

# News Writing



Pathways Resource  
Booklet

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## Outline: News writing workshop

Community radio is all about local content. That's why people love to tune in. In this session, you'll learn research, writing and presentation skills to produce news bulletins and current affairs stories for and about your community.

## The building blocks of news writing

### Elements of news and news values

News values are the elements that make something 'newsworthy'. News values are a strange sort of alchemy, they can blend into each other and be hard to pin down. What you consider exciting, breaking and important news might not be seen the same way by your editor or your audience.

Still, there are elements to be guided by. If your story has one or more of these it might be worth a 'run'.

**Significance or impact:** You should reflect on the number of people impacted by an event or occurrence. For example, one train running late might impact 200 people. That's probably not news on the face of it. A whole train line melting down might impact thousands of people and make it big news.

Measuring the impact of something over time or geography helps you judge if something is news. Disasters that have a huge, immediate impact, such as a bushfire, are easy to classify as news. Something like elder abuse or domestic violence might be harder to report on, because the impact is felt one person at a time. Turning stories like this into news is a very useful skill for a journalist.

**Proximity:** Proximity is how close an issue is to your audience. Geographical proximity can make something news. If there's a bushfire in your town that results in the local public school being destroyed, that's huge news. If the same thing happened in Italy, it might not make the news in your hometown. So if you're struggling to find news, look in your own backyard.

Proximity also refers to stories that are close to us culturally, historically and socially. When it comes to writing news at a community radio station, you have the power to push back against the assumptions about proximity that structure a lot of mainstream media. So, make sure you use this to your advantage!

**Conflict:** Tension and conflict makes something newsworthy. It may be a new conflict or a new development in an old battle. For example, people are interested in political conflict, sports matches and war.

**Human interest:** Most news bulletins and current affairs programs have elements of light and shade. To help digest heavy, important news there are those lighter stories that bring some levity to the program. Humans want to know what other humans are doing, and out of this compulsion come human interest stories. Stories about people helping each other or coming together are human interest stories. They may generate sympathy or curiosity.

**Novelty:** Something can be newsworthy if it's a novelty. A tram driver is not newsworthy. A dog driving a tram is newsworthy. Look for things out of the ordinary, ask why they exist and you might have a newsworthy story on your hands.

**Prominence:** Some individuals or groups are inherently newsworthy - the promotions, weddings, sacking or crimes of public figures can be newsworthy, and are certainly more newsworthy than the same events in an ordinary citizen's life.

## What are the different types of news writing?

**News bulletin:** This is what you hear at the top of the hour on a lot of stations. It's often a 3 to 10 minute bulletin, presented by a 'newsreader' and is usually made up of short, reported segments. The purpose of the bulletin is to give essential information in short, clear sentences that are easy to understand.

*Writing elements: Bulletin script, reporter script, reporter introduction.*

**Reporter cross:** Sometimes called a 'Q&A', this is where a presenter interviews the reporter on a subject they have been researching. This often happens when time is short, news is breaking, resources are low or just when the reporter is great talent!

*Writing elements: Introduction, questions, back announce. Depending on the show's style this could be written by the reporter, presenter or a producer.*

**Interview:** An interview can be an effective way of breaking news, getting the 'who, what, when, where and why' out there in an effective way.

*Writing elements: Introduction, interview, back announce.*

**Current affairs package:** Audio packaged and presented by the reporter to play as part of a current affairs program. This could include some actuality or scene-building recordings, interviews, vox pops, stand-ups and reporter narration.

*Writing elements: Presenter intro, reporter narration or voice over (VO), interview questions, back announce.*

*Examples: ABC's AM, World Today, PM, [The Wire](#), SYN's Panorama, NPR's Morning Edition)*

**Donut:** A combination of a reporter cross and a current affairs package. This can be a good way to get the whole story across when you only have one interviewee, or when your recording is lacking a crucial perspective. The presenter interviews the reporter about the story, then they throw to a package or secondary interview. This secondary interview may be between reporter and talent. Then the presenter would come back to the reporter for more questions or final comments.

*Writing elements: Intro, questions, throw to package, package script, back announce.*

**Narrative news:** The narrative news podcast is an emerging way of telling stories and breaking news. The format is still being created, so have fun with it! It has been pioneered in podcasting, but can be an effective way of scripting radio stories as well. Reporters map the news of the day into a narrative arc and then use interviews and other creative techniques to present the story. A common format is for one of two interviews to be used as tape with a narrative-structured interview between the reporter and presenter to form the scaffolding for the story, dipping in and out of tape.

*Writing elements: Intro, interview questions, reporter/presenter interview is often heavily scripted, narration.*

*Examples: New York Times podcast The Daily, ABC podcast The Signal, Vox podcast Today Explained, PRI's The World.*

**Serialised narrative news:** This involves using the narrative news technique but in an extended way. The producer maps out a news story or investigation over several episodes using various creative narrative techniques.

*Writing elements: Narration, interview questions, introductions.*

*Examples: NYT's Caliphate; ABC's Unravel and Blood on the Tracks; BBC's The Assassination.*

**Audio documentary:** A longer package that combines tape, actuality, narration, interviews and usually music or sound effects.

*Writing elements: narration, interview questions, introduction.*

*Examples: Background Briefing, BBC's File on 4, This American Life, Reveal.*

## House styles

Each station and show have their own 'house style' for covering news and current affairs. This will cover things like spelling, pronunciation and whether they like a package to start with tape or with the reporter's voice over. If you are working on an established news or current affairs show, make sure you ask the EP or Station manager about the style and tone of the news coverage. You should also listen to some existing programs and take note of the style. If you're starting a program or bulletin from scratch, have a think about your house style and make a manual for new reporters and producers.

Here are a few questions to get you started on your own style:

- Who is your audience? What tone and style will engage them, what issues are they interested in?
- Should the reporter use 'me' or 'we' when speaking from the show's perspective? For example, will they say 'I received a comment' or 'The Wire received a comment'?
- When referring to the listener, do you use 'you' or 'we'? For example, 'We're about to hear about NAIDOC Week' or 'You're about to hear about NAIDOC Week'?
- Can the reporter include analysis or opinion? Is there room for that in your show, and how will you signpost it?
- Do you want your stories to start with tape or the reporter's voice? Or can you use either?

- Will you have time to get out in the field? Or will you do most interviews over the phone or ask people to come to the studio?



## Basic elements of a radio news story

**Script / voice over:** The reporter's voice, which is recorded and used to deliver information to the listener.

**Tape / grabs / audio:** Something you've recorded in the field or as part of an interview. You use this to introduce other voices, like a print article would use quotes.

**Comments / statements:** Sometimes a stakeholder doesn't have time to do an interview, but if they have a significant stake in the story, you should ask yourself if they should be given a chance to comment. If for example your story is accusing them of something you should consider if they have a right of reply. That's why a comment or statement is often one element of a news. If you have a written statement, you could have the reporter or someone else at your station read it to air. Always make it clear that this is a written statement and not part of a taped interview.

**Online copy:** Increasingly our audio news lives on as a digital product: a podcast, an item on the station's website, a post on social media. This can be a re-write of your radio introduction, although the format and tense may change online depending on your station's style guide. If in doubt use the [ABC style guide](#).



## Research

### What's the news hook?

The news hook is the essence of the story, the one sentence that makes it worth telling. What is the story, why is it worth telling and why are we telling it now?

### Moving the news cycle forward

The best news takes a story and covers it in a way that hasn't been done before. This is called 'moving the story forward'. Whether you're working with a team or on your own, a good question to ask is 'how do we move this story forward'? Maybe there's someone who hasn't commented on it yet, whose opinion will matter or even change the outcome? Maybe there's an affected group who hasn't been spoken to? A lot of news rehashes what's been covered by other outlets, but the best news moves the story forward and 'breaks' news.

### Defining your story's driving question

A good way to give your story focus is to give it a driving question. Questions that ask how and why are often the strongest questions. Make sure your question is not too broad and not too narrow. It should have a focus but still have enough 'meat' in it to unfurl over the course of your story. Here's a great explanation of driving questions from [NPR Training](#), including an exercise you can do with your team.

### Finding a good news story

#### Build relationships with contacts

**and organisations:** This can be hard when you are starting out, but you will build relationships over time. Treat your interviewees with respect, store their contact information in an organised way and ask them to get in touch with any new developments. Make sure you collect phone numbers as well as emails - a lot of news writing involves working to a deadline and you'll want to be able to get in touch quickly if something 'breaks'.

**Cultivate a 'beat':** A good way to build contacts and get better at telling stories is to cultivate a 'beat'. A beat is a topic area or industry that you cover consistently and follow developments in. Maybe you're really interested in the environment or industrial relations? Maybe you want to focus on the local council? Choose a few areas to focus on, that way when a story develops you will understand its significance and be able to identify the newsworthy parts.

**Play to your strengths and the strengths of community radio:** You might not be able to get on the phone with the Prime Minister (yet!) but reporting on the news at community radio comes with its advantages. Think about the communities associated with your station, the highly engaged listenership who you can draw on for ideas and input into stories. Many stories can come from thinking about the principles of community radio. There's stories that speak to communities that feel despondent with coverage in mainstream media. There's speakers who might be





hesitant to trust their story to a stranger but feel more comfortable with someone from the local station they support. Cuts to local news also make community stations more important than ever. If you want to cover national stories or federal politics, think of how you can make it local and relevant to your community and start there.

**Ask your audience:** Community radio audiences are highly engaged - turn to them to find stories. Why not create a Google Form for your audience to submit questions and add it to your station's newsletter or website? This can be especially useful for political stories. It can be hard sometimes to see how politics impacts real people until you hear their stories about issues like housing, poverty, education or childcare. Here's an example from the [ABC's election coverage](#), and another [one that does the same thing with voice memos](#).

**Develop a routine:** Knowing where to find ideas can be hard, but it's easier when you develop a routine and learn to 'read in'. To know how to move the news forward you need to know what the news of the day is. If you're covering general news, come up with an efficient way to consume a range of news. For example, if you're working on a drive-time show maybe you; wake up, read a paper over breakfast, listen to AM in the car and then read a couple of email newsletters when you get to your desk. You might make a list of the stories that interest you, the questions you still have after reading in. If you have a beat or topic areas of interest, use Twitter lists, Google News Alerts and Feedly news reader to filter news of the day, so you're across all the new developments. A routine like this can help you reliably spot the stories of the day.

**Be organised:** Keep a rolling list of stories that you could follow, some days there just won't be news and you'll want something interesting up your sleeve. Come up with a way to file your ideas and your contacts. Use a plugin or app to save articles that interest you (e.g. Instapaper).

## **Now who to talk to? Characters and stakeholders**

As an audio story is made up of narration and tape, you're going to have to talk to someone! To tell the story you first need to identify the relevant characters, or stakeholders. You can also talk to experts or analysts who might not be stakeholders but will be able to provide insight into your story.

**Where to find talent:** Over time this will become easier, as you gather your own contacts. Someone's business website is often a good place to find contact details. LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook are useful places to get in contact with people and find new interviewees. If you're looking for experts, check out who has written on the topic for [The Conversation](#). Interest groups, unions and clubs will usually have contact details on their website, and student societies can be a good place to start as well. Even if you're looking for someone older within a community, students might have the means to reach others in that group quickly.

**Tip:** Remember to think about a diversity of backgrounds and views in your talent.

## The art of the pre-interview

The pre-interview is a chat with your talent before the recorded interview. This is essential for live radio news interviews. Even if you only have a few minutes, get your talent on the phone, check they're a confident talker and can answer your question with the basic facts of the story - who is involved, why is this happening, when it is happening etc. It's also a good chance to ask how they pronounce their name or any other tricky questions that you don't want to be asking on air! A good pre-interview will check that you're not throwing them any curve balls on air, will allow you to weed out questions with boring answers, and will find you those gems where the talent comes alive. It lets you reorder your questions so that one where their answer was particularly expansive and compelling comes first and engages the listener. If you work in a team, it can be good to have a producer or another reporter do the pre-interview and write the script. Then have the presenter do the live interview fresh. Sometimes if the same person does both interviews, then the magic is gone as the talent knows that you know their answers.

### ACTIVITY #1: Stakeholder map

Considering who the stakeholders are in your story can help you find speakers for your piece. For this example we'll use [this story](#) about an online scam.

Write the story in the middle of your board or butcher's paper.

#### FACEBOOK SCAM COMPETITIONS

Now write up all around that story title - who are the major stakeholders in the story?

- People who have been scammed
- People involved in the scam
- P&O cruises
- Virgin Australia
- Facebook
- Facebook friends of those scammed
- Police
- Companies that buy email databases

Most of these people have likely been spoken to or are involved in the original story in some way. But who else is impacted? Each of these labels likely involves others.

Write up all your ideas

- People who have been scammed - old people, groups who shared the scam
- People involved in the scam - 'Mark Graham' in the picture, what country is the scam coming from? Law enforcement in that country, the life of the scammer

**P&O cruises - marketing for P&O, Facebook moderator for P&O  
Virgin Australia  
Facebook - social media companies  
Facebook friends of those scammed  
Police  
Companies that buy email databases**

## How to write news for radio

There are a few rules that apply across all types of radio writing. These rules will make it easier for you to write news well. They will come naturally the more you practice them!

### Keep it simple!

It can be easy to over complicate things, but when we speak, we tend to do it in simpler language than when we write. Use short sentences and start by explaining the news as you would to a friend - simply say what happened. Write the 'who, what, when, where' and let your recording explain the 'how' or 'why'. Don't use too many numbers; find other ways to explain things, so that the few you do use stick in people's heads.



### Use the active voice

The active voice is one where the subject of the sentence is doing the action.

*The Prime Minister Scott Morrison called US President Donald Trump.*

NOT

*US President Donald Trump was called by Scott Morrison.*

There are lots of examples of active and passive sentences at [Your Dictionary](#).

It can be easy to slip into a passive voice when we're trying to write in a 'newsy' way, but it can also be confusing, and conceal the real point of your sentence. Editing your writing to be more active is almost always an improvement.

### Use present tense

Your station might have a style guide on tenses, but if not keep the [ABC style guide](#) handy, as it lays out some clear guidelines. If you must write in past tense, then past continuous can be very useful to keep your language active!

The preferred tense for many broadcast formats, notably radio news, is the present tense.

*The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, says he does not know when the budget will be announced.*

*Mr. Turnbull says he is waiting to hear from the Treasurer.*

That doesn't mean we avoid the past tense, which is useful when referring to actions that have taken place in the past.

*At a conference in Canberra, Mr. Turnbull said Australia and Malaysia 'are becoming better friends'.*

Always keep tenses the same within the same sentence:

*She says she is happy with the outcome.*

NOT

*She says she was happy with the outcome.*

Here's a last tip: 'Led' is the past tense of the verb lead. Phrases like 'She led the team to victory' appear all too often.

### **Writing for online**

In online news articles, your teaser text and short teaser text should be in present tense. The first paragraph should also be in an active tense. The rest of the story should be in the past tense, unless specifically referencing ongoing or future events.

Whatever tense you are using, ensure you are consistent. If you start the body text in the past tense, continue in the past tense. Avoid the following:

*The businessman announced plans to re-enter the political arena and says he will consider running against the MP for Herbert.*

If you are writing a personal essay or a feature, the present tense is fine. But again, be consistent within sentences.

### **Write like you speak**

There are some words that we would rarely say out loud. Some examples are: 'however', 'therefore' 'long-disputed' and 'war-torn'. They work well in printed pieces but not out loud when you're reading them from the page.

Change those 'however's' to 'buts' and 'therefores' to 'so'. Ask yourself 'how would I tell this story to a friend'? Use those words, your everyday words.

### **Beware the dependent clause**

Before you submit or record a radio story, do a script edit and check you're not depending on dependent clauses. They're very easy to edit away, and it'll make your work easier to read! Here's an example of editing a phrase with a dependent clause:

*The protest against offshore detention, which was organised by GetUp, drew ten thousand people.*

Try this instead:

*The protest drew ten thousand people. It was organised by GetUp to fight offshore detention.*

Tip: Try reading both versions out loud. Reading two sentences out loud is always easier than reading one sentence with a dependent clause!

### **Writing on deadline**

If you freeze, or are on deadline and nothing is coming, actively write the worst possible version of the story, something full of clichés, something cringeworthy. Then

make it better! It's easier to start with something, even if it is the worst possible version of a story, than to stare at a blank page while you silently panic.

Another trick is to do a 'barf draft'. Take out your phone and record your spoken intro, just like you're explaining the main points of the story to a friend. Then listen back and write down what you said. Often this writing is better than what you type out anyway! It's often more natural to read on air.

### **Nailing the introduction (intro)**

A good intro makes you want to listen to the interview or package, sets up what we're about to hear with any essential information, and doesn't give away the whole game. If the 'who, what, when, where and why' is all there in your introduction, why would we need to stick around for the story? Instead, make a list of the essential facts you'd like to get across (yes, the 'who, what, when, where, why, how') and then put a couple of those in the intro, writing the others into the first few questions.

Another good way to write an intro is to use a recording. Maybe there's a grab from your story or from a story that came before yours on the same topic that can be used to illustrate a point, so that you can bounce off it and do less talking! This can add texture to your story and make the intro more compelling.

### **Writing for radio is noisy**

News bulletins, interview intros, narration - it's all best written out loud, while you're speaking. Write, read, revise, repeat. It will feel weird at first, but the best radio newsrooms are the noisy ones. Everyone is muttering to themselves, reading scripts and checking the words they stumble on, the sentences that are hard to spit out.

One way to write a script is to explain it out loud while recording yourself on your phone. Then write out what you've said and edit it. Another way is to write the worst possible version of the story and then edit it to make it better. This can help when you're frozen, and don't know how to get started.

**ACTIVITY #2: Here's a news article, turn it into the intro for a radio story, using everything we've talked about - present tense, active voice, start with something interesting. BUT you must talk out loud while you write!**

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/devout-us-woman-found-with-cocaine-hidden-in-her-shoes-at-sydney-airport-20180809-p4zwho.html>

### **Pronunciation**

There's nothing worse than coming up to a word you can't pronounce live on air and stumbling over it. Oh wait, yes there is, it's seeing the word coming up, sentences away, and stumbling over all the words in between because you're thinking about the tricky word! Whether you're interviewing a guest, reading a bulletin or presenting an intro, you want to make sure any word that could have a question mark over the punctuation is signposted clearly.



Here are some tips:

- If the word is related to a guest you're speaking to (someone's name, or the place they're from) ask them! They'll appreciate that you want to get it right.
- The ABC has a public pronunciation guide. It's constantly being updated and is especially useful for Australian place names.
- Always check place names! They can be strange and mean you can always tell when a newsreader is new to town!

We call writing a word out phonetically in a script a 'pronouncer'. In a script, there are two common ways to write a pronouncer.

1. If you're writing for yourself, you might find it easier just to substitute the word with a pronouncer.
2. If you're writing for someone else, put the pronouncer in brackets after the word, so that if your version makes no sense the presenter can clarify.

There's also a third option - sometimes a pronouncer is not enough, and it's handy to add some further information to help.

Here's some examples:

1. *Fishermen in LAKE KAT-IGH are shaken by a proposed fishing ban.*
2. *Fishermen in Lake Cathie [*lake KAT-igh*] are shaken by a proposed fishing ban.*
3. *The custodian of the Namande story is Neville Namarnyilk [*NARM-UM-YOOK rhymes with book*] and he's spent years painting the character and telling this story.*

## Presenting your program

Presenting news and current affairs doesn't have to be boring - in fact, no one will listen if it is!

Think about your audience - what angle do they care about, what tone do they respond to? You know them better than anyone, so don't put on a 'news voice' just because you think that you should because you're talking about something important. Talk to other people at your station to get a picture of your audience. Make sure your delivery is in a tone and style that's appropriate for your audience and will make them interested.

Here is the same story done in different ways, for different audiences. Have a listen, and then talk about what information they prioritise, and what style they present the news in.

[The Daily, 2Ser](#), [Backchat](#), [FBI Radio](#), [The Signal](#), [ABC News](#), [AM](#), [ABC News](#).





## Ethics

Ethics come into play whenever we engage in journalism, whether we're writing news, posting on social media, creating a long audio documentary or producing any other media product.

To get thinking about ethics, a good starting place is to familiarise yourself with the MEAA's journalist code of ethics. This code sets out principles to help journalists strive for:

- Honesty
- Fairness
- Independence

### Respect for the rights of others

Fairness can mean giving a fair opportunity for parties to the story to respond before your deadline. It can also mean fairness over time - if there are angles of the story you've privileged over others, consider those choices. You may want to offer multiple perspectives over a whole week of your show, or cover the same topic over a long time period. Sometimes different parts of the journalist's code can come into conflict with each other. They're a set of principles to consider. At their core is a reminder of the importance of conscientious decision making by the journalist when working on a specific story.

**ACTIVITY:** Look at the MEAA journalist code of ethics handout. Break up in pairs and each discuss a scenario where that standard might be challenged or compromised, and workshop how to overcome that challenge in an ethical way. Pairs explain their dilemma and how they solved it to the larger group.

## Defamation law

Defamation law is designed to protect reputations. You should be very aware of it when writing for news, even if you're reporting on information that is already out there! Just because Fairfax or the ABC are reporting something that runs a defamation risk, doesn't mean you can as well - they might have a team of lawyers carefully constructing each and every sentence, so one variation could get you in hot water.

If you say something about another person on radio, TV, online or on social media, consider whether there is a risk of defamation.

The option of taking legal action for defamation is available if all these things are true:

- The material was 'published' (this includes being written, spoken or illustrated, including being posted on the internet) to at least one other person.
- The material identified the plaintiff (i.e. the person who claims to have been defamed), whether directly or indirectly.
- The material was 'defamatory' of the plaintiff. That is, it has the potential to cause damage to their reputation.

From 1 January 2006, uniform defamation law came into operation throughout Australia under the Defamation Act 2005.

To avoid being sued for defamation, make sure you:

- Think carefully before you interview anyone. Is there a risk that they might say something that could lead to being sued? If you think there is a risk, then **PRE-RECORD** the interview.
- Think carefully before you read anything on air that someone else has written, **CHECK IT BEFORE YOU READ IT OUT** and if you have any concerns check with a supervisor.

Think carefully when reading audience feedback - broadcasting someone else's opinion still counts.

Just because someone else has written or said something it **DOES NOT** mean you can repeat it safely. You can still be sued. Take extra care if you are reporting something that has been said in Parliament or in a court case.

Ask yourself these questions before broadcasting:

- Can the person be identified? Is there enough information for others to work out who the person is? Even if you're not using their name, information about the story or the person you're interviewing might make the subject identifiable to people who know them.
- Can you **PROVE** what you say is true? Under Australian defamation law this is the main thing you have to do, but if you have just heard or read something and cannot **PROVE** in court that it is true then you are taking a risk. Do you have evidence to support the facts? Would the people you have got information from (your 'sources') be able to give evidence in court if necessary? This can be a high bar to clear under Australian law.
- Have you acted 'reasonably'? Have you made reasonable attempts to get the person's response to things said about them on air? Have you included the responses in the broadcast?
- Can you trust your sources? Do they **WANT** to damage the person's reputation? Make sure your sources know that if there is a defamation case they might be called upon to give evidence - are they comfortable with this? Can they provide you with documentation that would help with this verification before airing the story?
- Is the issue a matter of public interest? Do listeners **NEED** to know about this? Can you argue this in court?
- Does the broadcast talk about a person's public position? If not, then you will find it hard to prove it was 'reasonable' to broadcast it.
- Put yourself in the shoes of the person being talked about. Would you want to sue to protect your reputation?
- Which parts of the broadcast are facts? Which parts are suspicions or allegations? Is it clear which is which?
- Is it important to broadcast quickly? Can you wait to get a response from the person being talked about? Can you try to? Can you explain to a court why not?

You can defend yourself against defamation by arguing that what you broadcast was 'fair comment'. This means that you may comment on a matter of public interest, as long as:

- The comments are based on true information.
- The opinions are 'honestly held' by you, not designed to harm someone or their reputation.

The opinions are 'reasonably based' on true information.

Corporations can't sue for defamation unless:

- They are not-for-profit, or
- They have less than 10 employees, and
- The corporation is not a public body.

A person can't sue for defamation about a deceased person.

More information: [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol\\_act/da200599/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/da200599/)

## Contempt of Court

True crime is an increasingly popular genre for audio storytelling, and there are some great stories being told. But Australian law means we need to be careful in covering crime the way you might hear it covered on some US-based podcasts! Defamation law and contempt of court both come into play, so get to know what you're allowed to report on before becoming attached to a story!

In a nutshell, journalists must be careful that they do not influence the outcome of a trial when reporting on court cases which are either scheduled to occur or are in the process of occurring.

Reporters should be extremely careful to avoid:

- revealing prior convictions
- breaching any non-publication order
- reports that imply guilt or innocence of the accused
- reports including interviews that could affect witnesses
- comments, as distinct from reports of the court case
- confessions
- pictures of the accused where identity is an issue
- reporting evidence in the absence of the jury
- any contact with jurors.

## Privacy

Everyone has the right to privacy. However, journalists and broadcasters are allowed to publish details about a public figure's private life if it is in the public's interest to know.

The Privacy Act 1988 regulates how personal information is handled.

You can report on the private life of public figures if:

- it tells something about their character which might affect their public duty
- they are responsible for public assets
- their private misdeeds could affect the public good.

You have no right to intrude on a person's private life where there is no public benefit. You should not broadcast people's phone numbers and addresses unless they have given you expressed permission. Your radio station cannot distribute yours or anyone else's personal information to anyone without your permission.

You must get a person's permission before you put them to air. You should not record or broadcast them without their permission. However, if someone is holding a press conference, permission to record or broadcast is not necessary as it is presumed that permission has already been given. Each state and territory has its own rules about secret recordings in the public interest. You should get legal advice on a state-by-state basis.

## Writing a news package

### **What makes a good current affairs package?**

You have an idea, you know how to write: let's apply those skills to the bread and butter of current affairs radio news, the package. There are lots of different types of news packages, but no matter the length, a package is an audio story that combines your voice and tape.

### **Good packages have a beginning, middle and end**

Even if you're doing a story about an 'issue', use the driving question to give your story a narrative arc. A narrative arc is a beginning, a middle and an end. This can turn even the most boring news story into something that your listener will want to stick with and hear the end of.

A good way to start writing news with narrative in mind is to use the three-act structure, to have three beats in your story that you'll hit. X happens and then Y happens and that leads to Z.

### **Character**

The best news uses strong characters to illustrate a story. Use the stakeholder activity from earlier one to think creatively about the people you choose to talk to.



Remember the power you have as a community broadcaster - do you have to go to the most obvious voice who is being interviewed across the media on the same topic, or can you be creative and cover the story in a different way, with different characters? Who are the real people this issue or event is affecting, and where do they come together or organise?

Think hard about why you're choosing someone - are you privileging voices that are easy to book, media trained or available because of hidden advantages? What do you have to do to surface opinions and perspectives that aren't heard from elsewhere? Maybe you need to go directly to a community, meet someone on their terms, or just let someone know that their children are welcome to hang out at the studio. Offer to do a practice run without recording or reassure someone that an interview is pre-recorded. This method ensures that a nervous speaker can choose to stop and have a break at any time.

### **Accountability**

While good characters make the best tape, great news stories also have an element of accountability. Who is responsible, or accountable, for the injustice or question at the heart of your story? As a reporter you can hold these people accountable. As we spoke about earlier, you must always ask these people for an interview or comment, even if you think they won't say yes (you might be surprised!). Think of how you'll use their recording in your interview. Is there a way to make it more compelling? Do you have information they don't have yet, and can you capture them confronting that information on tape?

## Types of tape

You've got to build a news story with something - usually a news package is made up of your VO, tape (recordings), and sometimes sound effects (sfx).

There are different types of tape you can use to build a story:

**Narrative tape:** Where someone is explaining what happened.

**Reflective tape:** Where someone is reflecting on the impact of something.

**Active tape:** Where action is unfolding in front of your microphone (radio gold!)

When you're out in the field, doing interviews and collecting your tape, try and get a combination of all of these things!

## Stand-ups

Don't forget that the audience can't see what you can! You need to fill in the other senses: taste, look, touch, smell, sight. Record yourself reflecting on the scenes unfolding in front of you, on the people you're talking to and the atmosphere of the location. This is called a stand-up. You might not even use it in your story, but it's good for your memory when you're writing your script as well!

### **ACTIVITY #3: Map narrative onto news**

Have a listen to this [news story](#) by WNYC reporter Marianne McCune, about Hurricane Sandy.

**‘On the Lower East Side, a woman emerges from a dark high rise for first time’**

**This story is about a big event (a hurricane!) and social issues (poverty, social inequality, age discrimination). But it also uses a narrative structure. Try and map it onto the handout - what is the beginning, middle and end.**

**Talk about the techniques Marianne has used here to make her story compelling: the report could have been dry and used the voices of lots of experts to illustrate that people in public housing complexes like La Guardia Houses on the Lower East Side weren’t getting much assistance in the wake of the hurricane. Instead, she used the voices of real people to explain the news in a narrative way.**

**Here is the handout.**

## Story plan

Whether your story is 3 minutes or 3 hours long, know what recordings you need to get in the field. This is a story plan, writing a short list before you even go out. It’ll change along the way, as you report, but knowing what you need to get is going to make writing so much easier.

In TV this is called a ‘shooting script’ so some radio shows use this terminology as well. If it’s a doco (documentary), this will be a long process and your editor might get involved, but if it’s for a short report or a package, then it can be done alone: think of three beats you need, a beginning, middle and an end. Ideally, what is the ‘dream tape’ you’ll be getting?

Here’s a handout to help you - save it on your phone for those times we’re you’re on the way to a story and you’re plotting what you need to collect!



### ACTIVITY #4: Story plan

**Cut up the morning’s newspaper and put the stories in a hat. Each pair takes one. You’ve just been assigned this story to cover - talk to your partner and decide where you’d go to find tape and who you would talk to? For the purpose of this activity, you can time travel if you need (if you’re covering an event yesterday, pretend you’re going to the event!)**

**Now each write a reporting plan for your news package covering this story, using the handout provided. Place sounds, stand-ups, vox pops, interviews, people, ideas, in each column. What beats to you have to hit to make it a good story? What will your driving question be, and what moment (however small) will provide you with a sort of resolution or ending? Fill in your plans and then share how you each chose to go about it - what is similar and different about your choices? Offer each other feedback.**



**Then as a big group, discuss the different stories you were sent to cover, and how you planned your coverage. Talk about the different angles you chose to take and how you'd use tape to form the narrative.**

## Writing with your tape

When your interview is over, jot down your favourite moments quickly. You could also call someone and tell them the story of what just happened. While you're speaking, notice the beginning, the middle and the end of your story. What were the best bits?

Take the tape and start to craft your story. Does it fit your original plan, or does it need a rethink? It usually will! Do you have enough of what you need on the tape (narrative, active, reflective)? Do you need to do any more interviews or ask anyone for comment?

Transcribe your tape (just the best bits, if you're on deadline!) and write into it. Use [otranscribe.com](https://otranscribe.com) to mark timecodes (control J) at the best spots and start to build your story.

### Introduce Your Talent

Don't forget to name the people you speak to, and signpost why you're speaking to them! There are exceptions to this, like when you're vox popping a large crowd, but generally even a first name and explanation of who you're talking to in these situations is best - put it in context! A good way to remember to do this is to have your talent introduce themselves ON TAPE while you're checking their levels.

*My name is Nadine and I'm a campaigner for Justice Watch dot com, I'm here to be part of the protest today.*

### Don't 'step on' your tape

You want to dance with your tape, not repeat what is said on tape. This is a big one, something even experienced reporters do, and something that a good editor or EP will help you watch out for.

DON'T DO THIS:

*VO: This is Nadine.*

*NADINE: My name is Nadine and I'm a campaigner for Justice Watch dot com, I'm here to be part of the protest today.*

*VO: She's here to be part of the protest today.*

DO THIS INSTEAD!

*VO: This is Nadine.*

~~*My name is Nadine and I'm a campaigner for Justice Watch dot com I'm here to be part of the protest today.*~~

*VO: She's here at the protest to march with her sister.*

The tape and the VO should work together to move the story along! When you dance with your tape it's a beautiful thing. Remember all the tricks we have learnt: present tense, write like you speak, hold power accountable, be fair.



## References and resources

Some good chats with producers about making news features:

[Laura Sullivan \(turning investigative reporting into artful radio\)](#)

[Marianne McCune \(making news stories good stories\)](#)

[Under the Hood with Planet Money](#)

[Lisa Chow \(types of tape\)](#)

[Bringing Together Narrative and News](#)

[Handle with Care](#)

### **Relevant NPR training resources:**

[Active sound: How to find it, record it and use it](#)

### **Some books that are worth your time:**

[Sound reporting \[Book\]](#)

[Out on the Wire \[Book\]](#)

[News as it happens \[Book\]](#)

For navigating ethical conundrums and thinking about your news values:

[MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics](#)

[CBAA](#): The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia is the governing body for all community media in Australia. They are responsible for setting the codes of practice.

Some relevant [Community Radio Codes of Practice](#): [Code 1](#), [Code 2](#), [Code 4](#), [Appendix 5](#)

[ABC Ed Pols](#) (if you're arguing within your team about something ethical, maybe the ABC has had the argument before, and published their considerations)

### **For further guidance on media law and ethics:**

[ACMA](#): The Australian Communications and Media Authority are responsible for managing broadcasting licences in Australia and making rulings about Codes of Practice.

[APRA](#): Australasian Performing Right Association is a copyright collection society. They collect money from community stations as annual license fees to broadcast music and distribute it as royalties to their members. They can also give advice on music copyright.

[Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

[Copyright Council](#): The Copyright Council is an excellent source of information and advice for all things copyright. It has many fact sheets on their website that you can download for personal use.

### **Other resources:**

[ABC pronunciation guide](#)

[ABC Style Guide](#)

## Glossary

**Tape:** Grabs, tape, cuts, they're all words used to talk about the same thing, recorded audio. This is the audio you've collected out in the field, or interviews you've done. The two basic elements of a scripted news story are tape and VO.

**VO:** Short for voice over. This is what is scripted and recorded by the reporter or presenter, often in a studio after the tape is collected and script is all written.

**Vox pops:** Interviews, usually short and focused on one or two questions, with a range of people, often presented together to give an overview of opinions. This could be used to illustrate the view of the general public. For example, you might ask ten people on the main street of your suburb or town what they think of the Prime Minister. Or they could be used to illustrate the opinion of a subsection of society. For example, you might ask ten high school students what they think about the Prime Minister. There's an art to getting a good vox pop - here's a good interview with [Robert Smith](#) from Planet Money about how he turns vox pops into 'live tape'.

**Stand-up:** A recording of the reporter, in the field, speaking into the microphone. Like a TV piece to camera - you speaking to your audience in the moment, alone: describing, narrating or reflecting. They're a great building block for current affairs packages, news packages, and news documentaries. And the better you get at stand-ups, the better you'll be at live crosses! Here is a great NPR Training resource to get you started: [How can I get better at standups?](#)

**Talent:** The term radio newsrooms often use for 'interviewee'. The person the reporter or presenter speaks to for the story is 'talent' and they can be 'good talent' or 'bad talent' depending on how good they are at speaking once the microphone is rolling!