Five tenets of writing for the ear

By Dan Grech, a storyteller for National Public Radio's Marketplace who teaches at Princeton University. Dec. 10, 2009. This is edited from a chat session at Poynter: http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=172670

Shorter is better -- That's tenet one of Writing for the Ear. Short sentences. It's not word count that matters, in writing for the ear, but the number of seconds it takes to read something. Each person has a different pace of voicing a script, aka their read rate, and so some people can fit more words into the same block of time. (By the way, spelling still matters in writing for the ear, since scripts are often posted online.)

Use conversational language -- Tenet #2, write like you speak. Adverbs and adjectives are clunky, and we use them when our nouns and verbs are weak. What matters most is a strong simple language that doesn't need any crutches. Listeners are confused by luxurious adverbs. Those multi-syllabic words actually obscure meaning, because they hide what you're trying to say.

Subject-Verb-Object -- Tenet #3 -- Since time is of the essence, use simple sentences, with familiar words in short sentences, to keep the attention of the listener.

Avoid repetition between your script and the sound bites -- Tenet 4

Observations:

I have always been told that you should imagine that you're writing your script for a stranger you met at the bar who's had a drink or two already. He or she knows nothing about what you're talking about, and is only half paying attention. That's a good proxy for the state of mind of people driving in their cars.

When in doubt, leave it out. The idea is that your brain tells you when something doesn't work. That's when doubt creeps in. So the best way to select the best stories, scenes and words is to listen to your gut instinct. That's what you tell that guy at the bar -- just the most interesting stuff.

Another thing I make my students do is give an "elevator pitch" -- that's the one minute pitch where you describe your story. Imagine you're on an elevator with your editor, and it's headed for the ground floor, and you
have just 60 seconds to get in your whole story. The floor numbers are counting down... what do you say? THAT is writing for the ear.

Writing for the ear is all about selection. Selection at the story level, at the scene level and at the word level. My main recommendation for how to break down a complex story into a simpler one is to narrow your focus. A story on Planet Money, for instance, is about one thing. An equivalent print story in the Wall Street Journal might be about half a dozen.

I think a lot about how easily I can say a word. For instance, I had a sentence in a recent script: "She was wary when I first called." Say the word "wary" a few times to yourself. It's one of the strangest, most difficult words to say I can imagine. So I changed it -- to suspicious.

There's a cool technique to do this called the Mouth Edit. It's where you read over your script, two lines at a time, without looking at the words on the page. If you stumble over something, your mouth is telling you it's too hard to say. So change it!

Also, keep these principles in mind:

* Use a straightforward, linear narrative (chronological)
* Make radio three dimensional with sound that gives a sense of volume
* Watch conjunctions, use contractions

The power is in the last word -- Tenet 5 -- The most important word in a sentence written for the ear is the last word. That's where all your power should be. Remember, you can't "hear" punctuation marks, so you need to punctuate the sentence with your voice. That's why the last word is so important.
I'll give you an example.

This is the rough draft of a story I did for Marketplace:

Drug cartel billions/grech

Ran Thursday, September 20, 2007 on Marketplace.

First draft: "The US Government Accountability Office spent 14 months looking into US efforts to fight drugs in Mexico.

It concluded that rampant corruption, bureaucratic bumbling and inadequate funding derailed those efforts."

Edited version (much improved)
"The GAO spent 14 months looking into the war on drugs in Mexico. It found inadequate funding, bureaucratic bumbling and rampant corruption."

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