
Broadcast News writing: Everyday Challenges

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Though the concept of news is the same, because of limitations of time available, the radio/television bulletin will only carry what is more important and must be accommodated. Of these most important events the radio or television correspondent will be able to give only most essential information. All important items will be competing for the time in the bulletin and therefore it will not be possible to give as much detail as is possible in a newspaper.

A newspaper reader can read a sentence again if he fails to understand one in the first reading or if a word, phrase or sentence is difficult to understand, he can also turn to the dictionary or consult someone else. But this is not possible in radio and television news.

The newspaper reads a sentence just once, and if it is not clear to the listener he will not be able to hear it again. Therefore the radio and television reporter and the news editor, will have to ensure clarity of each sentence. In other words, they have to ensure that they hold the attention of the listeners/viewers all the time.

The language has to be very simple. The meaning should be very clear and the news reader has to read it at reasonable speed, with the right tone, with pauses to ensure correct meaning and clarity of reception to the audience.

A person who writes news for the radio/television should bear in mind that he is not writing to be read, taken in by the eye as in the case of the print medium, but to be heard. This calls for the use of words, language and sentences which we employ in conversation, in day – to – day circumstances in our interpersonal contacts. When the listener or viewer hears the bulletin, it should be easy on his/her ears. It should be easily intelligible to him by virtue of the familiar words and conversational style used.

An important characteristic of broadcast news is immediacy. The listener is being told what is happening in the world 'Now'. It is here that broadcast media score over newspapers. Listeners do not wish to be aware that radio and television news is being read to them. They want to believe that they are being told the news. Ear appeal, as radio – television writers call it, is one of the objectives of electronic journalism. Such appeal is obtained by informality, naturalness, ease, familiarity of vocabulary and tone.

The language used in the news broadcast should be informal but not slang. It should be easy to listen to without sounding casual. Conversational language preferably used in short direct sentences should be the aim. There should be one idea in one sentence.

It should always be kept in mind that the entire effort would be wasted if the listener/viewer doesn't immediately grasp what is being said. If the language is heavy, or the speed is very high or low, the person listening to it gets tired or irritated quickly. While writing broadcast news, use of verbs in the active voice is encouraged whenever possible. Active voice tells it better, as the word order is subject – verb – object. Thus verbs become the keystones of the broadcast style.

The news agencies, which are an important source of news to radio/television stations, write in a style which suits the print medium. The stories provided by the news agencies are sometimes very long. They have to be rewritten, before they can be included in the bulletin.

Economy of words is the essence of broadcast news writing. The newspaper sub-editor calculates in terms of space, points and columns. The broadcaster has to calculate in time – minutes and seconds, and the time tested formula is that three words of English take one second for a professional to read it aloud on the air. The radio/television editor has to cut the coat to suit the limited cloth available to him.

In other words, the radio/television editor has to exercise the utmost economy, cutting out all unessential and several of the less essential points too. As the interested listener is sure to gather more information from the next day's newspaper. Also, too many details strain the listener's hearing and the average listener who is the target may not also be interested in them.

The news editor should question each and every word, whether they are essential and if you finds that they don't serve any purpose he need not keep such words in the sentence. Writing for the ear has some interesting problems. Since, newsreaders tend to drop their voice towards the end of a sentence. So as a rule a vital verb should not be put at the end of a sentence. It is always better to have the key words in the middle of the sentence because the listener may not be tuned to the sentence immediately at the beginning.

Avoid stereo-typed expressions. The person who writes the news must try to avoid the use of clichés. Stale language not only is unappealing to the reader or listener but also denies him the pleasure of seeing striking, clever and picturesque words at work. Reporters need large working vocabularies as well as wide and deep knowledge of words. It is as important to know when and when not to use unusual and extraordinary words as it is to know the words themselves. As the average person has only a vague concept of the meaning of many words, and he is often confused by the words which look and sound alike.

Unfamiliar words and expressions peculiar to various fields of special knowledge should be avoided as far as possible. The choice of words should be simple and elegant. Unfamiliar words should be explained in simple language. Mere fashionable use of foreign expressions should be avoided. Obscene or vulgar language should not be used.

Figures irritate listeners and therefore should be handled with care in broadcasting. The fewer the figures, the better. The broadcaster should include only the most essential figures in the simplest form. For simplification it is always useful to round off numbers and present them with 'about', 'nearly', 'almost', 'more than' etc. Like figures abbreviations are also to be avoided. Abbreviations must not be used when is reported for the first time in the story. But, full name of the organization should be mentioned.

Adjectives and epithets retain their significance only when used in proper context and chosen carefully and used aptly. They add color to a news story and improve its quality. On the other hand, they can mar a story when used needlessly. Further, in the interest of objectivity, adjectives or any other expression that smacks bias or involves a value judgment should be avoided. Language should be used carefully to avoid any value judgment when it is not intended.

A broadcaster should always remember that he is telling a story. Language should be simple, long words and long awkward sentences should be avoided. Information should be conveyed in a logical order flowing from the lead sentence. In a long story skillful use of repetition is a must. If the listener has missed the first sentence, he should not miss the whole story and therefore scene of event, are the name of the speaker should be repeated. Smooth flow of the story is essential. If a long and difficult phrase suddenly appears the whole momentum of the story is interrupted. Typographical errors, difficult and strange names also work as stumbling blocks for the newsreader as they interrupt the flow of the story.

The news, whether on the television or on the radio, has to be both factual and credible. Factuality and credibility are closely linked together if the broadcast news is factual it acquires the reputation of being truthful and therefore credible. If the trust is lost it will be difficult to regain it. Not reporting an event which the other media, like the newspapers, have covered or may cover the next day causes a decline in news broadcast's credibility.

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