice job laying out that this is a big deal ("biggest bonding project ever...") Then you could say "so how did this happen? Well Davenport went on a trip with the governor. And sat next to him on the plane. And pestered him." Then play the tape from the governor. (I wouldn't use the word "tutored" since the governor does). Also that clip of the governor might come off more smoothly if you establish him first with some other short piece of clip. Keep experimenting!