

DAVID KEITH COHLER

BROADCAST NEWSWRITING

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Preface

The aim of this book is to introduce journalism students to the essentials of broadcast newswriting. Because the technology of gathering and producing broadcast news has grown so complex, basic writing skills are often overwhelmed in a maze of colored lights and electronic beeps. The result is a rush of sounds and pictures lacking clear communication of the import of current events.

The best (and perhaps only) place to rectify this blurring of journalism's goal—which is to inform and enlighten—is the classroom, where instructors and students can devote time and attention to writing. With rare exceptions, on-the-job training in newswriting simply does not exist. Because of modern technology's speed and the relentless nature of competition, few working journalists have the time to drill newcomers in basic skills. At the same time, these skills are supposed to be second nature to broadcast newsrooms. Therefore, this book is devoted predominantly to writing in broadcast style—simply, clearly, and directly. The classroom may be the budding broadcast journalist's first and last exposure to the luxury of time—time to read, time to write, time to think.

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1

Writing for the Ear

To make a career in broadcast news, it helps to look like Peter Jennings or Diane Sawyer. But there's not much you can do about the face you were born with.

It helps to have a deep, resonant, or (if you're a woman) husky voice. But there's a limit to the flexibility of your vocal cords.

It helps to have a famous parent or marry the boss's son or daughter. But nepotism is comparatively rare in news broadcasting.

It helps to be able to write as well as Charles Osgood or Charles Kuralt. No buts. Writing is the backbone of journalism. Writing ability is so important that by developing your verbal skills and nose for news you can effectively overcome any perceived deficiencies in looks and voice.

In sum, your substantive skills as a journalist are far more important in the long run than cosmetic appearances.

Often, what you see and hear on your local news programs seems to contradict this. Yes, it's true that some stations do rely on cosmetics over substance, the pretty face over journalistic skill. But a great many stations, perhaps most, stress the substance.

Make no mistake about it, though: Except for government-supported public radio and television, stations are in business to make money, and the news, at least on the local level, is expected to show a profit. That means the more viewers or listeners a station can attract, the more money it can charge advertisers. Such bottom-line financing means many stations will not hesitate to hire a "pretty face" over a solid journalist where profitability is concerned.

This is the nature of most news broadcasting in the United States. It differs

from systems in many countries where broadcasting is government-run or there is a mix of state-run and privately run stations. In the overwhelmingly profit-oriented U.S. system, station managements want newscasts to grab and hold the audience, to keep the audience from tuning out or, worse, switching to a competing station. Thus, while a newscast in a state-run system can afford to be dull or visually static, a newscast in a commercial system must be unflaggingly *interesting*. It must strive to compel the audience's attention.

You might argue that the news itself is inherently interesting—and most working journalists would agree with you. But they would also caution that the news does not “tell itself.” No matter how intrinsically interesting a story might be, it requires a trained journalist, an effective writer and communicator, to preserve and impart that interest to a general audience.

Fortunately, many U.S. broadcasting companies recognize that the news is a vital service for an informed and democratic citizenry. So for every “pretty face” there are dozens of talented, hard-working journalists—writers, reporters, editors, producers, researchers, camera crews, and so forth. However, because broadcast news has become an attractive career for young people, and despite the expansion of news programming in recent times, the competition for jobs is very stiff. Newcomers are expected to know how to write well (and sometimes operate electronic equipment) before they are offered jobs.*

THE WAY PEOPLE TALK

The first words humans ever spoke were probably no more than inflected grunts, perhaps reactions to stepping on a sharp rock or to biting into a tasty hunk of raw zebra meat. Comedy writer-director Mel Brooks, in an old routine called “The 2,000-Year-Old Man,” muses that the first word was in “rock-talk,” as in, “Hey, don’t t’row dat rock!”

The point is, the first word was *spoken*, not chiseled in stone at Cave Man U. Chiseling—writing, that is—came much later in our cultural development.

Skipping ahead to modern days, we come to the broadcast news business, in which the natural order is reversed: Words are written first, then spoken. More exactly, they are written to be spoken. The structure of the written sentences follows the cadences of oral speech—short and simple.

Broadcast newswriting has also been described as “writing for the ear” instead of for the eye. The eye can pause, skip forward and backward, ponder words, meanings, and sentence structure. The ear cannot. A listener of broadcast news gets only one chance. If a word, phrase, or sentence is not immediately clear on first hearing, listeners may become lost and unable to understand the

*A recent study for the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) estimated the number of news department jobs at U.S. commercial stations at a total of 40,000—21,000 in radio, 19,000 in television. The study also estimated annual turnover at about 12,000, or 30 percent. While most of the turnover was a result of staffers changing jobs from one station to another, many of those hired were young people on their first jobs. Unfortunately, figures are virtually impossible to obtain on the exact number of entry-level positions in broadcast news.

rest of the story. In short, broadcast newswriting is a form of oral storytelling in which the words committed to paper or computer screen have no reality until given a human voice.

Many of you may already have been trained to write in newspaper style. If so, you were taught to make your first sentence (the lead sentence) a capsule version of the entire story. You were taught to cram the most significant elements of the story (Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How) into the lead sentence and into the sentences immediately following. This gave your story an "inverted pyramid" structure that enabled a copyeditor to trim from the end and fit your story into the available space.

In newspaper journalism, the result is often a convoluted and artificial kind of writing distant from human speech. If newspaper writing style were imposed on, say, the story of Little Red Riding Hood, the lead might go something like this:

THE WOODS, Oct. 31—An eight-year-old girl narrowly missed serious injury when she was rescued by a woodsman who snatched her from the claws of a transvestite wolf who had already devoured her grandmother, forest rangers reported Thursday.

That sort of writing is known as "journalese." It rearranges a natural, chronological series of events into a formalized structure digested via the eye. It is very useful when your job is editing a newspaper.

But it has nothing to do with broadcast news. As broadcasters, our job is to grab people by the ears. How? Well, suppose we begin by saying,

A remarkable rescue in the Woods today...

Do we have people's attention? You bet we do. Very simply, we have begun to tell a story. We have not attempted to tell the whole story right off the bat. We have not even used a complete sentence. But we have found a good starting point. And now, step by step, we are going to tell the rest of the story in a way that allows listeners to stay with us. No jargon, no journalese, no verbal overload.

News stories, of course, are not like fairy tales. Instead, they are about a reality that is often ugly and complex. You can't start a broadcast news story by saying, "Once upon a time there was a brutal murder. . . ." But you can start by saying, "A brutal murder on the West Side today. . . ." That is a legitimate and effective way to grab people's attention. There are many other ways, and in a later chapter we will examine them. But for the moment let's try to think of broadcast newswriting as old-fashioned, sit-around-the-campfire storytelling—with a strong beginning.

A word of caution at this point: While it's true that broadcast newswriting is supposed to be conversational and follow the cadences of oral speech, it's also true that it should be correct in grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. We must be

careful to omit the mistakes many people make in casual speech. In ordinary conversation, people do not pause to diagram their sentences or whip out a pocket dictionary. They often get their facts wrong, garble their syntax, say “lay down” when they mean “lie down,” mistake “infer” for “imply,” confuse “flaunt” and “flout,” and so on. So let’s put it this way: Broadcast newswriting is writing the way people talk when they use language correctly and get the facts straight.

BROADCAST NEWS VOCABULARY

In addition to using conversational language, broadcast journalists use a simplified vocabulary. The vocabulary of print journalism is small—around 10,000 words. The vocabulary of broadcast journalism is even smaller. Adjectives, for example, are short: a “spherical” object becomes *round* or *shaped like a ball*; a “lanky” person becomes *thin*; a “flaxen-haired” person is *blond*; “coniferous” trees become *evergreens* and “deciduous” trees become *leafy* trees; and so on.

Verbs, too, are short and active: “regarding” something becomes *watching* something; to “participate” becomes to *take part*; to “extinguish” a fire becomes to *put out* a fire; “assert,” “opine,” “recount,” “state,” “declare,” “explicate,” “elucidate,” “avow,” “expound,” and “aver” become *say*, *tell*, or *explain*; “hasten” becomes *hurry*; “inculcate” becomes *teach*; “make a determination” becomes *decide*; “purchase” becomes *buy*; and so forth.

And let’s not forget nouns: a “residence” or “domicile” becomes a *house*, *home*, or *apartment*; an “octogenarian” becomes an *80-year-old*; “mnemonics” becomes *memory improvement*; etc.

Some critics of broadcast news say its limited vocabulary leads to the impoverishment of language and, in effect, helps to promote functional illiteracy. That might be true if the aim of broadcast newswriting were to be literary. But that is not its aim. Its aim is to make the news clear to a mass audience—immediately and without complication.

Hence, if the choice is between a long word and a short one, choose the short one.

WYSWYS (WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU SAY)

Another characteristic of broadcast newswriting is that the copy you type on the page or computer screen should reflect the way it is to be spoken on the air. This often requires you to type words or phrases that do not appear in a printed story.

For example, if the U.S. trade deficit in a given month is “\$15.3 billion,” that looks fine on the printed page. But a broadcast news script—including the “\$”—must be read aloud. Thus, the figure should be written as “15-point-3 billion dollars.” Similarly, the figure “7.5%” should be written as “Seven-point-five percent” or, better, “Seven-and-a-half percent.” (Notice the hyphens linking the parts of the number.)

A similar copy-appearance problem arises in quoting people’s words, especially if the words constitute an opinion or moral judgment. In print journalism, you can bracket the words in quotation marks: “All men are created equal.”

Jefferson said. Looks fine on the printed page. But what happens when you read it aloud? No one can *see* the quotation marks. Thus, you must often provide "aural" quotation marks—by writing something on the order of,

Jefferson said—and these are his words—"All men are created equal."

The foregoing illustrates yet another aspect of broadcast style. In print, the attribution (the name of the speaker or source of the information) is generally given at the end of the sentence, preceded by a comma:

WASHINGTON (AP)—Higher postage rates, including a 25-cent charge for first-class mail, will begin April 3, the Postal Service announced Tuesday.

Read aloud, it becomes evident that such placement does not follow the cadences of oral speech. In normal speech, who-said-it comes first. Therefore, in broadcast news the attribution is placed at the *start* of the sentence:

The Postal Service says postage rates will go up on April Third. It says first class stamps will cost a quarter.

... or in the middle:

The Postal Service says postage rates will go up on April Third. A first class letter, the Service says, will cost 25 cents.

Another matter is pronunciation. Suppose someone named "Myschklyczevskinov" must be named or quoted. In print that looks difficult enough. When a newscaster or reporter has to *say* it, it becomes downright terrifying. So broadcast news copy must include visual aids to help the news anchor pronounce unfamiliar names and places. In this case, the writer would include, right after the actual spelling, a phonetic spelling: Mizz-kluh-SHEFFS-kin-off.

Most of these matters require rather simple adjustments for newswriters, and they soon become second nature. Far more difficult adjustments are necessitated by the very nature of radio and TV news; which exists not in space, but in *time*. The clock is a very cruel master.

THE LIMITATIONS OF TIME

Newspapers must shorten (or sometimes lengthen) stories to fit the available space. But that space is flexible. The number of pages may be increased or

decreased each day, or even between editions, to suit the combined needs of the editorial and advertising departments.

Radio and television have no such flexibility. All departments must go by the clock. Much as they might wish it otherwise, there are only 24 hours in each day, 60 minutes in each hour, and 60 seconds in each minute—period.

To demonstrate the effects of the clock's tyranny on broadcast news, let's pick an actual newspaper story as our model:

JERUSALEM—Declaring that certain deeds "can never be forgiven in law or in the hearts of men," a Jerusalem court Monday sentenced retired Cleveland auto worker John Demjanjuk to death by hanging for World War II crimes at the Treblinka extermination camp in Poland.

The sentence, only the second death penalty announced in Israel's 40-year history, was greeted by prolonged applause, dancing and singing in the converted theater that has served for the last 14 months as Demjanjuk's courtroom.

"The Nation of Israel Lives!" the joyous spectators sang while three Treblinka survivors, who had identified Demjanjuk as the cruel camp guard known as "Ivan the Terrible," wept in the front row.

The condemned man reacted to the decision with an almost imperceptible shake of his head but was otherwise expressionless.

In convicting him a week ago, the court concluded—"unequivocally, without the slightest doubt"—that Demjanjuk, 68, is Ivan. The burly, bespectacled Ukrainian, who emigrated to the United States and settled in the Cleveland area in 1952, maintains that he is the victim of mistaken identity.

"I am innocent!" he shouted in Hebrew as he was wheeled into the courtroom early Monday afternoon to hear Judge Zvi Tal pronounce sentence. Demjanjuk was in a wheelchair because of persistent back problems.

The sentence means that the verdict will now go automatically before the country's High Court of Appeals under an Israeli law that provides for such a review in any case involving capital punishment.

The condemned man's son, John Demjanjuk Jr., termed the decision an "injustice" that will "shame the Israeli government, the

Israeli Justice department, the U.S. Justice Department and, most unfortunately, the 6 million murdered in the Holocaust."

Demjanjuk was extradited from the United States to Israel in February, 1986, to face the Jewish state's first war crimes trial since that of Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann was convicted of masterminding Nazi Germany's systematic extermination of 6 million European Jews and was hanged in 1962.

The three-judge panel that heard Demjanjuk's case deliberated for more than three hours. Reading their decision, Judge Tal acknowledged that "almost 50 years have elapsed since Treblinka. We have established a new life, and we ask ourselves if time alleviates the crime; if time dulls the pain, and a person who has changed his course in life need not be punished as harshly.

"This holds true for some crimes," Tal said, "but not for those listed in the verdict. . . . These crimes can never be forgiven in law or in the hearts of men. These crimes can never be obliterated from memory. It is as though Treblinka continues to exist, as though the blood of the victims still cries out to us."

The court ruled last week that Demjanjuk operated the gas chambers at Treblinka in which about 850,000 individuals, most of them Jews, were put to death.

"We have not heard any extenuating circumstances from the defense," Tal said. And while acknowledging "the perils of an irrevocable sentence," he reminded the court of the sweeping certainty with which the panel had last week found Demjanjuk guilty. "In light of all the above, we sentence him to the punishment of death," Tal said.

Citing the Eichmann precedent, chief

prosecutor Yona Blattman had argued earlier that the death penalty was mandatory under Israel's Nazi and Nazi Collaborators Act—a position that Chief Judge Dov Levin rejected.

"The accused stood at the gateway to the inferno and went about his duties with unparalleled zeal and enthusiasm," Blattman argued in support of capital punishment. "The accused was no small cog. He was a major criminal against humanity.... He committed the most heinous acts with his very own hands, killing hundreds of thousands of people with utmost brutality."

As Blattman spoke, Demjanjuk, a member of the Ukrainian Orthodox (Christian) Church, crossed himself several times.

In his counterargument, chief defense attorney John Gill cited several instances in which people have been executed for crimes it was later learned they did not commit. New evidence continues to emerge related to his client's case, Gill said, and that presented during the trial "did not meet the required level of exactness needed to impose the death penalty."

"The taking of any innocent human life is a holocaust," Gill added, to the obvious displeasure of the bench.

Speaking briefly in his native Ukrainian, Demjanjuk said in his own defense that it was "very painful for me to sit here and hear the terrible tragedy that befell the Jewish people." He said he has no argument that "the atrocities perpetrated at Treblinka did take place, and that there is a hangman named Ivan, and he did brutalize the people."

However, Demjanjuk added, the court had made "a very grave mistake, because I am not 'Ivan the terrible.'... I do not deserve this. I am innocent, innocent, innocent, as God is my witness."

Trial spokesman Yossi Hasin said the date for the automatic appeal of the Demjanjuk verdict is uncertain. However, he noted, in order to give both prosecution and defense enough time to review the 444-page verdict and prepare arguments, it is unlikely that an appellate court will begin proceedings until at least the summer.

(Dau Fisher, © 1988 *Los Angeles Times*, reprinted with permission.)

By modern newspaper standards, that story is of moderate length, containing about 800 words. It takes a minute or two for the average person to read silently.

But radio and television news is read *aloud*, and by that standard it would take more than five minutes to read the story!

Now, there are a few news broadcasts that would spend five minutes on this story, or even longer, but they are almost exclusively on noncommercial public radio (NPR) and television (PBS). The overwhelming majority of U.S. news broadcasts are on commercial stations where *brevity* is the rule. Thus, the story you have just read would typically be allotted from 20 seconds to a maximum of one minute on radio, and from 20 seconds to at most a minute and a half on television (provided there were enough pictures to sustain the maximum length).

(There's no law that says stories must be told so briefly. It's just the way U.S. broadcast news is presented. If you think news stories should be told at greater length, just about the only way you'll ever make it happen is to own your own station or become the controlling shareholder of a broadcasting company.)

I hope you noticed a few of the matters we looked at earlier that need reworking for a broadcast version—making clear who said what, moving the attribution to the start of sentences, spelling out numbers ("World War Two," for example), and providing pronouncing help ("Dem-YAHN-yook"), and so on.

But those are minor matters compared to the major one: How do you