

Writing for the Ear

Some texts are meant to be heard rather than read, such as radio broadcasts and audio podcasts. These texts come in various forms, for example audio documentaries, news reports and commentaries. Such texts usually have the same text components as their print counterparts, but they also have additional ones, as we do not listen the way we read.

Audience Limitations

When listening to an audio text, we have more restrictions than we do reading a written text. The first reason is because our memories will not allow us to remember very long and complex sentences from beginning to end. Therefore, sentences must be shorter, so that we can “hold them in our heads.” Secondly, we cannot stop and look up a word in the dictionary, press replay the way we can reread a printed text, or slow down the “playing” of a text. Therefore, audio texts have to be written with these limitations in mind; they have to be written for the ear, not for the eye.

Reduced or Condensed Content

An audio text often has fewer details than a printed text. Ideas tend to be presented more concisely, because the listener cannot absorb or process a lot of information in a short lapse of time. Look at the following example:

Printed text: Ever since a depression in the earth was discovered in 1795 under a tree, Oak Island has had its share of treasure hunters, people willing to invest time and money in the hope of finding treasure. First was Daniel McInnes, the lad who discovered the depression. He was followed by Frederic Blair, a businessman; then by engineer Harry Bowdoin; by William Chappell, a contractor; and later by Chappell's son, Mel Chappell. Next came Bob Restall, who died in one of the shafts. The last names of the long list are those of Dan Blankenship and David Tobias, who have been trying to find the elusive treasure on and off since 1971.

Audio version: Ever since a depression in the earth was discovered in 1795 under a tree, Oak Island has had its share of treasure hunters. From Daniel McInnes, the young lad who discovered the depression, to Dan Blankenship and David Tobias, the most recent adventurers, a succession of people have invested a great deal of time and money with the hopes of finding treasure.

Any numbers or statistics included in an audio text are kept to a minimum and usually rounded off. In addition, larger numbers are often written out so the narrator does not stumble when reading the script. Look at the following example:

Printed text: Alcatraz had 336 cells, but held an average of 265 prisoners at any one time. Cells measured 1.5 m by 2.4 m. If a prisoner extended his arms, he could easily touch both walls. From 1934 to 1963, Alcatraz held a total of 1 576 inmates.

Audio version: Alcatraz held an average of 265 prisoners at any one time. Cells were very small, approximately the size of a small bathroom. If a prisoner extended his arms, he could easily touch both walls. Over its 29 years as a federal prison, Alcatraz held over fifteen hundred inmates.

Audio texts are usually planned to fit a certain time frame (e.g. a two-minute news report). When writing, keep in mind that the average person speaks 100 to 135 words per minute.

Language and Style

Language and style for audio texts differ significantly from printed texts. Here are some guidelines:

- **Use a conversational tone.** An audio text is delivered orally, so the text has to sound authentic, natural. The person who “reads” the text is talking to his or her audience and the tone should be conversational; however, the language register must be appropriate for the audience. Conversational does not mean anything is permitted—it is more like a conversation with someone you just met in a relatively formal setting, not a conversation with an old friend.
- **Use contractions.** In the same vein, an audio text should include contractions in order to sound natural.
- **Use descriptive or visual language.** When we read a text, we can pause and picture ideas and events in our heads. We do not have this luxury when we listen to an audio text, so the writer has to make these images explicit. In the above example from Alcatraz, comparing the size of a cell to that of a small bathroom provides such an image.
- **Use short sentences.** Long sentences that contain subordinate clauses may be quite appropriate in a printed text, but may prove a challenge for the memory of the listener of an audio text. Look at the following example:

Printed text: Standing in the Alcatraz cellhouse, looking up at three tiers of tiny cells on each side, one's imagination goes into overdrive, imagining the dread that imprisoned men felt in these barren cells.

Audio version: Imagine standing in the Alcatraz cellhouse. Imagine looking up at three tiers of tiny cells on each side. Can you imagine the dread that imprisoned men felt in these barren cells?

- **Use words that are easy to understand.** Vocabulary should be precise but easy to understand. If you have to use technical terms, make sure that you explain them.
- **Restrict the use of pronouns.** The audience can easily get confused as to who *he* or *she* refers to if more than one person is mentioned or if the original reference to the person was a while back. In an audio text, the listener cannot leaf through the text to go back to the antecedent, i.e. the person the pronoun refers to.

Tip!

Read the text aloud or in your head to see what it sounds like.

Writing for the ear requires the writer to:

- know the text components of audio texts
- engage in the writing process
- be keenly aware of purpose and audience
- focus on language and style

Bibliography

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