

(This is from an early draft of *Sound Reporting: The NPR Guide to Audio Journalism and Production* by Jonathan Kern. Used by permission of the author and NPR.)

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Story Editing

For some reporters, editors make an easy target – and it's almost always open season. If a story seems convoluted and poorly structured, the reporter can blame the editor for insisting on adding material that wasn't in the first draft. If the piece is missing some key facts, the editor can be blamed for cutting them out or insisting the report be kept to a certain length. Sentences are too long? It must be the editor's fault. Reported the sidebar but somehow missed the real story? That was the assignment the editor made. And when editors do really extraordinary work, it often goes unrecognized. There are Pulitzer prizes for reporting, photography, commentary and even cartooning – but not for editing.

NPR does make an effort to recognize the contributions that editors make to award-winning reports. But much of the day-to-day work of story editors is necessarily invisible – and inaudible – to listeners. Moreover, editors at NPR do the jobs of several different editors at newspapers – they make assignments, suggest sources, raise questions, help structure the story and revise copy. And they play some roles that are unique to radio, and even just to NPR, including liaising with program executive producers, coaching the reporter's delivery, and writing entries for the DACS for NPR member stations.¹ They have to help the reporter see the big picture, but also need to fret over details. And they do it all, with few exceptions, without being credited on the air or on the Internet.

¹ The DACS is the electronic system for distributing information across the public radio system. Among the many DACS messages are the NPR program line-ups, which include summaries of all the pieces slated to air in upcoming shows.

The Editor's Role

Above all, editors are responsible for making sure that NPR reports are accurate and fair. This is not merely an ideal; it must be the foundation of every report we broadcast, podcast or post online. Inaccuracies and bias reflect badly on the reporter, the editor and the entire network. They break the bond of trust between journalist and audience.

A piece can be technically accurate and still misleading. National Desk editor Ron Elving gives the example of a report characterizing a tax cut proposal as “the biggest in twenty years.” That was true, but the statement ignored the fact that there hadn't *been* many tax cuts in the past twenty years. The phrasing – while technically accurate – suggested that the cut is very big indeed. And that's a disputable claim; there were certainly people who felt that taxes were still way too high.

As an editor, you're also responsible for ensuring that any given NPR report is well-structured – that it has a beginning, a middle and an end. The report should be focused; it must be clear from the start what it is about. And when the piece is over, it should be easy for the listener to recall key scenes and ideas.

Whether it is memorable will depend in large part on the quality of the writing. A good NPR report is one that is visual and descriptive. It engages the listeners, and keeps them engaged throughout the piece. It is written at a level that neither presumes too much knowledge on the listeners' part nor talks down to them. And it's written for radio – in short, clear, strong sentences that avoid jargon and journalese.

NPR places a premium on sound. News reports must be well-delivered. If they use tape, that tape should advance the story, not merely add production for its own sake. While editors are not primarily voice coaches, they should recognize that their work is wasted if a piece is unlistenable, either because of the way the reporter reads or because of the poor quality of the tape.

The Ingredients of a Story

The editor and reporter should collaborate from the very start – before the reporting has begun. One of the editor's key jobs is to help the reporter focus the story, so a reporter-editor conversation early on can save time when it comes to doing interviews and tracking down facts.

One way you can start that process, especially with less-experienced journalists, is to get the reporter to give you (or even write out) a “focus statement” – a one-sentence description of what the proposed story will be about. A good focus statement suggests the tension inherent in the story: “My story is about how teenagers with disabilities make the transition from public schools to private universities, and about the people and institutions that help them, or fail to help them, in their first year at college.” Or, “My

story is about whether government-sponsored radio services, like the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, reach their target audiences now that there are commercial satellite broadcasts, Internet access, and indigenous news media in many formerly closed societies.” Note that a useful focus statement doesn’t assume the conclusion of the reporting, though it may hint at a direction for the reporting to start; in these examples, the reporter doesn’t presume that private schools are failing to help disabled freshmen make successful transitions to college, or that international broadcasts are a waste of money now that there are other media alternatives. The statement should be value-neutral.

As an editor, you should also make sure the story is actually interesting enough to pursue. You should ask what is new about the proposed story, whether it is (or can be made to appear) relevant to people in other parts of the country or the world, and whether there’s a news “hook” that makes the story worth doing now. That means you should be familiar with the beats and regions of the reporters you work with. As Foreign Desk editor Ted Clark puts it, the Victorian ideal of knowing something about everything and everything about something also defines the editor-reporter relationship. The editor needs to be able to determine whether news is incremental; whether it relates to events in other places; or whether a local story is simply so compelling that it should be heard by a national audience. Steve Drummond edits education stories from all over the country, and says local reporters sometimes don’t have the same perspective he has. “What I see often are trends among cities, or among school districts,” he says, “where the same problem that arises in the Cleveland public schools is right now being dealt with in the San Francisco schools; and the thing that makes a story not just a Cleveland story is to say – somewhere in the story – this is also happening in San Francisco and Seattle.”

Science editor Alison Richards says the “So what?” factor poses a big challenge for her desk. “For most of our stories, it’s going to be several years down the line before they make an impact on people’s lives,” she says. “So the editor’s job is often to think about how you tell the story, or even whether you use the scientific discovery itself as a kind of springboard for moving off to explore different bigger issues raised by an area of research or a particular discovery.” In short, one of your roles as an editor is to offer a perspective on the news that may be difficult for a reporter to achieve.

Part of the discussion of a story’s focus may include whether you want the piece to be structured “vertically” or “horizontally.” In the first case, we learn about the subject chronologically; in the second, we pull out a slice of a story – a moment in time – and focus intensely on that moment. Horizontal stories often take a high and wide view of a news event, while vertical stories go deeply into a single idea or episode. Similar stories can be told in different ways. For instance, if a reporter wants to report on scientific advances in cloning animals, he may interview policy-makers, ethicists, scientists, and business people, so that different people who have a stake in cloning each tell a bit of the story. This “horizontal” story may also involve the history of cloning advances, told in chronological order. On the other hand, the reporter could focus on one scientist in one lab – on the moment when she painstakingly removes the genetic material from a cow’s egg and replaces it with the DNA from another cow’s skin cell – and use that scene as a

doorway for information about why cloning is so difficult. That story would be structured “vertically.”

Once the editor and reporter agree on the focus of a story, they should make sure they have thought through the other essential elements. Almost every good story, from a children’s fairy tale to an investigative piece for the *New York Times*, has a few basic ingredients. It has characters; it is set in some specific place; it has a clear beginning, middle and end; and there is some sort of tension that makes the listener or reader want to find out how things are resolved. Radio stories are no exception.

For instance, when a reporter is pitching a story, you may want to ask, “Who do you imagine will be the main characters in your piece?” This is the time when you can prod the reporter to think creatively. Can we try to do this story about U.S. policy *without* talking to any of the usual suspects at Washington think tanks? In this piece about school re-segregation, did any of the teachers or other workers now at the school attend it *before* it was integrated? National Desk editor Bebe Crouse says she tries to ensure that each interview will help advance the story. “With some reporters, I’m very specific about asking, ‘Who are you going to talk to and what do you want from them?’” she says. “Not ‘What’s the quote you want?’ but ‘What’s the focus of your interview with them?’ And that’s always going to keep coming back to the focus of the story,” Crouse says. It may turn out that the best “character” isn’t even a person. If the proposed story is about limiting beach erosion in New England, the main character could be a lighthouse. If the piece describes new advances in photographic restoration technology, the main character could be a photograph – stained, torn, and faded at the start of the story, revived and vivid at the end.

The reporter and editor should also discuss the location for the story, and explain why one particular place is best to do the reporting. Sometimes the location is obvious – i.e., the story is about the New Jersey foster care system, or a plant species found primarily in Mississippi, or changes to logging regulations in Alaska. But many other times, the story could be set in a number of different locations. If a new study on illegal immigration from Mexico and Central America shows the numbers going up across the country, we *could* report the story from California, or Florida, or New York. But maybe we’d get the most interesting and surprising piece by going to Minnesota, or another state that has not historically had to deal with a large influx of Hispanic immigrants. If the reporter is planning a story on how some big cities are losing their Chinatowns to upscale development, the editor might ask if the story should focus on only one of those cities, or should compare two of them, or should take an overview of the situation across the country.

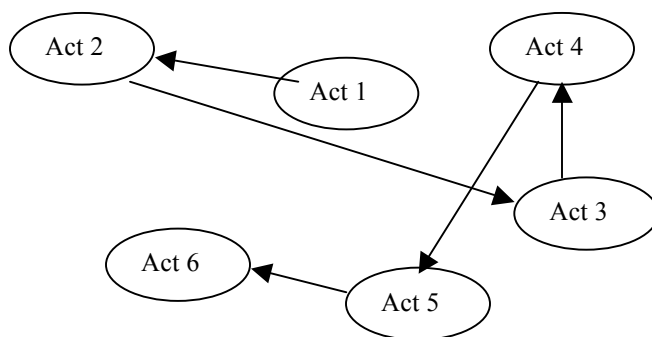
It’s also worthwhile at this stage for you to ask if there are ways to tell the story through scenes and by using sound. Get the reporter to imagine the ideal scene or the best sound he or she might get – a construction site in Duluth where the Minnesota crew managers are trying to communicate with their Mexican workers, or a street protest by Chinese-Americans who are watching their community center be replaced by a new luxury apartment building. Then suggest ways to get those scenes, or similar ones, into the

story. “A lot of times it’s a brainstorming process,” Steve Drummond says. “You’re on the phone with the reporter, and you’re doing a story about special education, and you say, ‘I want to make sure that if we interview the parent, he’s not just sitting on the couch in the living room talking to you. I want to hear the parent interacting with the child.’ And I’ll suggest maybe hearing them doing homework around the kitchen table that night, or maybe doing dishes and the child is helping out and there’s some interaction.” Once the reporter is actually on location or arranging interviews, events may not turn out as you’d planned. That’s okay; the exercise won’t be wasted. Thinking in advance about the scenes you’d *like* to have in your report will often point a reporter in the right direction.

Ideally, the reporter and editor should also discuss these same elements of the story while it is being reported, especially if the focus of the story evolves as more facts are uncovered, or if key sources can’t be interviewed. It’s the editor’s responsibility to make sure that the reporter has conclusively established essential facts, that he has solicited responses from people criticized by interviewees – even that he has contacted an expert who might debunk the thesis of the story. In the end, the report will be stronger if it can withstand these sorts of challenges. And the last thing you want is to promise a piece to a program – and then have to renege, when you discover the story was thin, or didn’t hold together, or was wanting in some other way.

Structuring the Story

One of the main jobs of the NPR editor is to ensure that each story has a logical structure. Good radio stories are built around sound – either actualities or natural sound – but great tape doesn’t necessarily mean a great story. All too often reporters assemble their pieces by collecting their best tape, and then writing copy that simply gets them from one tape cut to another (usually ending with the cut that is most poignant, or emphatic, or forward-looking, or in some other way sounds “conclusive.”) If you were to diagram the structure of such a piece, it might look something like this:



In this sort of “connect-the-dots” structure, the copy blocks serve primarily to move the listener from one piece of tape to another.² The problem is that each copy-and-cut module of the story may make sense, but the report may not cohere. A piece that is no more than a collection of good actualities strung together by the reporter’s voice tracks will be much less memorable than a story that unfolds in some systematic way.

Exactly *what* way will often depend on the story that’s being told. For example, a reporter may be taking a listener on a tour of a place, in which case the piece may be structured geographically – as a trip down the river, a visit to the headquarters building, a survey of a battle site, and so on. Many reports describe events in chronological order. For instance, a piece explaining a detective’s theory of how a crime was perpetrated may run through the sequence of events very straightforwardly. Or a report on a scientific discovery may begin with the question the scientist hoped to answer, and then take us through his research one step at a time. It’s sometimes possible to invert the chronology, beginning with the latest developments and then telling us how we got to this point. For instance, a report might begin with a scene of community members having a ceremony to remember a local activist – and then work backward through his career so that we learn why he made such an impression on people.

If you want to build suspense, you can start telling the story close to the peak of the action, halt the action to present needed facts and background information, and then resume the story to resolve the tension. For example, let’s say a reporter is working a story about the dilemma of foster parents who have been separated from their children by a devastating hurricane; in the rush to evacuate people, the parents got on one bus and the kids on another. The reporter has interviewed a woman from New Orleans who was relocated to Texas, and who spent eight days looking for her two foster children before she found them at a shelter in Baltimore. He also has lots of other information from interviews with foster care experts and New Orleans officials. Using this sort of “interrupted action” structure, the reporter might begin his story of the foster mother, but *interrupt* it at the point that she gets separated from her children – that is, to set aside the end of her story for a few minutes. As listeners, we’ll be hooked – we’ll want to find out what happened to the children and whether the woman has been reunited with them. Now the reporter can tell us about the plight of *other* foster parents in New Orleans, the laws that apply to relocating children in other states, the problem of reconstructing legal documents and other data, and so on. Since we want to hear how things turned out for the main character, the reporter just needs to find a way to segue back to the primary narrative. “For Wilma Mae Booth, things eventually turned out well. She found her two foster children in Baltimore...”

Many news pieces are framed more or less as an argument: the report may examine an issue by posing the problem at the beginning – e.g., whether curbside recycling actually saves communities money, whether building a new stadium for the local football team will revive the city’s economy – and then letting people on various sides each have a say.

² Often the disjointed nature of the report is obscured by the fact that the tape and copy seem to dovetail. If the actuality ends with someone saying, “...it’s not the end of the world, you know.” The track may begin, “But for farmers, it *does* seem like the end of the world.”

A common – perhaps *too* common – variation on that structure starts with a case study to illustrate the problem: “Sylvia Clements gets up every morning at 4:30 so that she can feed her children... before she takes a bus, to catch a train, to catch another bus, to get her to her job by 7:30. Three hours of commuting every day that costs her more than ten dollars. That’s nearly a fifth of what she earns each day...”

The important job for you, as the editor, is to ensure that *whatever* structure the story has makes sense. “You’re trying to make sure the story is going to be interesting on the radio, that the listener will want to stick around for three or four or five minutes and listen to it,” Steve Drummond says. “That’s part of what you as an editor can do. The reporters have gathered the sound, they have all the facts and figures. You help them organize them in a way that has a narrative flow, and that you think will be interesting and exciting on the air.”

Sometimes the structure will be obvious even before the reporting has begun. But frequently reporters come back with lots of good information and great tape, and while they know they have a gripping story, they’re at a loss as to how to begin telling it. Or they’re so determined to work in all the material they’ve gathered that they’ve lost their focus. So you can coach the reporter. If you sketch out an outline, does the structure make sense? Do all of the elements relate to the focus of the story? Are there parts that are built around compelling tape but don’t actually fit with this particular story? “If you listen to the proposed tape cuts in order, do they help to tell the story? (Many editors like to do this sort of “tape edit” before the script is written.) “The detective story is a metaphor we use a lot for science pieces,” Alice Richards says. “Or we might make the story show something about the process of science. Depending on how quickly we’re turning it around, if the reporter has pre-interviewed the scientist and found they have this amazing story that you didn’t quite expect, then you might decide, ‘This becomes a profile.’” Taking the time to think about and discuss a story’s structure – before the reporter starts writing – can actually be a way to *save* time during the edit.

Editing by Ear

Editing for radio involves much more than merely correcting and revising text. The NPR editor serves as a surrogate for the listeners – a one-person focus group to determine whether a report “works” on the radio.

The most obvious difference between script editing in public radio and editing at magazines or newspapers is that the radio reporter is always expected to read his story *out loud* to his editor. Some NPR editors will refuse even to look at a script ahead of time; they want to hear it “cold,” as if they had just turned on the radio in time catch this story at the beginning. Other editors will ask for a script, but use it mainly as a notepad; they will glance down at the script as they’re listening, and circle sections they have questions about, or which they think need extra work. A few editors do like to see the script before the formal edit, especially if they are concerned about the way the reporter has structured the story, and think it might need major surgery. But all of them will end

up either sitting face to face with the reporter or listening to him or her over the phone. They will edit by ear, to determine whether the story is intelligible, accessible, interesting, paced correctly, and generally ready for broadcast. As Andrea de Leon of the National Desk says, it doesn't matter how a script reads – only how it sounds. “Sometimes I'll hear a paragraph or hear a sound bite,” she says, “and I'll think, ‘Huh?’ Then I'll look at the script, and say, ‘That makes perfect sense.’ But I didn't get it the first time.”

For listeners, there is no second time. They get one chance to make sense of a story.

So you should listen to all the sound in a report and judge whether it's airworthy – i.e., whether it will be intelligible to someone listening in a car, or to a bedside radio with a small speaker, or in a kitchen while making dinner. Reporters can become overly familiar with and almost emotionally attached to their tape; they can sometimes recite an actuality word for word. The editor helps provide a reality test, so that we don't end up with a report built on a foundation of incomprehensible actualities.³

A foreign accent on a studio-quality recording may make an actuality merely hard to understand, but it may make the same actuality impenetrable when it's filed over the phone. Natural sound that brings a piece to life when it's filed on an ISDN line may sound like so much noise when the report is sent over the telephone.⁴ So you should think about the means of transmission, and edit accordingly. For example, one editor on the Foreign Desk knew that his reporter in the Mideast would be filing from Gaza by phone. So he told her to keep all of the actualities in Arabic, and then to translate them herself in the body of the piece. He knew the speakers' heavily accented English would be hard to understand. If you're editing over the phone, you may not be sure that an actuality is intelligible – but don't take any chances. “If I have a question about a piece of tape while I'm editing,” Bebe Crouse says, “I'll have the reporter feed it to me so I can listen to it before crunch time, just to make sure...because we don't want to build your story around it and then lose it at the last minute.”

Even editors who are usually hardnosed about making sure tape cuts are airworthy may be led astray if the actualities are transcribed in the script; if the editor is reading along while he's listening, it's easy to think the tape is much clearer than it really is. For that reason, and others, Alison Richards says she never wants to *read* an actuality before she *hears* it. “Once you've heard it you can never hear it cold again,” she says. “And I'm listening for lots of things – obviously for content and for clarity, but I'm also listening

³ The NPR transcript archive has any number of pieces that include sections like this:

REPORTER: Dr. Mohamed Khojandi says his research will be conducted carefully, to minimize any possible risks to the patients:

DR. MOHAMED KHOJANDI: When it comes to (unintelligible), I have no doubts that we are (unintelligible). The government makes sure of that.

REPORTER: But others disagree...

Presumably what is unintelligible to a transcriber listening carefully to a tape is unintelligible to a casual radio listener who is also driving in rush hour traffic.

⁴ One reporter filing a piece from overseas by telephone once began a report with the sound of waves crashing on the shore – which sounded exactly like the hiss of the phone line, only louder.

for pace, whether it's grabbing me, whether it slows down, whether I feel I'm being clearly shown the way, whether there's a real sort of narrative momentum."

As the editor listens to the voice tracks, actualities and sound, he or she will also time the piece, using a stopwatch. This is certainly not the most important part of the edit, but it's nonetheless a crucial one; most pieces are allotted a specific amount of time – four minutes would be average – so the reporter and editor need to know if the story is running long or coming in short. Timing a script is a skill, albeit not a very difficult one to acquire. An editor has to learn how to stop the clock if the reporter wants to re-read a paragraph, or if an actuality doesn't play when it's supposed to, or if the phone rings and they're interrupted, and then to start it at precisely the same point when the edit resumes. (Many editors have been mortified to get through a lengthy edit and then realize they forgot to re-start their stopwatch after an interruption, or never started it to begin with!) Since the time allotted for any report includes the introduction, the editor should start timing the piece with the first words of the intro. And make sure the reporter doesn't rush through the story in order to squeeze a four and a half minute piece into a four-minute hole! "There's no one I know who reads faster when they're recording than they do in an edit," Bebe Crouse says. "They always read slower, so I build that difference in when I time a script." Steve Drummond says he is never surprised if the piece is too long after a first edit. "So you're thinking already about what can be cut," he says. That's a lot easier if you've been helping the reporter focus the story from the start. "Having a concrete knowledge of what the story's about allows you to look at every paragraph and every piece of tape, and ask, 'Does this contribute to that larger story, or does it not?' If there's a piece of tape that's very interesting or lively or exciting, but doesn't help tell the story, then often it has to go," Drummond says.

By listening to the piece, rather than reading it, the editor ensures that it holds up for its full length. As Alison Richards puts it, "You've got to be driving the audience's curiosity and engagement all the time." Bebe Crouse says she sometimes writes comments in the margin of a script, to remind herself, "I got lost, I started drifting, I got confused. I'll go back to those spots on the script, and say, 'You started losing me here. Let's look at why that was.'" Indeed, one of the harshest criticisms an editor can make of a radio report is, "My mind began to wander."

The Intro

The host intro is one of the most important – if not *the* most important – part of a radio story. It is the equivalent of a newspaper headline and lead paragraph rolled into one – the "hook" that is going to grab the listener's attention. It is the first thing a reporter should write, and the first part of a story the editor should listen to.

The intro has to whet the listener's appetite for the piece that's coming up, and explain why the news event or issue is worth paying attention to. It should set the scene for the upcoming report, by providing the time reference, the location, and perhaps even the main characters of the story. As much as possible, it should be visual; it should give the

listener something to see in his mind's eye. It should make people care about the upcoming story.

And there are many things it should *not* do.

It should not paraphrase the entire report. Imagine a six-sentence intro that tells us that lawmakers are working on a new bill; that Democrats take the position the legislation is needed to correct some alleged abuse by big corporations; that Republicans say they think the law would hurt the economy; that the President says he'll veto the bill if it gets to his desk; that the GOP says there aren't enough votes to over-ride a veto; and that NPR's Mark McMuffin has more details. Why should anyone stick around for the details?

An intro should not have to carry all the technical freight of the story. Some intros are filled with names and numbers – almost as if the reporter didn't want to clutter his piece with all the facts. But when we've got a piece on, say, a heated election in Nigeria that is a test of whether democracy will take root there, nothing could be duller than telling people Nigeria's population, how many people voted in the election, what percentage of eligible voters that amounts to, the names of the major political parties, and the names of the leaders of those parties.

An intro should lead logically into, but not echo the reporter's first track. It should avoid "layer-caking," where the host tells us what has happened and then the reporter tells it again in different words – sometimes more than once, depending on what's in the first actuality. And when the intro is part of a package of reports, it should not echo material in the preceding piece.

It should put the news at the top. A great many intros at NPR fall into a pattern that can be summarized: "It used to be that way... but now it's this way" – a pattern that almost always leaves what's new for the last line. Here's an example:

One of the hallmarks of workplaces in the last decade was a marked change in dress codes. The vast majority of businesses relaxed their standards. Surveys indicate that about half of all office workers are now allowed to "dress down" at least once a week, and for some employees "casual Fridays" evolved into casual every day. But as NPR's _____ reports, casual wear may be starting to fade.

There are lots of ways this intro could be re-written, perhaps the easiest of which (and this is often the case) is to put the last sentence first:

Casual wear may be starting to fade.

Of course, this means the writer has to follow it up with something more than a re-statement of common knowledge. (And in this case, you have to wonder whether the typical NPR listener really needs to be told the history of casual Fridays.)

Common variations of this stock format include: “You probably assume it’s this way, but it’s really that way” (e.g., Many people believe the folk music boom ended in the 1960’s, but it’s returning with a vengeance to college campuses); “Some people think this, but others think that” (e.g., Hunters think of rattlesnake roundups as a springtime tradition, but animal-rights groups say they’re barbaric); and, “This may be good, but that is bad” (e.g. Waste-to-energy programs have helped keep thousands of tons of trash out of America’s landfills, but they’re also adding to air pollution). These sorts of formulas are not only dull; they are also simplistic, squeezing any sort of nuance out of the intro. And they’re confusing: putting too many “buts” in an intro leaves the listener unsure what the piece is about – we are in the process of absorbing one piece of information when we’re presented with another, contrary one that effectively undercuts it.⁵ More important, it is a formula, and formulaic writing does not demand the listener’s attention. A great intro has an element of surprise. Here are just a few examples:

We've all heard that it's expensive to live in New York City, but it's not cheap to be dead there either. New York's cemeteries are filling up, and the remaining lots are pricey. That's bad news for families that want to stay in New York forever, and challenging for cemeteries that will soon be out of the burying business. Here's NPR's Robert Smith.

The Great Wall of China has survived assaults by Mongols, Manchus and Chairman Mao, and now it's being threatened by modernization. The wall is one of China's main tourist attractions for foreigners and the new Chinese middle class. Tourism means commercial development near the wall -- which is raising concerns, as NPR's Rob Gifford reports.

Not-so-recent graduates of North Carolina and Illinois are swarming St. Louis this weekend anxiously awaiting tomorrow night's final game in the NCAA basketball championship. They are the “loyal alumni,” a term that really doesn't do them justice. NPR's Tom Goldman reports maybe “crazed” would be a better term for the middle-aged alums who still live and die with each game. He spent time with one man from Moline, Illinois.

An intro is a sort of promise to the listener – it tells them what to expect to find out in the report that follows it. As an editor, you need to check that the reporter makes good on that promise. If an intro says, “Jim Rodino reports federal documents show the coal mine has a record of serious safety violations,” that’s what he has to report. A good intro should let the listeners know if the report is an investigative piece, a profile, a chronology of events, etc. It needs to manage their expectations.

Because the intro is so important, the writing should shine – it should give the host an opportunity to connect with the audience and sell the reporter’s story. As NPR Senior

⁵ And the confusion wreaked by “buts” seems to increase geometrically with their number. This intro feels at least *four* times as muddled as a straightforward lead:

Lebanon's capital, Beirut, was once known as the Paris of the Middle East: a commercial and entertainment center for the entire Arab World. But then came 15 years of warfare, and Beirut was left in ruins. Now, a little more than a decade after the war's end, the city is starting to sparkle again. The ravaged center of the city has been rebuilt. And new restaurants and nightclubs are hopping with young professionals. But scratch the surface, and a deep malaise becomes apparent. NPR's _____ reports:

Vice President for Programming Jay Kernis puts it, “During a lead is when hosts become hosts...Let them have their moment on the stage, in the best possible light, in front of the most captivating set.”

The First Track

It isn't exactly the ancient chicken-and-egg conundrum, but radio journalists have their own mystery to grapple with – namely, if the story's news lead goes into the intro, what does the reporter say first?

One way around this issue has long been to start the piece with sound. The rationale for constructing a piece this way is that it sets the scene immediately, and allows the reporter to be (in the listener's mind) somewhere other than in a studio. The device *can* work. But after more than thirty years of reporters beginning their stories with sound, this has become a production cliché. Starting with sound shouldn't be the automatic, “default” choice; the sound should be as effective a follow-up to the intro as a well-written sentence.

In general, you should make sure there's some sort of logical connection between the intro and the start of the report itself, whether or not it begins with sound. That means that the reporter should read his track as if he has just heard the intro – which, of course, is how it will be presented to the listener. Here's one example:

INTRO: Human evolution is sometimes compressed to a kind of comic strip. It starts with a hairy apelike creature bent over and walking on his knuckles, and next to it are progressively more upright figures slouching along, and finally a fully bipedal, clean-shaven modern human. Some anthropologists hate this drawing, in part because there's been little evidence that human ancestors walked on their knuckles. Now it turns out that cartoon may be fairly accurate. NPR's _____ reports.

REPORTER: Brian Richmond is an anthropologist at George Washington University. He says he's tried to walk on his knuckles like a chimp or a gorilla, but he feels silly and his wrists hurt. He got to thinking about wrists a couple of years ago. Richmond was sitting in a small office at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum...

Note that this is *almost* an intro of the “It used to be that way... but now it's this way” variety; you might call it a “veiled but” intro, since “but” is implied at the beginning of the sentence that starts, “Now it turns out...” Yet this intro and voice track work well together. The intro begins with a strong visual image – the evolution cartoon that many of us have seen, and even seen parodied. It gives us some information we probably didn't know – that most anthropologists hate that cartoon. And it makes it clear what the piece is going to be about – namely, that new research shows human ancestors might have walked on their knuckles.

Having put all of that in the intro, the reporter then began his report with a new scene – a researcher, in his office, practicing walking on his knuckles. But the way he read it made it clear that this was a continuation of the ideas presented by the host. The reporter said, “Brian Richmond is an anthropologist at George Washington University. He says he's *tried* to walk on his knuckles like a chimp or a gorilla, but he feels silly and his wrists hurt.” The reporter stresses the word “tried,” not “knuckles”; he knows the host has already broached the subject of knuckle-walking.

(As good as that *second* sentence is – and it usually provokes a laugh from anyone who hears it – the *first* one is awfully dull. The reporter could have postponed giving us the information about Richmond’s affiliation by saying something like, “Anthropologist Brian Richmond says he’s tried walking on his knuckles...”)

The first line of the reporter’s first track *can* be problematical. Since the news lead is in the intro, the goal of the first sentence is to advance the story. We don’t always meet that goal, as in this example:

HOST: The Bush administration will announce its decision this week on regulations to protect the confidentiality of medical records. The rules, issued by the Clinton administration, are the first federal protections for medical information, but they've been suspended for the past two months while privacy advocates and the health-care industry have fought over whether they go too far or not far enough. NPR's _____ reports.

REPORTER: The medical privacy regulations issued last December would, for the first time, guarantee patients access to their own medical records.

There’s not much in this first sentence that advances the intro, except perhaps the fact that the regulations were issued in December (although the intro does say they’ve been suspended for two months). And the vocabulary of both the intro and first line is technical, dry, policy-speak.

On the same day that this piece aired, a number of reporters working on policy stories came up with some more successful first lines. Among them:

If ever there was a situation ripe for political payback, this would be it.

Every year, Taipei makes requests to Washington for new weapons – but there are weapons, and there are *weapons*.

For the first few months of the Bush administration, there was a White House Office of National AIDS Policy – but no one seemed to be working there.

The Bush administration came into office talking tough about overthrowing Saddam Hussein, but uttering sympathetic words for the Iraqi people.

Even though these reports were about politics, weapons agreements, AIDS policy and U.S.-Iraq relations, the reporters all managed to put something into their first sentences to

catch the listener's attention. One of the editor's jobs is to make sure that attention never flags – and if it evaporates with the first line, we've lost our audience.

Of course, a tried and true way of grabbing the listener is to give a specific example of a person who is affected by a policy, or an event. But this, too, can become a formula. For example, a quick check of NPR stories one afternoon found a number of scripts that started almost identically:

When Tampa Police officer Rick Dubinas gets a report of a stolen handgun, the first thing he wants to know is the gun's serial number.

When Jay Schechter relaxes in the quiet of his home on Hannawa Pond in northern New York, there's one sound he can't stand.

When Sarah Higley was a nine-year old growing up in Glendora, California, she and her friends wanted be able to share secrets and pass notes.

In short, there's no recipe for writing a first track, just as there's no recipe for writing an intro. Ideally – and this has been used as a definition of good poetry – every word should seem unexpected... and inevitable.

Copy Editing

The best editors are good writers. They recognize disorganized or turgid prose, understand and practice good grammar, and know how to turn a phrase. As an editor, you should be familiar with the principles of broadcast writing outlined earlier in this guide, and keep an eye out for clichés, long sentences, odd vocabulary or syntax, and other common writing problems. In addition, you should be alert to mistakes that are much more likely to occur in reported pieces than in news spots or commentaries.

Among them:

Echoes. We often hear echoes of thoughts and phrases between the intro and the piece itself, but echoes can also appear between the actualities and tracks. This is just one of many reasons why it's essential to listen to all the actualities in a piece, and not accept a transcript or a paraphrase from the reporter. Also, not all echoes involve repeating phrases word-for-word. If there's a first reference to a person or thing in the intro or at the top of a report, make sure there isn't another first reference later in the piece.

Unidentified actualities. If we've been hearing from Arnold Whipple throughout a piece, reporters sometimes assume we don't need to identify him when he speaks for the fourth time. But listeners aren't taking notes; we have to assume they're listening with half an ear most of the time, and so we should identify people concisely but frequently. It never hurts to add the ID – and almost always helps.

Confusing identifications. Often reporters come out of one actuality with the ID of the *next* person we're going to hear.

DALET: (RONALD BABCOCK):

"...So I think the government should use one tenth of one percent of the money it spends on roads to protect wilderness trails."

REPORTER:

Richard Jenkins of the U.S. Forest Service says many environmentalists are opposed to designating new trails because they fear they will only attract tourists:

DALET: (RICHARD JENKINS):

"We're getting to the point with the Appalachian Trail in the East where it's costing millions of dollars just to pick up trash..."

This placement of the identifier is really confusing, especially if the two people who are speaking have similar voices but different views; it would be natural for listeners to assume that the voice they just heard was Richard Jenkins, not Ronald Babcock. A simple way to clarify things is to contrast the two speakers in the voice track: "Richard Jenkins disagrees. He oversees the designation of trails for the federal government..." Or "Ronald Babcock is in the minority. Many environmentalists say they're concerned that designating new trails will create new problems. Richard Jenkins says..."

Confusing production devices. Just as we don't need every piece to start with sound, not every actuality should begin with a blind tease of the speaker. Make sure that there's a reason behind the way tape is used, and that the production device is effective. For example, reporters sometimes like to "butt-cut" (splice together, to use a metaphor from the analog days) the end of one actuality with the beginning of another, when the views expressed contrast well.

DALET: (RONALD BABCOCK):

"...So I think the government should use one tenth of one percent of the money it spends on roads to protect wilderness trails."

DALET: (RICHARD JENKINS):

"We're getting to the point with the Appalachian Trail in the East where it's costing millions of dollars just to pick up trash."

REPORTER:

Richard Jenkins of the U.S. Forest Service says many environmentalists are opposed to designating new trails because they fear they will only attract tourists:

DALET: (RICHARD JENKINS):

"Every time you give a new trail a name and publish a guide book to it, you're inviting every backpacker in America to set up camp in the woods."

This can look fine on the page, but where the actualities are on the phone, and the speakers are of the same gender, it can sound confusing. So audition tape critically, as if

you were listening to the radio. If you have any doubts about whether the listener will know what's going on, encourage the reporter to try a different approach.

Of course, getting people to write *well* is much harder than keeping them from writing badly. You can remove the clichés, shorten the sentences, eliminate unnecessary numbers – and still have a dull script. Science editor Alison Richards says she makes a special effort to get reporters to use everyday language. “You catch language from the people you’re talking to and whatever it is that you’re reading,” she points out. “So if you’re talking and reading science all the time, there’s a danger – as a reporter and as an editor – that you start to think in that kind of vocabulary....And very often the first draft of a science story will be completely lacking in feeling in just that kind of way that a scientific paper is.”

An editor can also liven up the writing by asking the reporter a few, well-chosen questions. “If a reporter comes back and writes, ‘Here we are in Mrs. Jones’s class and the students are working on math problems,’ I interview them,” Steve Drummond says. “I ask, ‘What kind of math problems?’ And the reporter may say, ‘Oh, they were doing story problems about a two trains heading toward each other.’ And I’ll say, ‘Let’s put that in there. Were all the kids sitting at their desks, or were some of them at the chalkboard? Did they have their textbooks out and open, or were they all working on sheets of paper? Those are the sorts of things many reporters don’t think to put in or don’t think they have time to put in. By interviewing them, you can draw this out of them,” Drummond says.

An editor can also urge a reporter to use strong, visual verbs instead of the many forms of “to be.” Target sentences that start with “There is” or “There are.” The changes can be quite small and still make a difference. Instead of, “There were crowds of teenagers eager to buy tickets,” we might say, “Teenagers elbowed one another aside as they pushed forward to buy tickets.” Instead of “There was a small girl in the front of the school,” we can say, “A small girl fidgeted with her lunchbox as she stood in the front of the school.”

That means the reporter has to record those details – mentally, in a notebook, on tape, but somehow! Sometimes reporters are only thinking about sound, so they don’t pay attention to the other aspects of a scene that can bring it alive. Editor Andrea de Leon recalls the time a reporter spent a week at a jail that was running a summer camp for the children of inmates. “I wanted to know about the moment when these children first went in,” she says, “and not only did I want to hear, but I wanted to *see* them waiting to be let in on their first morning. The reporter stood there with them, but she was so intent on her minidisk that she had to call the jail and ask [officials] what the door was made of. She couldn’t tell me what it was made of, the color, if it had a window, or bars.” De Leon’s advice to her reporters: “Make sure that you report with *all* of your senses.”

Sometimes – and that “sometimes” should probably be underlined – you can help a reporter write better by getting him or her to have a particular *perspective* on his story. This doesn’t mean slanting the story: a reporter can have a point of view without showing an editorial bias. It’s okay, for example, to describe what it *feels* like at the top of the

dormant volcano where the observatory is located, or to make it clear that the sights at the refugee camp were appalling, or to reflect a sense of humor in a situation that is undeniably funny.

And somewhere during this process, take a step back and ask yourself whether the reporter has succeeded in giving the listener something new. After all, one of the “core values” of public radio identified by the Public Radio Program Directors was “love of lifelong learning.” The best NPR reports don’t repack ideas or points of view that are widely heard elsewhere; they tell us something we either didn’t know or didn’t remember. You don’t want to get so caught up in the technical details of editing that you fail to make sure that the story rewards listeners for their time and attention.

The Ending

Just as you have to pay close attention to the intro and the start of the report when you’re editing, you should make a habit of checking that the conclusion of the piece actually says something. We all joke about reports that conclude with the hackneyed phrase “only time will tell.” But these are actual last lines from NPR pieces that all aired *on one day*, and they all say little more than “only time will tell”:

But as the fight over the medical privacy issue nears its five-year mark, it's clear that whatever the decision, it won't be the last word.

The head of Gazprom's media arm, Alfred Kokh, says he has until tomorrow to respond to Turner's latest offer, but Kokh indicated a final deal could be months away. In the meantime, the test of wills continues.

The debate over the budget and the tax cuts will likely get louder once lawmakers get back from spring recess.

Many NPR pieces currently conclude by saying, in effect, “Something is going to happen – but we can’t say what.” Some reports – like the last example here – make a vague prediction of what’s going to happen, modified by “likely” and sometimes also by “may,” to ensure that the reporter is not charged with speculating: “The President may push Congress to pass an even bigger tax cut – something Democrats are likely to oppose.”

So what’s an editor to do? Sometimes it is fair to ask the reporter to look to the future. In this conclusion, the reporter adds a new piece of information to her report on U.S. AIDS policy:

All this is leading up to a key meeting in June in New York. For the first time, the United Nations General Assembly is convening specifically to address international AIDS issues.

Some reporters opt not to *have* a final track – ending their piece with an actuality, followed simply by the reporter sign-off. NPR editors are outspoken in their belief that this is a cop-out – that ending a report with an actuality is a device that should be used

very rarely, and only when the last cut of tape is, in effect, a conclusion. “The reporter is in control of the flow and the thought process you want your audience to be going through,” says editor Andrea de Leon. “You told them this was the beginning, you told them this was the middle, and you should have the last word.” De Leon and other editors say that in reports on controversial subjects, ending the piece with one actuality may give the impression that the reporter sides with the speaker; it’s as if the reporter were saying, “What can I possibly add to that?” In addition, an actuality that’s more than, say, twenty seconds long may need to be re-identified, which means the reporter’s final track will be something like, “Jim Smith, of the Chesapeake Waterman’s Association. Jack Jones, NPR News, Annapolis” – hardly an effective ending. And some editors simply object to it on production grounds, saying it just sounds odd to have the reporter pop back in at the end of a report only to sign-off. Despite all these objections, conclusion-less pieces air regularly on NPR, presumably because editors – at least under deadline pressure – are hard pressed to find something for reporters to say that isn’t platitudinous, speculative or redundant.

Many reporters like to end their pieces with a quote, but *not* an actuality – that is, they paraphrase something one of the interviewees has said. For instance, a reporter ended a piece on Peru’s presidential elections this way:

“The process has changed 100 percent,” Velasquez says. “Last time, it was totally fraudulent, but this time it’s all very correct, and we hope that today’s winner will be Peru.”

Frequently the editor can help the reporter steal a quote, or idea, or fact from somewhere else in the piece. In fact, many of the best conclusions began their lives as intros.

When to Stop Editing

There’s no rule about how much editing is *too* much. Some NPR editors say that if they’ve done their job right from the start – if they’ve talked the story idea over with the reporter, consulted while the reporting was still underway, and helped him or her structure the piece – then only one edit should be necessary. Others expect to have several edits, especially on a longer piece. “It’s in the second and third edits that you polish the story,” Steve Drummond says, “and deal with issues like: is the writing exciting and clear, does the reporter get into and out of tape well, is the tape exciting and useful? And also at these times, you’re looking at the length. At a certain point, you take out the surgeon’s knife, as it were, and say, ‘Let’s cut this phrase.’”

However many times you go over a script, the process should involve *editing*, not rewriting. It’s almost always better to steer reporters in the right direction and let them use their own words – words they’re comfortable saying. One common technique is to get the reporter to tell part of the story *without* a script. Then the editor can point out to him or her whether the phrases used in speech are better than the ones in the first draft of the piece: “See, you didn’t call him the ‘Wynton J. Rassias Professor of Psycholinguistics, you just called him ‘a linguist.’ And it was much easier to follow you

when you described how he figured out the ancient Greek text. All the detail in the script had me confused. Now go back and write it more or less the way you *told* it to me.”

Similarly, a reporter should not expect his or her editor to boil a sixteen-minute piece down to eight. If a story is twice as long as it ought to be, the editor might give some general guidance about what needs to be cut; but the reporter should do most of the cutting.

Editors can, and often do, help out in the reporting of a story, by gathering material, lining up sources, pulling tape (or the digital equivalent) – and even by conducting interviews. These are jobs usually carried out by the reporter, sometimes by an editorial assistant or producer; but editors should also be willing to lend a hand, especially when the reporter is on a deadline. Just make sure that it’s clear what each person is trying to accomplish, so the two of you don’t end up duplicating each other’s work

An editor cannot know everything about every subject, but like a good field producer, he should know which facts need to be checked, and how to verify them. You want to make sure that names and dates and places are all correct (and don’t forget that someone who was 28 when he was interviewed last summer may be 29 now). But you should also get in the habit of taking a hard look at all numbers (“Half of all fourteen-year-olds have used marijuana”), at assertions from individuals or groups with political agendas (“The state government has made no effort to help single mothers find jobs after they’ve been kicked off welfare”), at historical descriptions that are not common knowledge (“The Japanese invasion of Manchuria unleashed forces which led ultimately to the attack on Pearl Harbor”), at anyone characterizing another person’s motives (“Republican Congressman Jim Smith says Democrats are introducing the bill to embarrass the president”), and many other similar statements. They may not be wrong; but you need to know why the reporter felt comfortable making them.

As an editor, you may also have to tell a reporter that a piece is not ready for broadcast and needs extensive revisions. Especially if the subject is controversial and you are not convinced that the story is fair, or that all the vital facts have been established, you have a responsibility to keep the story off the air. And on occasion, you may need to kill a piece, though it can take years of experience to know when to take a reporter off a story that is not materializing. In any event, remember that a five-minute decision on your part may undermine days or even weeks of work by the reporter – so a good editor doesn’t make these sorts of decisions lightly. “You’re a diplomat, you’re a psychologist,” Bebe Crouse says. “I always try to remember what it was like being a reporter – being on the other side.”

New Approaches to Old Stories

One of the ironies of the news business is how much of what we report is not really new. At the beginning of every year, the NPR news desks already know that there are certain stories they will cover during the next twelve months. The Foreign Desk is sure to have

pieces on new outbreaks of fighting in old trouble spots; the Arts Desk will do pieces on annual awards ceremonies, like the Grammys and Academy Awards; the National Desk will have pieces on the start of the school year, on big moves in the financial markets, on the Super Bowl and World Series; the Science Desk will have scores of pieces based on research journals. Every “routine” story presents the challenge of presenting it in an unusual way.

After hearing these sorts of stories year after year, most editors can predict what the next incarnation will sound like. Try it yourself. Imagine a day on which the big news story concerned a hurricane heading toward Florida. Forecasters say it’ll be the biggest storm in twenty years, and it’s heading straight for a city in Florida, and it’s expected to make landfall in forty-eight hours. A reporter has been assigned to cover the story today for *All Things Considered*. What would you expect to hear?

When we asked different groups of NPR editors that question, they independently said almost the identical thing:

The piece would start with the sound of people preparing for the storm – probably hammering up plywood to cover the windows.

It would include a scene somewhere of people stockpiling supplies – water, milk, toilet paper, etc.

It might also have tape of, or at least describe, the people evacuating, taking the one road out of town. (For some reason, one editor noted, there always seems to be only one road out of town!)

It would have to include an actuality of an expert – i.e., someone at the National Hurricane Center, describing the path of the storm and why it’s to be feared. (This cut would probably be on the phone, while the others would probably have come from in-person interviews.)

It would conclude with an old-timer who is “stayin’ put” because he’s been through big storms before.

Such a piece might well meet most of the tests for a good piece of reporting. It would certainly be timely. It would have lots of relevant sound, and only one cut of phone tape. It would be well-focused, and well-structured (we’d probably hear from people who are getting ready to leave, are leaving and who are staying put, in that order). A reporter who produced such a story on deadline would probably feel pretty good about having covered all the bases. But the piece would be almost comically dull – because it would be so similar to the dozens of hurricane stories we have produced over the years.

Now, if there really were an oncoming storm that threatened to take people’s lives and destroy huge amounts of property, ATC – or any other show – would be justified in wanting some sort of coverage. So we asked editors to take just a couple of minutes to

think up some alternative ways to get at the same story. Here are some of the things they came up with:

Have a reporter ride along with a policeman conducting the evacuation.

Have a program host check in repeatedly throughout the day with one person – a storeowner, a cop, the person running a shelter, etc., to get a sense of the growing crisis. Or ask a reporter to do the same thing.

Talk to a meteorologist about the science of predicting when and where a hurricane will make landfall.

Talk to a weather channel producer who thinks the storm is exciting.

Have a reporter or host collect advice about coping with a hurricane from people who have been through such monster storms in the past.

Have a reporter stake out a route *into* the city and find out why people would be entering a place from which other people are being evacuated.

Have a reporter talk to insurers gearing up for the aftermath of the hurricane before the storm has even struck.

Have a business reporter find out who profits from a destructive hurricane (e.g., lumberyards, homebuilders, landscapers, etc.).

Not all of these ideas would pan out, and some would depend on having a skilled reporter. Others might sound better a day or two later. The point is that most editors can generate four or five alternative ways to get at a story in just a few minutes of brainstorming. So it's important to take those few minutes to try to conceive an approach that doesn't fit one of the old templates.

It's not as hard as it may seem. Here's how one science reporter began a story about an article in a journal:

A scientist returns from an exotic place every now and then and describes something that's stranger than fiction. A biologist has done just that in Costa Rica. NPR's _____ has a story about death and transfiguration in the rainforest.

REPORTER: When you're crawling around a tropical forest looking for unusual forms of life, there's a simple rule of thumb to remember: one thing leads to the next. For William Eberhard, who works at the University of Costa Rica and for the Smithsonian Institution, the trail began with a spider:

WILLIAM EBERHARD (Smithsonian Institution): It's sort of a medium-sized spider. It's really beautiful, its silver abdomen with black streaks and patches of gold and green and red.

REPORTER: What really intrigued Eberhard wasn't the spiders, though; it was their webs. These were orb spinners. Normally, they make oval, lattice-worked webs. But many of these webs were weird looking, just a big X with a sticky tangle at the center. And hanging from this tangle was a single cocoon, one Eberhard recognized as belonging to a small, stinging wasp.

EBERHARD: I could see that these webs were very strange, and that they somehow or other were associated with the presence of the wasps. And that set me going.

REPORTER: Eberhard didn't have to go far. He found spiders in the act of weaving these strange webs. Each had the larva of the wasps stuck to its abdomen. They wove the basic superstructure of a web, but didn't finish. Eberhard watched these spiders for hours ...

Look what the reporter has done. He's written an intro that tells you you're about to hear a story, not about some newly-published research, but about something that's "stranger than fiction" and deals with "death and transfiguration." He's told the story as a sort of mystery, where "one thing leads to another": a scientist found an unusual spider, then he noticed the something was wrong with the web it was spinning; and so on. When editors were asked what this piece was about – an important question for every editor to ask of every reporter – they almost always responded "Nature is amazing," or something of that sort. In other words, the piece – nominally about how certain wasps can get certain spiders to reprogram their web-weaving – was really about something larger, and considerably more interesting, especially to people who are not usually science junkies.

This is an unconventional piece for other reasons that may not be apparent in this excerpt. The journal in which the research was published isn't mentioned in the intro; in fact, it's only cited at the end of the piece. The intro doesn't include the usual *pro forma* statement that "while the results are preliminary, the research could eventually lead to new treatments for [some disease]. And the piece is built around a single interview with the researcher. (The reporter conducted other interviews, but decided that the researcher was the right person to tell the story.)

Not every reporter will be able to think up a new way to get at a conventional story. But editors can always challenge them to try. "It's a little bit like a dance," Bebe Crouse says. "You're both coming to it with something and don't want to step on each other's toes, but you work it out together."

After all, the editor is the critical middleman between the reporter and the audience. The role may often be invisible, and the responsibility unappreciated – until something goes wrong. Then the first question asked by managers and listeners alike is, "Who *edited* that?"