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# Manual for Radio Journalists



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**01**

**The News**

## Introduction

It's a daily routine for all of us: whenever we want to know what is going on in our region, in our country or in the world, we simply tune into the news on the radio. The radio newscast will bring us up to date on the most important events and issues within a few minutes. The news is precise, brief, neutral and nevertheless interesting and intriguing. At least that's how it should be. A radio programme without news is like flowers without a scent or a birthday without a cake – possible, but not the real thing. Hardly any listener wants to do without regular newscasts. The news is the calling card of each and every broadcaster. If the news is credible and understandable, listeners will also rate highly the radio station as a whole. This is why it is essential for journalists to prepare and phrase their news with the utmost care and to adhere to certain rules. Above all, journalists must ask themselves: is this information really new? What is important about the information? Is it interesting or useful to the listener? Only once these questions have been answered affirmatively, can the journalist start to write a news item and compile a news broadcast.

## Definition

Radio news is current, topical information on events, facts and opinions. It is objective and must not contain the journalist's opinion. The language of the news is simple and precise. In most cases, news reports are spoken texts only. Sometimes, news items also include short sound bites from a reporter, a correspondent or a statement from a person mentioned in the news item. A news broadcast is made up of news items about a variety of topics (politics, economics/finance, culture, sports, etc.). These news items can again be subdivided into categories like world news, regional news and local news.

## What is News?

- Political activities (government, opposition, parliament, political parties)
- Political developments/decisions
- Wars
- Natural catastrophes and disasters
- Accidents/misfortunes
- Crime
- Conferences
- Rallies/demonstrations
- Business activities
- Social issues and problems
- Cultural activities
- Outstanding scientific/cultural achievements
- Awards/award ceremonies
- Unusual/exceptional events and issues
- Sports results
- Human-interest stories
- The weather

## Strengths and weaknesses of the format

The news informs listeners about current events and developments. The information has to be new, interesting and relevant to the lives of the listeners. The news can also update listeners' knowledge about ongoing developments and events. Furthermore, the news supplies listeners with the information they need to form their own opinions about things that are happening and make them more aware of certain issues and problems.

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### Example

The international pharmaceutical company PILLCO plans to build a new factory in the run-down neighbourhood of BIGTOWN. People living in this neighbourhood will have to be relocated so that the factory can be built. The company has already negotiated a contract with the state government, which will be signed by the responsible parties today. This will be followed by a reception and a press conference. At the same time, opponents of the project are demonstrating on the streets of the city.

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The listeners already know that the factory will be built, that the contract has been negotiated and that many people from BIGTOWN will have to be rehoused. So all this is no longer news. However, the fact that the contract will be signed today is in fact news. The news also includes who will be signing the contract and what will be said in the subsequent speeches and the final press conference. All of this is topical and relevant to the listeners (possibly because it affects them personally or somebody they know). Furthermore, what is said at the press conference may have an effect on listeners' opinions or give them cause to rethink their positions.

The fact that opponents of the project are demonstrating today is also news. News is usually broadcast at certain times: on the hour, on the half-hour or at other regular intervals. It is important to stick to a certain time schedule so that listeners know when they can tune in for the news.

### Strengths and weaknesses of the news

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Informs listeners about relevant events, facts and opinions</li> <li>+ Is objective, unbiased</li> <li>+ Gives listeners the information they need to form their own opinion</li> <li>+ Is broadcast at regular intervals, usually on the hour; listeners can form a habit of tuning in at these times to find out what's new</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Only supplies the essential information – not all details of the story</li> <li>- Is restricted by a tight time framework (much information in a very short time)</li> <li>- The journalist is often confronted with too much material (agencies, internet, press releases, etc.); the journalist therefore needs to make quick and precise decisions as to what is relevant to the listeners</li> </ul>

### How is it done?

Writing the news is not only a highly responsible activity, it is also very work-intensive. A news editor is frequently inundated with material from the most varied sources.

#### Where can a news journalist find information?

- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| – News agencies        | – The police                                       |
| – Correspondents       | – Hospitals  |
| – The internet         | – Personal contacts                                |
| – Government offices   | – Insider sources                                  |
| – Politicians          | – Newspapers/other media                           |
| – Press releases       | – Interviews run by the own station or other media |
| – Public announcements | – Through personal observation                     |

Information from all these sources can pile up on the news editor's desk. It's now his or her task to separate the relevant from the irrelevant information. The editor might also have to do additional research: to verify whether information is true or to get an opposing view from other key players. Then, the news editor has to write all the individual news items for the broadcast. They have to be brief, precise, easy to understand and objective. All this happens under extreme time pressure. And that's why the news editor has to go about his or her tasks in a systematic manner.

### **What is new?**

This is the first question that news editors have to ask themselves. One of the greatest assets of the radio is that it's a very fast medium – only surpassed by the internet at times. Radio journalists can supply their audience with information much quicker than television or newspaper journalists. In the example mentioned above, news is the fact that the contract for the construction of the pharmaceutical factory will be signed today, that there will be a subsequent reception and press conference and that the opponents of the project are demonstrating.

### **What is important about this new information?**

This should be the second question that the news editors ask themselves. What is important is that the contract is being signed today because this represents a decisive step on the way to implementing the project. It is also important for the listeners to know who will be signing the contract, so that they know who is responsible. And finally, it's important for the listeners to find out what is said at the subsequent press conference: Is there news relating to possible compensation for those people being rehoused? Will there be an announcement with information regarding the number of new jobs the project will create? What environmental protection measures are planned? All this is important because it affects a great number of people and because it interests an even larger number of the listeners. It's important because it takes place right on the listeners' doorstep. It's important because it helps them understand what is happening in their community. And it's important because it points out potential hazards of the project (for instance if no environmental protection measures were planned).

Of course, news editors will also find a great deal of irrelevant information among the material they get every day. Particularly, press releases and political statements are often nothing but hot air. Sometimes – especially on slow news days – news editors are tempted to use such material for the news. But the result is that in the end the whole news broadcast sounds boring. The listeners will switch off – first mentally and then the radio itself.

This is why it is important for the editors to apply strict rules on what's newsworthy and what's not. The words of presidents or ministers do not automatically have weight just because these people hold a high office. These dignitaries should only be quoted in the news if they are actually saying something substantially new or if their statement adds a new twist or angle to an ongoing issue.

### Verifying information

If you have two or more independent sources of information for a news item, you can usually assume that the information is correct. You can begin to write your news item. However, if you only have a single source of information, you should be very careful. Always try to double-check the information through personal research.

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News agency N is the only source to report: *The chairman C of PILLCO's Board of Directors has guaranteed all those being rehoused substantial financial support.*

Before you include this information in your news item, you should double-check by calling the pharmaceutical company. Ask them whether this statement is really correct. Once you've established that it is true, you can include the statement in your news item. If you cannot get confirmation, leave the chairman's statement out of your news broadcast. Just imagine what would happen if you broadcast this news, only to discover that the information is not correct: the affected listeners would be expecting financial support, only then to find out that they will not receive any money. You personally, but particularly the station, would suffer a huge loss of trust and credibility, which would be very difficult to reverse. It's better to be correct and reliable, than to try to be the fastest and broadcast unchecked information. If you don't know it, don't say it.

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Of course, the following could also happen: you've received information that you think is so important it should be broadcast immediately – even though you only have a single source. In this case, you have to make it absolutely clear in your news items that this is non-confirmed information.

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News agency N reports: *A court order is due to put an end to the demolition of buildings in BIGTOWN before the end of the day. This means that the project to build a pharmaceutical factory in BIGTOWN is dead.*

As you had only one single source for this information, you tried to double-check by doing additional research on the subject – but to no avail. The court did not provide any information. Neither PILLCO nor the Ministry of Industry

knew anything about it. You have to make all this crystal clear in your news item: *The demolition of the buildings in BIGTOWN will allegedly be blocked by a court order later today, news agency N claims to have heard from court sources. There is no confirmation for this yet. When asked, the pharmaceutical company, PILLCO, and the Ministry of Industry said that they knew nothing of the supposedly pending court order. They both assumed that the construction of the factory would go ahead as planned.*

With your choice of words, you have made it clear that this development is still unconfirmed, based on considerable uncertainties. Furthermore, you have informed listeners about the viewpoints of those involved. You should pick up on the further development of the story in a later broadcast.

Either: *The courts have stopped the demolition of the buildings in BIGTOWN (which would be news anyway).*

Or: *The demolition of the buildings in BIGTOWN has not been stopped, according to the responsible courts in BIGTOWN. A spokesperson for the court said the report issued by a news agency relating to a pending demolition injunction was nonsense.*

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## Sequence of news items

When you determine the sequence of the topics within a news bulletin, a seemingly simple principle applies: the most important issues come first. Listeners must be able to rely on this. However, this is not always as simple as it sounds, because this selection process seems to contradict the principle of objectivity and neutrality in the news. After all, determining the most relevant issue is a value judgement by the news editors. Everybody – even a news editor – has their own opinion on how to rank a topic. Editors select what they believe to be the most important topics for the listeners, the second most important, the third most important, etc. But this subjective selection is the only solution. However, often the sequence of the first news items is automatically determined by the nature of the events in question. If, for example, you work as a news editor of a local or regional broadcaster, the report relating to the construction of the new pharmaceutical factory will definitely be at the beginning of a news broadcast. The project directly affects many of your listeners; it is controversial and hotly debated in your community. Which event takes second, third or fourth place in the rundown often depends on the tastes of the editors in charge.

## Writing news items

The principle of writing news is very simple: be precise, brief, neutral and objective, but nonetheless interesting. This is what news language is all about. Make short sentences to ensure that listeners can understand everything quickly. Do not overload the sentences with information to make sure that the listeners are able to take in what is being said. Be neutral and objective to make sure that listeners can make up their own minds about the news.

In news, the most important information comes first – though not necessarily at the beginning of the sentence. The first sentence or the first two sentences contain the core of the information ('lead sentence'). Everything that follows just adds further detail or background, which will help listeners understand the issue and put it into perspective.

Imagine you are on a railway platform, saying goodbye to a friend. Your friend has already boarded the train and the doors will close at any moment. At this moment, you remember that there's some information you still want to pass on to your friend. Obviously, you don't bother with complex sentence structures or elaborate language. You express yourself clearly and precisely, since your friend will not have a chance to ask what you've meant: "There was trouble during the demonstration against the construction of the new pharmaceutical factory. Five demonstrators and three police officers were injured." With just a little polishing up, these sentences could almost be the lead of a news item: Several hundred people demonstrated against the construction of the new pharmaceutical factory this morning. The demonstration culminated in clashes with the police outside City Hall. Five demonstrators and three police officers were injured.

Always remember that a news item has to have a logical structure, so that listeners can understand it immediately. Each new sentence must follow logically from what has already been said; don't jump from one aspect of the information to another and back. In a news item, the journalist should answer the six key questions: who, what, where, when, why and how.

'Who?' and 'what?' – the answers to these two questions generally form the core of the news item, i.e. this information will definitely be included in the first sentence. The answers to 'when?' and 'where?' are sometimes also included in the first sentence, but can often wait until the second or third sentence. News needs attribution. The source should be mentioned in the second or, at the very latest, third sentence. Listeners need to know where the information originated – especially if the information is controversial.

If different sources provide you with conflicting information always mention both sources.

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The police and the organizers of the protest have given you different figures for the number of participants in the demonstration. If you mention both figures in the news item and where you got them from, your listeners will know that the police and the organizers differ on this issue, yet you are not taking sides with either party. This way, your news stays credible and neutral.

*Police say 400 demonstrators took part in the protest. Organisers of the demonstration put the number of participants at 2,000.*

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If you are quoting a particularly controversial statement in your news item, the source must be mentioned in the first sentence.

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**not good:** *PILLCO has bribed the Minister M of Industry to secure planning permission for the construction of a new factory. This is the view of the head H of the Environmental Protection Party.*

The first sentence in this version of the news item will sound like a fact to your listeners. They might even be so shocked by it that they fail to listen to the second sentence. Only later will they discover that they took a statement of opinion for a fact – because the news item was badly written. Listeners will lose trust and may never tune into your station again.

**better:** *The head H of the Environmental Protection Party claims that PILLCO has bribed the Minister M of Industry. H made this statement in an interview with our station. H says that PILLCO only got the building permit for the new pharmaceutical factory because it bribed the minister.*

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The answers to the questions ‘why’ and ‘how’ will further explain the issue. They will follow once the most important facts have been presented. This information could possibly even be left out if the news item has to be very short.

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*Several hundred people (who) protested against the construction of the new pharmaceutical factory (what) this morning (when). During the demonstration, demonstrators clashed with the police outside City Hall (where). Doctors at city hospital say (source), they had to treat five demonstrators and three police officers for injuries incurred during the demonstration. According to eyewitnesses (further source), the police used tear gas and rubber bullets against the protesters after stones were thrown at the police (how/why).*

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## News language

Radio news gives the listeners a lot of information in a very short time. Therefore, the news has to be worded in a way that it is easy to understand and to follow. News language has to be absolutely concise and neutral. And since the aim is to convey a maximum of information in a minimum amount of time, there is no room for literary style in the news (> page 18 ff.). Here is a short overview over the most important rules:

- Repeat key words rather than using synonyms. Synonyms are often difficult for listeners to understand and sometimes lead to misunderstandings.
- Beware of foreign words. Do not base your manuscript on what you understand. Consider whether your listeners will understand it. If there is no alternative for a foreign word, you should use it and then explain it.
- Abbreviations and acronyms need to be explained the first time they appear in a news item. Do not assume that all listeners know what UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) or UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) means.
- Keep numbers and figures to a minimum. They are hard to understand on the radio. If you have to use numbers, try to round them off. However, there are cases when it is absolutely necessary to give the exact figures and numbers down to the decimal points – particularly when reporting election results, inflation rates or exchange rates.
- Percentage rates often sound very abstract. Wherever possible, try to find different expressions for them: '50 percent' can also be described as 'half', '200 percent' are 'twice' or 'double'.
- Draw comparisons to visualise information about size and/or distance. If, for example, you mention that a building site is 'about the size of two football fields', listeners will visualise this better than if you say the size in square metres.
- If possible, write your news in the active voice. This will make the news item sound livelier and more natural. The passive voice often sounds like an official announcement: dry and boring.
- There are no quotation marks on the radio – unlike in print. So if you quote someone, use a phrase like 'end of quote' to tell the listeners where the quote ends and where your journalistic text continues. Or better yet: use indirect speech.

## The form of the individual news items

Your station or news department should decide on a common policy regarding how all news items should begin. There are various options. Each item:

- simply starts with its lead sentence
- is preceded by a date-line (e.g. New York: ..., Berlin: ..., Moscow: ...)
- is preceded by a buzzword (e.g. Demonstrations: ...)
- is preceded by a full headline (e.g. Demonstrations over plant turn violent ...)

## The form of the news bulletin as a whole

It's just as important for your station or news desk to agree on a uniform design for all news bulletins as it is to define a certain format for each individual news item. Once again, you have numerous options:

- Musical introduction of the news broadcast (news jingle/intro)
- Music underlying the whole news bulletin
- Short jingles between the individual news items
- A short overview of the most important news headlines at the beginning and/or at the end of the bulletin
- The weather report at the beginning or at the end of the bulletin
- Giving the name of the editor at the beginning and/or end
- Giving the exact time before and/or after the news bulletin

## Stumbling blocks

### Lack of distance

Carelessness in writing the news can easily lead to using tainted words and phrases. This means that you lose your professional distance and neutrality.

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**not good:** *Today, the contract for the construction of the new pharmaceutical factory was finally signed.*

The word 'finally' creates the impression that the journalist was hoping the contract would be signed. However, this sentiment may not be shared by many of the residents of BIGTOWN. It is not neutral.

**better:** *The contract for the construction of the new pharmaceutical factory was signed today after weeks of negotiations.*

**not good:** *The demonstrators are protesting against pollution that will be caused by the new factory.*

Will the factory really pollute the environment or is this primarily the opinion of the environmentalists?

**better:** *The demonstrators are protesting because they believe the new factory will be harmful to the environment.*

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### Biased instead of neutral words

When we try to add colour to our news language, we can easily make the mistake of introducing tainted words. For instance, we may sometimes grow tired of using the word ‘say’ (says, said, etc.) in our news over and over. So we start replacing ‘say’ with words like ‘emphasise’, ‘explain’, ‘claim’, ‘highlight’ or ‘underline’. But unfortunately, none of these words is as neutral as the word ‘say’. Each of them will taint your news item in a certain way.

### Sticking to press releases, agencies and other texts

News items often sound artificial and stilted because the news editors copied a lot of text from the original source material – for instance from an agency report or press release. But such texts are hardly ever written in good radio news language. And very often, they’re not objective – especially in the case of press releases. So it’s your job as a news editor to translate this material into neutral and easily understandable news language.

It’s best to read the original agency report or press release, write down some key points and then put the source material aside. Without constantly glancing at the original text, it will be easier for you to rephrase the information in proper news language.

**02**

# Writing for radio

## Introduction

When writing a script for the radio, you should always bear one thing in mind: you are writing for listeners – not for readers. The listeners will only hear your text once and they will have to understand it immediately. Readers of a newspaper or an online article can read sentences that they do not understand two or three times. They can even look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary. In addition, readers can process the information at their own pace. Some people are slow readers, others will just scan an article. In radio, however, the speed at which the listeners have to digest the information is determined by the speaker. And everyone has to listen to everything.

### Differences between reading and listening

Reading	Listening
Reading is a primary activity; when we read, we only concentrate on the text	Listening is frequently a secondary activity; listeners often do not fully concentrate on what is being said
Readers can read an article at any time they like	Listening to the radio depends on the broadcast times
Readers can re-read information they do not understand	Listeners only hear information once
Readers can determine how fast they read and when to take a break	Listeners have to follow the speed of the speaker or radio journalist; if they stop listening for a moment, they miss pieces of information
Readers see how long an article is and can decide whether they want to read the whole text	Listeners never know what comes next in the report

Radio texts have to be well presented, logically structured and easy to understand. If listeners stumble over unfamiliar words or cannot follow your train of thought, you lose their attention. And even if the listeners are only disoriented

for a moment, the speaker on the radio meanwhile continues reading. So it will be difficult for the listeners to catch up with the context, once they are ready to concentrate again. Ultimately, much of your message will be lost on the listeners.

## How is it done?

Radio scripts are not literature. In radio, simplicity wins. Simple words, clear short sentences and a logical structure are necessary to get information across. Radio scripts should be informal, direct and polite. When you write your script and when you present it on the air, imagine that you are talking to one individual listener: your neighbour, your friend or your aunt. Think of how you would tell them the information which you are about to give. What words would you use? What is the first thing you would tell them, and what would you mention later?

When you present your script on the air, don't think of the hundreds or thousands of listeners who might have tuned in – think of that one concrete person: imagine him or her sitting across from you in the studio. Talk as if you were addressing just that one person. You will discover that your presentation will be much more direct and animate.

Radio language should be very close to spoken language. Write as you would speak. However, this does not mean that you can slip into colloquial slang. Aim for straightforward simplicity and avoid long, complicated sentences and specialist jargon. When writing your script, you should always know what language is appropriate for your target group. If you use words that your listeners do not understand or language that they find offensive, you alienate them and will not get your message across. You need to keep in mind what your listeners' religious, moral and ethnic sensibilities are. What words are taboos? Carelessness can cause great harm and damage your radio station's image and credibility.

### Make short sentences

Research shows that listeners find it difficult to understand sentences with more than 15 words. Your listeners should not feel like the Spartans once felt in Ancient Greece. After they sat through a long speech delivered by a messenger from the Island of Samos, they said: "We forgot what he said in the beginning and did not understand the end because we couldn't remember the beginning."

---

**not good (sentence too long):** *The globally active pharmaceutical group PILLCO, which – at its Supervisory Board meeting on Friday of last week – finally decided*

*to go ahead with the construction of a new factory in BIGTOWN, reassured local environmentalists who had originally voiced concerns that pollution filters would be integrated in the smokestacks of the factory so that emissions would not endanger the residents.*

**better (several short sentences):** *PILLCO announced last night that it would integrate pollution filters into the smokestacks of the new factory in BIGTOWN. According to PILLCO, these filters will prevent emissions from endangering the residents. PILLCO decided to go ahead with building the new pharmaceutical factory in BIGTOWN last week. But local environmentalists voiced concerns.*

---

### Repeat important terms

It is confusing for radio listeners, if you replace nouns or names with pronouns. It is better to repeat the name or noun. This may not sound elegant, but it guarantees clarity.

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**not good:** *The PILLCO Group did not find the decision an easy one. In its considerations, it not only had to take the international market conditions into account, but also had to consider whether qualified manpower was available. Following careful deliberation of all these points, it came to the conclusion that the BIGTOWN site offered ideal production conditions.*

By the time you've reached the second sentence, listeners no longer know what 'it' refers to. You've confused them and have lost their attention. In this case it is therefore better to repeat the term – either 'the company' or 'PILLCO'.

---

### Synonyms, foreign words and abbreviations

Radio language should be lively. But it is even more important that it should be understood immediately. Synonyms may seem like a good idea to make a script livelier – but in fact, they often confuse the listeners. For instance, when you are writing a script about the United States Department of Defense, it might not be a good idea to use the synonym 'Pentagon'. Not all of your listeners would know this term. And if they do not know that the U.S. Department of Defense is also called the Pentagon, they will not understand the information that you are trying to convey. Similarly, if you talk about Hong Kong in a script and then replace the city's name with the synonym 'the former British crown colony', listeners may be confused. If in doubt, you should always repeat a name or term that your listeners already know. It's better to say 'Hong Kong' in three consecutive sentences than to use confusing synonyms. In radio – unlike in literature – redundancy is good. It promotes easy understanding.

Avoid using foreign words. Do not base your manuscript on what words you understand, instead try to think whether your listeners will understand it. If there is no alternative for using a foreign word, you should provide a translation or an explanation of the word in question.

If you use abbreviations or acronyms in your script, you should say the full name or explain the abbreviation at least once. Not all listeners will know what the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) is or what NGO (non-governmental organisation) stands for.

## Numbers and figures

Radio is not the medium for detailed figures and numbers. Printed texts or online articles are much better for conveying this kind of information. Therefore it is better to concentrate on just two or three key figures in a radio script – those that are absolutely necessary – and leave the rest to the printed press or online articles. If you have to mention numbers or figures in your script, it's usually better to round the numbers off if this is possible without changing the information content of your message.

---

**not good:** *PILLCO plans to invest 78.89 million Euros in this country.*

**better:** *PILLCO plans to invest almost 80 million Euros in this country.*

**not good:** *7,123 people have signed a petition against the new factory.*

**better:** *Well over 7,000 people have signed a petition against the new factory.*

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However, there are cases in which it is essential to give the listener exact numbers and figures – sometimes up to the second or third decimal point. This applies particularly to election results, inflation rates and wage agreements. Percentages frequently sound abstract to radio listeners. Wherever possible, try to find different expressions: '50 percent' can also be described as 'half', '200 percent' as 'twice' or 'double'.

## Comparisons

When you talk about sizes, amounts or quantities of objects, it helps radio listeners visualise what you are saying if you draw comparisons. If, for example, you mention that a building site is 'roughly the size of two football fields', most listeners will be able to visualise this better than if you tell them the size in square metres. If, however, your listeners have never seen a football field, this comparison will obviously not work for your script. It is important that you draw your comparisons from your listeners' frame of reference – things they know and can relate to.

## Graphic language

Using descriptive words and expressions is essential for a radio script. Keep in mind that your only tool to convey information to your listeners is the medium of sound – words. You cannot show them colourful pictures, like a television journalist would. And you cannot use graphics, charts or drawings, like a newspaper or online journalist would. You have to put all the information these visual media contain into your words. That's why it is crucial to use visual and descriptive language. You are the listeners' eyes. Describe to them what you see when you are reporting on location. But you are also the listeners' ears, nose and taste buds. Don't just describe what something looks like, explain what it smells, feels or tastes like as well.

## Active verbs

If possible, write your radio script in the active voice. This will make it sound livelier and less stilted. The passive voice often makes texts sound like official announcements: boring and stiff.

---

**not good:** *A contract between PILLCO and city officials will be signed later today.*  
**better:** *PILLCO and city officials will sign a contract later today.*

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## Quotes

When you are quoting what someone said in your script, your listeners cannot see where you've put the quotation marks. They may sometimes not understand where the quote begins and where it ends. It is not enough to indicate where a quote begins and where it ends through your intonation. If the statement is a short and snappy one you can say 'quote' and 'end of quote' at the beginning and at the end. Otherwise it is better to change direct into indirect speech.

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**indirect speech:** *PILLCO president John Miller said that the factory would bring wealth and prosperity to the people of BIGTOWN.*  
**direct quotation:** *PILLCO president John Miller said – quote – This factory will bring wealth and prosperity to the people of BIGTOWN – end of quote.*

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## The structure of a radio script

The fact that everything spoken on the radio can only be heard once and therefore needs to be understood immediately also has an effect on the structure of the manuscript. Imagine that you have to take your listeners by the hand and lead them through the topic – on a straight path, without wandering off to the right or left. Spare your listeners detours, do not bother them with insignificant side-lines. For your manuscript, this means: a clear structure which informs and does not confuse.

### Strong introduction

Always start with a strong opening, which catches the listeners' attention, arouses their interest and makes them want to hear more about this topic. A slow, boring introduction will make listeners switch off and turn their attention to other things.

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**not good:** *Yesterday evening, PILLCO – following extensive negotiations – confirmed that the residents of BIGTOWN, whose houses will be demolished to make room for the new pharmaceutical factory, will receive financial compensation.*

The introduction 'yesterday evening' gives listeners the impression that you are about to present them old news. Their interest in the subject will automatically fade. In addition, the wording sounds stiff and the sentence is much too long.

**better:** *Residents of BIGTOWN are breathing a sigh of relief: everyone whose house has to be torn down to make room for the new factory will get financial compensation. PILLCO confirmed this last night. The decision was made following extensive negotiations.*

The introduction 'residents of BIGTOWN are breathing a sigh of relief' catches the listeners' attention. They immediately ask: 'Why can they breathe a sigh of relief?' You have aroused their interest and they want to know more about the topic.

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The strong opening is followed by the main facts. Afterwards, your report should discuss the background and further details. The script ends with a conclusion and/or an outlook.

### The main facts

- The people whose houses will be demolished will receive money
- How much money will they receive?
- When will they receive it?
- When will their houses be torn down?

### Further details

- Do the affected residents have to apply for compensation?
- Which office/body is responsible?
- Are there deadlines?

### Background information

- Why are the buildings being demolished and residents moved elsewhere?
- What will happen with the land?
- Has there been any reaction to PILLCO's announcement yet?
- What do the supporters of the project say on the matter?
- What do its opponents say?

### Summary/Conclusion

- After years of debate, PILLCO and BIGTOWN will go ahead with the project
- What does the current situation mean for PILLCO?
- Will the opponents of the project give up now?

## The outward appearance of the radio script

When writing a radio script, the contents and structure are undoubtedly the most important factors. However, if you want to get your message across to the listeners, it is also important how you present your piece. It's helpful if your script is easy to read. This will make a good and lively presentation possible. You can focus totally on the text and the presentation instead of battling with unnecessary obstacles. Here are some helpful hints:

### Only write on one side of the paper

If you have to turn the pages of your script to read text on the reverse sides, your listeners will hear you rustling the pieces of paper. This unwanted sound will distract them. In addition, you may get confused whether you've already read both sides of the paper. You can make things easier for yourself if you just write on one side. You can then put each page aside once you have read it and don't have to look if there is anything written on the reverse side.

## Define space between the lines and clear paragraphs

Generous space between the lines of your text will make it easier for you to focus on the text while you are reading it on the air. It will prevent you from accidentally slipping into the wrong line. If you leave space between the lines of your text, you can add pronunciation and intonation marks over or under the words. Clearly define paragraphs within your text. This visual aid will show you at first sight where to pause and take a breath.

## Write legibly

When you are reading an illegible script on the air, you have to focus mainly on deciphering the text. Your pronunciation and intonation will not be lively. It's very likely that you will stumble over certain words or phrases that are hard to read. Listeners will think that this sounds unprofessional. Their attention will be diverted from the contents of your report.

## Avoid words and expressions that are hard to pronounce

When writing a text, avoid words that you might stumble over later, when you present the text on the air. If you think you could have a problem pronouncing a certain word, choose a simpler one. Numbers and figures can also be linguistic stumbling blocks, especially large numbers. It helps if you write out 'thousand', 'million' and 'billion' in words rather than figures. It's easier to read 'two million' than to see a figure like '2,000,000' and have to count the zeroes to figure out whether you are dealing with millions or billions.

## Check the script

If you stick to the above-mentioned tips and tricks, you should have a radio script that looks virtually impeccable. But before you can present it in the studio, you should read it aloud at least once. This way you will discover which sentences may be too long, where you may have the odd unpronounceable word and whether your report has the intended total length. Finally, ask a colleague to go over your script or to listen to you reading it aloud. Maybe your colleague will spot phrases or words that are hard to understand or do not make sense. Once you have been given the green light, you are ready to go into the studio and present your text on the air.

## The use of sound clips

Sound clips make news or a report livelier, more interesting and more authentic. But not all sound clips are good and make sense. Before you use a sound clip, you should consider whether it will truly provide listeners with new insights. Ask yourself these core questions:

**Can I say what the sound clip contains better, simpler or clearer?**

yes > do not use sound clip

no > use sound clip

**Does the sound clip contain something that I, as a neutral reporter, may not express (e.g. opinion, emotions)?**

yes > use sound clip

no > do not use sound clip

### Sound clips should be unique

Using sound clips makes sense if they contain, for example, strong feelings, expressions of opinion or humour/wit. Sound clips are also unique if they tell something about the personality of the interviewee, if they are witness reports or historical sound documents.

### Sound clips are not for background information

Essentials like facts and background information should be part of your text, not part of the sound clip. As a journalist, you have been professionally trained to present a subject in clear and easy words. Therefore you – not the interviewee – are the one who should provide the listeners with the facts.

### Be careful with expert language in sound clips

Journalists often use sound clips when they have to report about complex subject matters, e.g. complicated scientific or business topics. Frequently, the journalists themselves have not fully understood all details and aspects of these issues. But they fear that they might be unable to translate the specialists' jargon into generally understandable language. Such sound clips containing expert lingo are usually incomprehensible for the listener. It is better to leave them out. If the journalist cannot understand what is being said, then chances are that most listeners will not either. If you are doing interviews and the interviewees talk to you in a language only experts will understand, immediately ask them to rephrase their ideas using simple words.

## Be careful with the introduction of sound clips

When leading into a sound clip, journalists frequently make the mistake of saying exactly the same things that the listener will hear again from the interviewee. This is a waste of time and it is boring for the listener. Instead, guide the listener towards the statement of the sound clip. Explain who is speaking and what they are speaking about, but do not summarise what the statement is about in advance.

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### **not good:**

Journalist: *Minister M believes the construction of the new factory will create jobs and provide economic impetus for the city.*

M: *As the minister in charge, I believe that the construction of the new factory will create a large number of jobs for our city. This will provide economic impetus for our city.*

### **better:**

Journalist: *Although the construction of the new factory is contentious, Minister M believes the positive aspects outweigh the negative.*

M: *As the minister in charge, I believe that the construction of the new factory will create a large number of jobs for our city. This will provide economic impetus for our city.*

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## Sound clips should be neither too short nor too long

The listener needs time to adapt to the new voice. However, the sound clip should not be so long that it dominates the news bulletin or the report. In the case of news with clips, the sound clips should not be longer than 20 seconds.

For longer journalistic reports of between 2 and 4 minutes, each sound clip should be between 15 and 30 seconds long. For longer reports, e.g. in the case of a 30-minute feature, the sound clips could also be longer.

## At the end of the sound clip the voice should be down

The listener should hear that the interviewee has come to the end of their sentence and/or thought. If you cut a sound clip at a point where the interviewee's voice is up, the listener will suspect that the interviewee may have further expanded on his or her thought. So a statement cut in mid-sentence may sound like you are trying to keep something from the listener – manipulating what was actually said.



**03**

# The Report with Clips

## Introduction

Whenever journalists want to give their listeners information, they can make use of a number of different stylistic forms. These include news, interviews and reports, to name just a few. For reports, the same rules apply as for news: journalists have to stay objective. Their language must be precise and easy to understand. The words they choose have to be neutral – not loaded or emotional. The aim of a report is to inform the listeners objectively, to tell both sides of a story. This way, the listeners can form their own opinion based on the arguments and views presented.

Basically, there are two types of journalistic reports: straight reports without sound clips and reports with clips. In a straight report, the journalist tells the listeners about an event or issue and the various views and positions the key players have on it. The journalist quotes the arguments of the relevant parties in indirect speech. In contrast to this, the voices of the key players are heard as sound clips in a report with clips. They present their arguments or opinions in short sound bites: authentic and in their own words. As this journalistic format is very attractive to the listeners, we will focus on it in greater detail.

## Definition

The report with clips is an objective, informative journalistic report, which consists of the journalists' narration and sound clips. In the clips, the key players of the topic the report deals with present their arguments and voice their opinions.

Length: 2 to 5 minutes

## Strengths and weaknesses of the format

We produce reports and reports with clips when we want to cover a topic in greater detail than we could in the news. In a report with clips, we can convey information about complex topics on which there are various opinions, because the key players can voice their views themselves.

For the listener, a report with clips is more varied and more authentic than a simple report in which only the voice of the journalist will be heard. Each time a new voice appears in a report through sound clips, the voice change gets the listeners' attention and they will continue following the topic at hand with renewed interest. In contrast to this, a longer report only read by a journalist

or narrator can easily come across as monotonous and boring. If the audience hears the same voice over a longer period of time, it soon loses interest in the subject at hand.

Furthermore, sound clips lend credibility to what the journalist is reporting. The main participants themselves provide the listener with the most important arguments or opinions; hence, the listener knows that nothing has been incorrectly quoted or misinterpreted. In many cases, the voices of the key players are well known (e.g. politicians or celebrities). So reports with clips containing these well known voices are also more authentic for the listeners than reports without clips. Dialects and certain well-known speech patterns can add authenticity to a report with clips. In addition, sound clips are the best way to convey the emotions of the interviewees (e.g. of eyewitnesses).

Finally, background ambience sounds included on the tape while recording the sound clip will make such a report more authentic than a simple report. These background noises might occur, for example, if sound clips are recorded during a demonstration, in parliament, near moving water or in a room with specific acoustics. This always conveys to the listener that the journalist was actually at the scene of the event in question, and that makes the overall journalistic report more attractive and more credible than a dry report.

Of course, a report with sound clips also has disadvantages versus a simple report, an interview or news. The most important disadvantage: it is very time-consuming to produce. Journalists not only have to research the topic, they must also identify the most important parties involved, contact them and conduct interviews with them or acquire statements from them.

From this raw material, journalists must then select and edit the best sound clips. Then they have to write their narration linking the selected sound clips and presenting the necessary information, and finally they have to mix their spoken text and the sound clips in the studio or on the computer to create the final product. All in all, this requires considerably more time and demands more sophisticated technical facilities than does a straight report. It is not possible to produce reports with sound clips without a functioning mobile recording device (portable tape recorder, cassette recorder, mini-disc recorder, etc.) and a production studio or audio-editing computer.

Furthermore, please keep in mind that not every sound clip is automatically a good sound clip (> page 25 ff.). If the interview partners are unable to state their views in an understandable way, it is better not to use the sound clip. In such cases, it's better to summarise what has been said. In addition to this, you should not use sound clips if the interview partners are difficult to understand due to the way they speak (e.g. dialect or speech impediment) or if the technical quality of the sound clips is poor (e.g. poor recording device, unclear telephone line or loud background noise).

A further drawback of sound clips is that they may distract the listener from the information you are trying to get across in your report. In a straight report, you are the one who determines the logical order in which the information is presented. And you choose the words to convey the information according to journalistic principles. In a report with sound clips, however, this sequence of events and the choice of words is dependent on the existing sound material.

### Strengths and weaknesses of a report with clips

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Lively (different voices)</li> <li>+ Credible (the key players present their views and opinions themselves)</li> <li>+ Authentic (emotions, strong statements of opinion, dialects, background ambience sounds)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time-intensive and technically complex (research topic, contact interviewees, conduct interviews, edit, final production)</li> <li>- Not all interviewees can provide good sound clips</li> <li>- Sound clips can distract from the core of the information</li> </ul>

### How is it done?

Producing a report with sound clips requires the following steps:

#### Research topic

What is it about? Who is affected by this topic? How has this topic developed in the past and what is likely to happen in the future? What are the most important contentious issues?

## Identify relevant and suitable interview partners

Who are the relevant parties within the context of this topic? What opinions do they represent? Which of these key players are willing to be interviewed and can be reached? Which of them are able to give good statements about this topic? If the key players are not available for interviews: who else can say something on this topic?

## Contact interview partners, agree on dates and venues

In many cases, it is not immediately possible to get statements from all relevant parties. Some interview partners do not have the time or the desire to speak to journalists. Journalists may have to go out of their way to visit their interviewees. This takes time and costs money – so make provisions for this when planning the report. Inform your interview partners that you will only be using some excerpts (statements) of the interview in your report. Your interviewees must be aware of the fact that you will not be broadcasting the entire interview.

## Conduct interviews

Only conduct short interviews. Two or three precise questions should be enough to get some good sound clips. The more raw material you return to the studio with, the more you will have to listen to and screen, hence the more time you will lose. Even during the interview, bear in mind that you will need short, concise statements for your report with clips. If your interviewees phrase their thoughts in a manner that is too long-winded or complicated, ask them to repeat what they have just said in a more concise way that will be generally understood. You can also record sound clips at a press conference, during a speech or at other public appearances. Be careful with sound clips that you record from broadcasts by other radio or television stations! You might be infringing on copyright laws.

## Listen to interviews

When listening to your recordings, jot down at which points the interviewees say something that can be used as a sound clip. Write down the exact words – especially the first and last words of the statements – so that you will be able to lead into the clip with good narration and ensure that the text following the sound clip picks up where the interviewee left off (> page 25 ff.).

### **Transfer sound clips and edit**

If the production is analogue (on tape), you will have to transfer your sound clips from cassette to tape so that you can edit them. If the production is digital, you need to transfer the sound clips to the editing computer so that you can work on them with audio-editing software. Do not transfer the entire interviews, just the parts containing the sound clips you plan to use in your report. This saves time. Some journalists prefer to transfer and edit their sound clips only after they have written and recorded their own narration texts. But this depends on personal preference and the technical facilities of the broadcaster (studio availability; independent PC editing, or analogue editing with a tape machine – either with or without a sound technician).

### **Write text**

Write your narration texts around the sound clips. Your link text should provide all the necessary facts and create bridges between the sound clips. Ensure that you identify all speakers with their name, function, and, if necessary, their title so that the listener always knows who is speaking.

### **Record voice tracks**

Record your journalistic narration text in the studio. Leave short pauses at the points where you want to insert the sound clips.

### **Final production**

Insert the sound clips into the tape or sound file containing your narration. The report with sound clips is finished. To be on the safe side, listen to the entire report one final time to ensure that all transitions are correct and the report is logical and understandable.

## Stumbling blocks

### Clips from only one side

Often, we may not be able to get sound clips from all relevant parties.

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In the report on the planned new factory, you have a sound clip from an opponent of the project (e.g. from a local resident who will have to move out of his house), but no sound clip from a person in favour of the scheme (e.g. from a representative of the multinational corporation that wants to build the factory).

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In such cases, you yourself will have to summarise the arguments of the party that does not appear in a sound clip in your narration. Even if you were not able to get interviews with all the key players, you have to present all relevant views on the topic to your listeners. Your reporting must always stay neutral and objective. If one of the parties refuses to talk to you, you may mention this in your report. The listeners can then draw their own conclusions.

### Clips too long

As we discussed before, a sound clip should not be longer than 15–30 seconds (> page 32 ff.). But often, the statements we want to use are longer. If, for example, an interviewee needs 60 seconds to make his or her point, you may be able to shorten the clip by only using its first sentences, then transcribe the next two or three sentences in indirect speech and go back into the last part of the sound clip.

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#### Continuing sound clip (too long for the listener)

Resident R: *I have lived in this neighbourhood all my life and feel at home here. Every stone in these streets harbours memories for me. I belong here. I know where to shop around here, where I can meet my girlfriend in the evening and where the local doctor is. My grandparents also lived in this neighbourhood. My parents live in the house next door and all my relatives live close by. If we are now moved to skyscrapers on the edge of town, we will all be torn apart. Besides, my parents are much too old to adapt to a new environment now. If they were evicted from their old house, the worry and upheaval would probably kill them.*

#### Interrupted sound clip (same statement, but greater variety)

Resident R: *I have lived in this neighbourhood all my life and feel at home here. Every stone in these streets harbours memories for me. I belong here. I know where to shop around here, where I can meet my girlfriend in the evening and where the local doctor is.*

*Journalist: Mr. R adds that his grandparents also lived in the neighbourhood. His parents live in the house next door and all his relatives live close by.*

*Resident R: If we are now moved to skyscrapers on the edge of town, we will all be torn apart. Besides, my parents are much too old to adapt to a new environment now. If they were evicted from their old house, the worry and upheaval would probably kill them.*

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04

## The Interview

## Introduction

In our daily lives, we all speak with other people – mostly to exchange information and to find out what's new. And even if we are not aware of it: we are constantly conducting interviews. “How are you?” – “Oh, not too good today.” – “Why not, what's wrong?” – “I wanted to go on vacation, but I couldn't.” – “And why not?” – “My wife is sick.” – “What's wrong with her?” etc. Such a question-and-answer game is nothing unusual and we conduct it with ease in our everyday lives. So, why should conducting a radio interview be any different? After all, it is not difficult to ask questions and those who ask should also get answers. In a journalistic interview, this isn't always the case. One crucial difference is the time factor. In radio, the time we are given to get the relevant information from our interview partner is limited. Often, radio interviews will only be two or three minutes long. Therefore, only a journalist who asks the right questions can expect to get good answers within this timeframe. Interviewing people is an art that can be mastered, if certain fundamental rules are followed.

## Definition

The interview is a focussed exchange of questions and answers with the objective of acquiring information. It aims to get comprehensive and clear information from the interview partner within the shortest possible time. An interview can be conducted with the intention of broadcasting the complete exchange of questions and answers. An interview can also be conducted in order to research information or to record individual statements for news items or reports. One thing holds true for any interview: the interviewee is the main person. His or her answers are the most important thing in the interview. We journalists only ask questions on behalf of the listeners – the questions they would ask the interview partner if they had a chance to talk to him or her. Our questions should be short and precise and directly targeted to reach our information goal. We have to stay unbiased and should avoid getting emotional. Our personal opinions must not shine through at any time during the interview.

Length: between 3 and 20 minutes

## Strengths and weaknesses of an interview

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ Authentic, credible</li><li>+ First-hand information, opinions and emotions</li><li>+ Contains spontaneous, unplanned elements that are surprising and attractive for the listener</li><li>+ Makes the programme lively</li><li>+ Cheap and quick to produce</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Risk of confusing the listener if you do not strictly adhere to a logical structure</li><li>- Only presents one person's opinion</li><li>- It can be difficult for the journalist to stay in control of the interview – especially when dealing with very experienced interview partners</li><li>- Experts have a tendency to use jargon; here, the journalist has to intervene and ask the expert to repeat the information using simpler words</li></ul>

## Different forms of interviews

There are various forms of an interview. The distinguishing factor between them is the information goal that you are trying to reach.

### Interviews to be broadcast as a whole

#### Information interview

The aim of an information interview is to find out facts and figures about a certain topic. The interviewee's views on the topic or his personality are not relevant, what counts is his or her expertise. Therefore, the interview partners in information interviews are mostly experts, politicians or people directly involved in a topic.

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The international pharmaceutical company PILLCO has negotiated a contract with the regional government about the rehousing of the residents of BIGTOWN, which will be signed by the responsible parties today. The listeners should find out what exactly PILLCO and the city have agreed on in this contract.

Interviewees could be representatives of PILLCO, but also someone working for the local administration or the mayor.

Question: *What environmental protection measures are specified in the contract?*

Answer: *The Environmental Ministry has defined maximum quotas for harmful emissions, and these must not be exceeded. The same applies to waste water that flows into the general waste water network.*

Question: *How will you be able to ensure that PILLCO will stick to these limits?*

Answer: *This is also outlined in the contract. An independent institute will carry out measurements every six months.*

### Opinion interview

The objective of this type of interview is to find out the opinion or viewpoint of the interviewee on a specific issue, event or development.

The contract between the pharmaceutical company PILLCO and the city on the construction of a new factory in BIGTOWN has been finalised. But now there are new problems: The residents of BIGTOWN are demonstrating because their homes will be demolished and because they will have to be rehoused. The citizens' group Initiative Against Rehousing wants to appeal to the courts to halt the project. And environmentalists are protesting against potential environmental damage. Will PILLCO still go through with the project? To find out how the chairman C of the company's Board of Directors feels about these new problems, you conduct an opinion interview.

Question: *Mr. C, in view of the emerging difficulties, what is your stance on the demands to scrap the plans for building the new factory?*

Answer: *Scrapping the plans to build the factory is out of the question. I believe that these demands are without substance. The current situation has primarily arisen because representatives of the city did not inform the residents of the benefits that building the new factory will bring for them: jobs, new homes and an improved social environment.*

Question: *How do you rate your chances if this matter ends up in court?*

Answer: *I am not worried about any potential court case. Company lawyers drafted the contracts very carefully. Everything is watertight.*

## Personality interview (portrait)

Here, the focus is on the personality of the interview partner. The questions mainly deal with the life, character and experiences of the interviewee.

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In recent weeks, the spokesperson S of the citizens' group Initiative Against Rehousing has become the figurehead of the protests and turned into a prominent figure in BIGTOWN. Listeners already know a lot about his activities, but very little about him personally. You would like to change this and conduct a personality interview with him.

*Question: Mr. S, you have practically become the spearhead of resistance against rehousing for the residents of BIGTOWN. How come you got so involved in this issue?*

*Answer: This whole struggle is about fighting injustice. Even as a child, injustice was the worst thing for my brother and me. We learned this from our parents.*

*Question: So, what forms of injustice did you witness as a child?*

*Answer: Well, for instance, if a teacher punished one of my classmates without reason, I would stand up and support that classmate.*

---

In practice, a clear-cut distinction between these different forms of interviews is not always possible. And sometimes it is not even desirable. Most of your interviews will contain elements of different forms – for example an opinion interview with some information questions thrown in. But it helps you stay on track with your questions if you define your interview goal beforehand and if you know which interview format will lead you to that goal. If you have not clearly defined your interview goal, your questions and the interviewee's answers will get side-tracked and your listener will get confused.

## Interviews as tools

The three interview formats we have dealt with so far are conducted and recorded so that they can be broadcast as a whole. But journalists also conduct interviews for research purposes or to get some isolated statements for a report with clips.

## Research interview

If you want to research or double-check information, you conduct a research interview. This kind of interview is usually not broadcast. Your only aim is to get additional information that you will use for writing a report, a commentary or a news item.

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Environmentalists say that the factory that PILLCO wants to build in BIG-TOWN will pollute the air. You have heard that PILLCO plans to invest around one billion Euros in environmental protection measures. But you don't know what exactly these measures will be. To find out, you conduct a research interview with a representative of PILLCO with the goal of confirming the amount to be invested in environmental protection measures and getting more information about the kind of measures that PILLCO plans to take.

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### Statement interview

This type of interview is designed to yield an individual statement that will become part of another journalistic piece, e.g. a sound bite for a report or a news item.

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You are writing a report on the fact that the construction of the new pharmaceutical factory will require the demolition of homes and the rehousing of residents. You conduct an interview with the chairman C of PILLCO's Board of Directors and one with the spokesperson S of the citizens' group Initiative Against Rehousing. Then you take the strongest statements from the interviews and use them as sound bites for your report.

*C: All residents who will be rehoused can rest assured that they will get modern new homes that are affordable.*

*S: We don't believe a word of what the company is saying. PILLCO has never kept any promises that it made in the past.*

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## How is it done?

### Preparing the interview

First, you have to research the topic of your interview. Focus on just one topic. Don't ask questions about side aspects – otherwise your interviewee will get carried away and the listeners will be confused. Next, you should define your interview goal. Ask yourself what the listeners want to know about this topic and what information is relevant for them. Do your research properly. Nothing is more embarrassing than if an interviewee corrects mistakes in your questions during an interview or if your interview partner gets away with making false statements because you did not know enough about the topic and did not realize how you were being manipulated or tricked. And finally: Define a lead question for the interview as a whole.

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**Lead question:** ‘How will PILLCO fulfil the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract?’

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You might not actually ask this question in your interview. But your interview as a whole should serve to answer the lead question. Every question and answer should add a little piece to the puzzle, so that at the end, the listener sees the whole picture – and has the answer to the lead question. In order to reach this goal, the following steps are necessary:

### Selecting the interviewees, the venue and time

The success and failure of an interview depends largely on choosing the right interview partners. There are many things you need to consider when deciding whom to interview: their expertise, their ability to explain things in a straight-forward way, their position and views with regard to the topic of the interview. In addition, you need to know whether your interviewee will be available for the interview and willing to talk on the radio. It is also good to know beforehand whether your interview partner is someone who is quiet and shy or someone who will talk a lot during the interview.

The time of the interview will depend on the interviewee’s schedule or – if it is a live interview – on when your radio programme is on the air. If you are conducting the interview by telephone, you cannot influence where the interviewee will be when he or she answers your questions. However, if you are able to determine venue and time, remember that you need time for an interview. If either you or your interview partner feels rushed, the result will most likely be unsatisfactory. The venue is also important to reduce any inhibitions the interviewee may have.

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After having considered all possibilities, you decide to interview the chairman C of PILLCO’s Board of Directors. Your lead question is: ‘How will PILLCO implement the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract?’ He is likely to feel most comfortable in a familiar environment, e.g. in his office at the PILLCO company. The spokesperson S of the Initiative Against Rehousing, on the other hand, will probably give very lively answers if you interview him somewhere in BIGTOWN because he will associate this area with his fight.

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### Briefing the interviewees

Before you start conducting an interview, you should always brief your interviewee about some things:

- What is the topic and the focus of the interview?
- How long will the interview take?
- Will the interview be recorded or broadcast live?
- When will the interview be broadcast?
- Will it be broadcast as a whole or is it just a research or statement interview?
- When and where will the interview be conducted?
- Will it be a one-on-one interview, or will other interviewees or additional journalists be present?

One of the advantages of such an interview briefing is that you and your interview partner get to know each other. It can break the ice and reduce nervousness. You will also get an idea of how your interviewee answers questions: does he or she beat around the bush, go into great detail or are the answers short and to the point?

In your interview briefing, you should inform your interview partner about the topic and focus of the interview, but you should not discuss the questions you want to ask. If you go into too much detail, your interview partner might later, when you are recording, feel like everything has already been said. You run the risk that the answers will sound like they've been rehearsed or that your interview partner does not mention important information again. Only in the case of an extremely insecure or difficult interview partner can it make sense to discuss the first question beforehand. This may help to reduce the interviewee's anxiety.

Do not give your interviewee a list of the questions you plan to ask during the interview. You will lose control of the interview. If your interviewee asks for such a list, try to convince him or her that you will stick to the topic of the interview and that you will not ask any questions that are unfair. You may also tell your interviewee that your station never supplies the questions beforehand. If your interviewee still insists, you have two choices: you can tell him or her that you will look for a different interview partner. Faced with such prospects, interviewees sometimes decide that they will give the interview after all because they are eager to present their views on the radio. If you cannot find another qualified interview partner, give this interviewee a list of questions. Make sure to write 'list of some possible questions' on the top of it. This way you remain flexible to change the order, leave out questions or include others if the interview situation demands it.

## Different forms of questions

You will not get good answers if you ask unclear questions. To make sure that the interview will be successful, you should be familiar with some basic forms of questions. You ought to know what effect they will have and when to use them.

### Closed questions

#### Yes/no question

This form of question only allows a 'yes', 'no' or 'I don't know' answer. In most cases, you will have to ask a follow-up question to find out more. This can be a waste of time. Yes/no questions are good to pinpoint an interviewee on a certain topic, but they will not get the interviewee talking.

---

#### **not good:**

Question: *Mr. Mayor, do you believe PILLCO will fulfil the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract?*

Answer: *Yes.*

Question: *What makes you think that?*

Answer: *In the contract with PILLCO, these measures are described in great detail. In addition, we've also clearly defined penalty payments in the event that these measures are not adhered to.*

#### **better:**

Question: *Mr. Mayor, which environmental protection measures does PILLCO have to fulfil according to the contract?*

Answer: *The contract specifies that PILLCO has to stick to some precisely defined limits for emissions. If PILLCO exceeds these limits, the company will have to pay damages.*

---

In some cases, you may, however, choose to ask a closed question in order to get the interviewee to give a short, precise answer.

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Question: *Mr. Mayor, you have been accused of taking bribes in conjunction with the construction of the new pharmaceutical factory. Is this true?*

Answer: *No.*

You have intentionally chosen a closed question because you wanted a definite 'yes' or 'no' answer.

---

### Information question

This form of a closed question is used if you want to get a short and precise information. It is also suitable as a follow-up question or in order to specify an issue.

Question: *How many people will have to be rehoused?*

Answer: *According to our estimates it will be around 2,000.*

### Open questions

The answers to open questions are usually longer. You are giving the interviewee a chance to go into more detail, to explain the background, reasons, developments or personal opinions.

Question: *Why it is essential for the factory to be built in BIGTOWN?*

Answer: *BIGTOWN seemed the most suitable site because ...* (this is followed by various reasons for choosing the site)

### Special forms of question

#### Statement plus question:

The interviewer states a fact and then adds a question.

Question: *Most people in BIGTOWN are against rehousing. Why haven't you thought about building the factory somewhere else?*

You should only choose this form of question if you are absolutely sure that the fact you are stating is correct. If your statement is false or needs explanation, the interviewee will start a discussion about your incorrect statement instead of answering your question. You run the risk of the interview developing into an argument, something that you should avoid at all costs.

#### Suggestive question:

With a suggestive question, you are implying something in the hope that your interviewee will agree or disagree in a very lively way. This form of question can force the interviewee to take a stance and make the interview more dynamic.

Question: *Mr. Mayor, you are an ardent supporter of the new pharmaceutical factory and the rehousing project that will go with it. So you are ready to accept that many people will practically be uprooted?*

*Answer: No, of course I am not. I am very concerned about the well-being of the residents of this city. That's why the new apartments will be built close by. This will allow old neighbours to stay in touch with each other.*

---

But be careful: a suggestive question can sometimes be seen as a provocation by the interviewee. This could spoil the atmosphere of your interview. A disturbance on the relationship level of the interview will also affect the information level. If things turn sour, your interviewee might even refuse to answer or ask a counter-question. In the end, your listeners will perceive your questions as unfair or even aggressive.

### **Interpreting question**

If the interviewee is not clear in his or her answers or tries to get away without making a clear statement, you can offer a possible interpretation in a follow-up question. This would force the interviewee to take a stance and make the original answer understandable for the listener.

*Question: So that means the factory could not have been built in any other part of town?*

*Answer: Yes, that is what I think.*

This precise answer makes the interviewee's position clear for the listener.

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### **Indirect question**

In an indirect question, you confront your interviewee with a statement made by a third party. Usually, this statement will be in opposition to what the interviewee thinks or says. Since you can hide behind the critical remarks that someone else made, this method allows you to be somewhat confrontational without hurting the interview atmosphere.

*Question: Environmental groups say that the new factory will cause considerable air pollution. What is your response to such claims?*

*Answer: These claims are completely unsubstantiated. I can provide you with calculations that clearly show there is no risk at all.*

---

### **Sequence of questions**

The interview as a whole should answer a lead question (> page 41). Getting an answer to this lead question is the information goal of your interview. It is usually best to start an interview with a general question. This will give the interviewee a

chance to talk freely and to get used to the interview situation. Your first question should be interesting and new for your interviewee and for your listeners. If your first question is one that your interview partner has already answered frequently in other interviews, he or she will not develop much interest in your interview, will be bored and provide answers that sound like they've been rehearsed. However, if you ask your interview partner an unusual question as an opener, he or she will be drawn into the interview – and so will your listeners.

It is essential to get the listeners' attention from the start of an interview and to make them feel that it's worth their time to keep on listening. Radio listeners decide within the first 30 seconds of an interview whether they will keep listening or whether they will mentally switch off. So the first question of your interview will already determine whether you will have an interested and attentive audience or not. Do not open your interview with a question like 'Could you tell us something about ...?' or 'Would you like to say something about ...?'. Such questions are much too broad, too unfocused. Your interview partner can say whatever he or she likes and take the interview into any direction he or she desires. This will mean that you've lost control of the interview from the start.

One traditional form for an interview is the so-called funnel-structure. You start off with rather general questions. During the course of the interview, you get more and more specific, until you end with a yes/no question that pinpoints your interviewee. This way, your interview ends on a clear statement from the interviewee. And this will leave your listeners with the impression that the interview was worth their while because it left them with clear and concise information.

---

You are interviewing the chairman C of PILLCO's Board of Directors about the planned environmental protection measures. Your lead question is: How will PILLCO fulfil the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract?

Question: *Environmental protection is very important to the people of BIGTOWN with regard to the new factory. What aspects of environmental protection are important to you?*

Answer: *A clean and healthy environment is also important to the people at PILLCO. That's why PILLCO will do everything it can to make sure that the air, the water of the river and the ground will not be contaminated.*

Question: *But environmentalist groups in BIGTOWN are not convinced that you will be doing enough?*

Answer: *Well, what the environmental activists say is nothing but propaganda. Once the factory has been built, you will see that we'll stick to all the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract.*

Question: *Which measures are these exactly?*

Answer: *We will secure clean air by using state-of-the-art filtering systems.*

*We will also build a sewage facility to clean our waste water. This facility will operate independently from the public sewage system. This way we can ensure that no harmful substances can get into the public water system.*

Question: *How will you make sure that the environmental protection measures are implemented?*

Answer: *We have commissioned an independent institute to monitor this.*

*The institute is also approved by the local authorities.*

Question: *Do you believe that this will be sufficient to disperse the concerns of the residents and of the environmentalists?*

Answer: *Yes, I am sure of it. And I think that all the sceptics will be convinced once the plant is up and running.*

---

Do not stick to a sequence of questions that you may have prepared. Instead, try to derive your questions out of the answers you get. This way, the flow of the interview sounds natural and logical. It is vital that you listen to what your interviewee says. If you give interview partners the feeling that you are personally interested in their answers, they will give much livelier answers than if they feel that you are just ticking off a list of questions.

## Stumbling blocks

### Badly worded questions

#### Either/or question

If you ask an either/or question, you narrow your interviewee down to only two alternatives. But instead of the either-or alternative, your interviewee would possibly have mentioned a third option that you did not think of. Either/or questions will usually require follow-up questions. This wastes time and can be confusing to the listeners.

---

Question: *Are you against the construction of the new factory in principle or are you primarily concerned that PILLCO will violate the environmental protection measures?*

Answer: *Of course the environmental protection measures must be implemented. If this does not happen, the residents will be at risk.*

From this answer, you do not learn whether the environmentalist opposes the construction of the factory. You have to ask a follow-up question. This would not have been necessary if you had asked the question differently.

---

## Multiple questions

Multiple questions create confusion and lead to you losing control of the interview. Your interview partner can decide which part of the question he or she wishes to answer. It's better to always ask one question at a time.

Question: *How many jobs will the construction of the new factory create and what will this mean for the regional economy?*

Answer: *It will strengthen the regional economy. After all, some of the products manufactured in the new factory will be exported and that is good for this country's trade balance.*

The interviewee did not answer the question of how many jobs would be created. You will have to ask a follow-up question. This will waste time and interrupt the flow of the interview.

## Technical stumbling blocks

Interesting interview partners and clever questions are worthless if technical problems ruin your interview. Always make sure that your technical equipment is working before you start recording an interview. Test your recording device, your microphone and the levels before the interview. Always take a foam wind screen for your microphone with you to avoid wind noise. Check whether your batteries are charged and bring spare batteries. After the interview, check whether the recording is all right. Do this while your interviewee is still around. If you discover that technical problems have spoiled your recording, you may be able to convince your interview partner to repeat the interview.

## What to do if ...

### ... the interviewee's answers are too long?

Non-verbal interruption: Open your mouth and take a breath as if you wanted to start speaking. This will show your interview partner that you want to ask your next question. You could also indicate with your hand that you would like to say something.

Direct interruption: If the interviewee takes a breath, interrupt with 'but' and add a short, quick question like 'why?' or 'can you give an example?'. You can also interrupt by calling interviewees by their name: 'Mr./Mrs. X, ...'. For most people, hearing their own name is a quick stimulus. It will startle them and make them come to a halt.

### ... you would like to get your interviewee to continue talking?

Show your interview partner you are interested in what he or she is saying by nodding and keeping eye contact. This is normally interpreted by the interviewee as approval and will encourage him or her to continue talking. Sometimes it also works if you simply do not ask your next question when your interviewee has come to the end of his or her answer. Just look at him or her encouragingly, smile and nod. Your interviewee will usually find the silence awkward and continue talking.

### ... you panic, lose track of what is being said?

In such cases, you can ask a so-called parachute question. This is a question that works in almost any context – regardless of what the interviewee said before. Examples for parachute questions are: ‘Why?’, ‘What does that mean?’ or ‘What makes you so sure?’ The interviewee will usually reiterate what he or she said before and go into greater detail. This gives you enough time to overcome your initial panic, refocus and think up the next question. Another parachute question is: ‘Could you give an example?’ Or you could just simply repeat your interview partner’s last words and turn them into a question.

---

*Answer: Once the factory has been built, you will see that we’ll stick to all the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract. But what the environmental protection groups are saying is, of course, nothing but propaganda.*

*Question: Nothing but propaganda?*

*Answer: Yes! These environmental activists are really only interested in manipulating people with half-truths.*

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**05**

# The Vox Pop

## Introduction

Radio programmes are not an end in themselves – journalists don't produce them for their own self-fulfilment, but to meet the needs of their target group, the radio listeners. Journalists write news bulletins and reports to meet the listeners' information needs. And they produce music programmes or radio plays to entertain their audience. All of these journalistic formats have one thing in common: they are produced and presented by professionals. And the other voices that appear in the sound clips are most often those of politicians, experts or high-ranking people. The average listener hardly ever appears on the air – unless the programme uses vox pop. This expression is short for the Latin term *Vox populi* and means the 'voice of the people'. When this voice of the people is heard, the listeners know that normal people, very much like themselves, also have a place in radio broadcasting. They feel appreciated and taken seriously by the radio station. And this in turn strengthens the listeners' loyalty to the station.

## Definition

For a vox pop, journalists ask a number of randomly selected people the same question, collect the answers and string them together. The different answers create an idea of the variety of opinions existing within the population. Journalists usually conduct these one-question interviews in public places where you can find many different kinds of people. A vox pop is never a representative opinion poll, but merely a random selection of responses. A vox pop will make any programme more lively, entertaining and credible.

Length: 1 minute to 1 minute 30 seconds

## Strengths and weaknesses of the format

A vox pop never stands alone in a radio programme. It is always broadcast in combination with some other element, like an interview, a studio discussion or a report. If, for example, you want to conduct a studio interview with a politician, you can precede this interview with a vox pop. This way, you can refer to some of the peoples' answers when asking the interviewee. A short vox pop may also be used as part of a mini-feature or report.

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After asking ordinary people on the streets of BIGTOWN how they feel about the building of the new pharmaceutical factory, you use the answers to put together a vox pop. Afterwards, when you conduct your studio interview with the mayor,

you confront him with what the people said and refer to the vox pop in your first question: *Mr. Mayor, you have heard some of the residents' opinions. How do you feel about these?*

---

Using a vox pop also makes sense if you have a report in your programme about the press conference in which the mayor and the pharmaceutical company announced that the new factory would be built. In this report, the listeners find out what the officials have to say on this topic. But they do not know what the residents of the affected neighbourhood BIGTOWN think about the plans. Do they all agree with the project? Are there also critical voices? Or are the people indifferent about what is happening? Of course you could summarize in your own words that opinion about this project is divided among the population. But this way of presenting that information would be rather boring and not at all radiophonic. It is better to give the affected people a voice in your programme: let the listeners hear what the people say in a vox pop, which you can broadcast after the report. That way, the listeners get all the information on the various parties' opinions.

Vox pops are an instrument to present public opinion on the radio, and help make your programmes sound more dynamic. As the people voice their opinions spontaneously, they are often emotional, angry, funny or provide unexpected insights. The voices of average people lend your programmes more authenticity and credibility. Listeners can identify with the people they hear on the radio. After all, these are not politicians or experts who talk to them, but ordinary people – just like them.

### Strengths and weaknesses of the vox pop:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ Makes programmes more lively</li><li>+ Spontaneous statements, authentic and credible</li><li>+ Creates a close connection with the listener</li><li>+ Reflects public opinion</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- The people being interviewed may be shy and apprehensive about talking into a microphone; they may be unable to express themselves</li><li>- Vox pop cannot stand alone – it always has to be connected to another part of the programme</li><li>- Is not representative</li><li>- The production is very time-consuming</li></ul>

## How is it done?

### Selecting a topic

Before you decide to produce a vox pop, you should make sure that the topic lends itself to this format. The spectrum of possible topics ranges from politics, business, sports and religion to social issues and everyday problems. The best topics for vox pops are controversial issues that move the people. With these kinds of issues, you can be fairly sure that the answers you get from the people will be varied, interesting and usable. But other topics, such as consumer behaviour, recreational activities, etc. are also possible. What's important is that the issue must be topical and of general interest. If only a minority of your listeners is interested in the topic of the vox pop, you run the risk that the majority of your listeners will switch off. And it is very difficult to win back lost listeners.

---

You have chosen an issue that is topical, of general interest and – in this case – even controversial: the construction of the new pharmaceutical factory in BIGTOWN. In this vox pop, we want to document what residents of BIGTOWN think about having to leave their homes in order to make room for the new factory.

---

### How to ask the right question

Whether a vox pop turns out well or not depends largely on the kind of question you ask. It is important that you always ask the same question and that it is short and clear. Don't change the wording from one person to the next – after all, you want the answers to fit together, but they will not fit if you keep changing your question. Don't ask a closed question – a question to which people can only give 'yes' or 'no' answers. This would inevitably lead to further questions – and before you know it, you're caught up in a dialogue. Play through your question and possible answers with colleagues or friends before you go out to record your vox pop. This will help you see whether your question is well formulated and whether you can expect interesting answers.

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**not good** (closed question): *Do you mind having to leave BIGTOWN because of the construction of the new pharmaceutical plant?*

Answer: *Yes, I do mind.* or: *No, I don't mind.*

If you are lucky, the people may also give you an explanation. But it is also possible that the people you ask will turn around after the initial 'yes' or 'no', and simply walk away. You will have got an answer to your question, but not one that you can use.

**better** (open question): *How do you feel about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new pharmaceutical plant?*

This question makes a 'yes' or 'no' answer impossible. Instead, you will now get answers that clearly express the speakers' critical or positive attitudes:

Answer: *This whole issue makes me sick! They are treating us like dirt ...*

or: *I can't wait to get out of here. This way, I finally get a new apartment.*

*And maybe I'll even find a job at the new factory!*

---

Make sure that you are always neutral when formulating your question, so as not to influence the answers.

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**not good** (closed suggestive question): *I suppose you feel sad about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new factory?*

**better** (open question): *What are your feelings when you think about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new pharmaceutical plant?*

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## Where to record the vox pop

Choose a location for the vox pop where you will find many people and where you can get a variety of opinions. For the topic we selected in our example, the ideal location could be the market place in BIGTOWN or a supermarket. But make sure that there is not too much background noise at the location you choose. Although such background ambience sound can make your vox pop sound more authentic and lively, it can also drown out the answers if it gets too loud. If there is background ambience, it should be consistent. This way, you can later edit and paste together the individual statements without any noticeable breaks in the ambience sound. And this is why a market with its consistent buzz of activity is usually a good location for a vox pop – unlike a street with a lot of traffic. When you're recording answers for a vox pop on a street, the ambience sounds of passing cars could suddenly break off when you edit or rearrange your answers later on in the studio.

## How to approach your interviewees

Stand in front of the supermarket and wait for customers who are entering or exiting the store. It's a good idea to have your radio station's logo printed on the foam wind screen of your microphone. This way, the people you interview immediately know that they are talking to a journalist of a certain radio station. Do not try to ambush your interviewees – this hardly ever works. Instead, you run the risk that people feel overwhelmed, cornered and either give no answer at all, or give an answer that is completely unsatisfactory. Approach your potential interviewees,

address them in a friendly and polite manner, introduce yourself and explain what you are doing. Tell them that they will remain anonymous, i.e. that their name will not be mentioned. Accept the fact that some people will not want to talk to you. People passing sometimes do not have the time, are not interested or are too nervous and therefore do not want to answer any questions.

### Practical tips

Collect two or three times as many answers as you need for your vox pop. When listening to them, you will realize that some of them are repetitive, others may be unclear or boring, or that the technical quality may be rather poor in some cases. While still on location, note down which answers you might be able to use for your vox pop. This makes the subsequent editing process easier for you and saves you a lot of time.

### Editing your vox pop

Once you have collected a sufficient number of answers, the time-consuming work of editing can begin. Listen to all the answers you have recorded and select the ones you want to use for your vox pop. Then determine the order in which they sound best. To make the vox pop sound lively and interesting, you should have a good mix of voices and opinions: male, female, young, old, positive answers, negative answers. Cut out the parts of the recording where you asked your question.

A vox pop is always introduced by the host of the programme who tells the listeners what the question of the vox pop was. This studio introduction is then followed by the sequence of answers, strung together without any intermediate text or music.

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Host's introduction: *Our reporter R visited the marketplace in BIGTOWN. She asked people there how they felt about having to leave their homes because the new pharmaceutical plant will be built.*

Vox pop: *I am totally outraged. I can't even begin to say how angry I am. – I am so glad that I can finally leave this run-down neighbourhood. – The people responsible for this are nothing but crooks! I've lived here all my life and now they are forcing me to give up my home. – I really don't mind leaving my old neighbourhood if this means I'll find a new job! ...*

---

Start your vox pop with a very strong statement. A distinctive and convincing first answer will get the listeners interested in the topic and the rest of the vox pop.

They will want to know more about what the people in BIGTOWN say about this controversial issue.

Vary the length of the individual sound bites. But no answer should be longer than 20 seconds – even if it seems interesting. The total length of a vox pop should not exceed 1 minute and 30 seconds. If your vox pop is too long, the listener will get bored and lose interest.

End your vox pop with a strong answer. This creates the effect of a distinctive ending and leaves listeners with a feeling that it was worth listening to the whole vox pop. If you let your vox pop end on a shallow statement, listeners will think that less talk would have been enough.

### Example for the composition of a vox pop

Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Young	Old	Young	Young	Deep voice	High voice
Negative	Positive	Critical	Positive	Positive	Negative
20 sec	12 sec	8 sec	20 sec	12 sec	18 sec

## Stumbling blocks

### Answers too short

You have the impression that the interviewee wants to say something that could be interesting but is a little hesitant or afraid of the microphone. Be polite but persistent and ask a follow-up question or rephrase your original question and ask it again, but do not change the content of the initial question.

---

Question: *What are your feelings when you think about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new pharmaceutical plant?*

Answer: *I don't know.*

Follow-up question: *But surely you have given it some thought, haven't you?*

Answer: *Of course I have, but what can I say? The whole thing scares me, of course, because I don't know what the future will bring.*

If you delete the first part of the answer, you will have achieved your goal: despite the interviewee's initial hesitation, you have been able to record a strong statement.

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### Answers too long

The interviewees keep talking and it is impossible to stop their flow of words. Let them talk for a while and when you know that there's something in their long answer that you can use as a short excerpt, politely interrupt. When editing the vox pop, make sure that the voices are not up at the end of the sound bites. The statements should sound like the interviewees have come to the end of their sentence. Otherwise listeners will think you have cut an important part of the answer and are trying to manipulate what was actually said.

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*Question: What are your feelings when you think about having to leave BIGTOWN because of the new pharmaceutical plant?*

*Answer: Let me tell you something: this is not how this works. Just imagine it! Where would that lead us! I'm shocked and will not let this matter rest. After all, there are courts and I will definitely appeal to them. I have read in the newspaper that all this is not final yet. I heard there is a family that is in the same situation as I am now and they have gone to court ...*

From this point on, you can politely try to interrupt your interviewee because he's already given you a good and snappy statement that you can use. When you edit your vox pop later, you can delete the beginning and the end of the interviewee's long-winded answer.

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### Answers not spontaneous

A vox pop only comes alive if the interviewees give their answers spontaneously. Therefore, you should only briefly tell your interviewees what the topic is, ask your question and record the spontaneous answer. Do not enter into a discussion with the interviewees before you start recording. Otherwise, they might think they've already said everything when you finally press the record button. So the answers that you record then could be incomplete, sound boring or sound as if they have been rehearsed.

### Several answers at a time

Every now and then when you're recording a vox pop in a public place, interested passers-by might stop, listen to what's being said and want to have their say. Soon, everybody will be talking at the same time. If you are unable to quieten things down with a few polite words, you should stop recording. For a vox pop, you need clear answers from individuals and not a cacophony of voices.

## Answers not correctly edited

Edit the answers in the studio: delete long pauses if they break up the flow of the answer. Too many 'uhms' or 'ahs' can also be quite disturbing. It might be better to cut them out. Watch the levels on your recording equipment while you are recording the answers. If there are big gaps in the recording levels from one answer to the next, the finished vox pop will not sound smooth. If the levels jump from one answer to the next, you should try to readjust the levels in the studio – either with audio-editing software or by re-recording the whole vox-pop and readjusting the levels manually.

## Background noises

All statements for a vox pop should be recorded at the same location. If you need to change to a different location while recording the answers to your question, make sure that possible background sounds are approximately the same. Always remember: your finished vox pop should be one harmonious piece. If there are breaks in the background sounds, the vox pop will not flow along smoothly.

## Danger of manipulation

It is easy to manipulate a vox pop. If you yourself have a certain opinion about the topic of the vox pop, it is possible – consciously or subconsciously – to give it a certain slant. This can be done by asking a suggestive question or by editing the answers in a particular manner. But this is unethical. Make sure you stay neutral and objective throughout the entire production process.



**06**

# The Mini-Feature

## Introduction

The name says it all: the mini-feature is a short radio feature. Sounds good. But what exactly is a feature? What does this word really mean? In an encyclopaedia or dictionary, you will find various definitions of the word depending on the context. Definitions include facial expression, appearance, and characteristics as well as attraction, highlight or form of presentation. And what does all this mean in terms of radio? For one thing, it means that there is no single definition of the term feature. There are various potential definitions, nearly all of which are inadequate and do not really describe the characteristics of this journalistic form. The most important characteristic of a radio feature is that journalists use this format to give abstract or complex situations a face. This requires creativity in the planning phase, considerable patience in the execution and extensive work during the time-consuming production phase. But the listeners will appreciate it. It is not without reason that many radio journalists still consider features – or mini-features – one of the most outstanding genres of radio journalism.

## Definition

The mini-feature is a report that largely consists of sound clips of the most varied nature. You could say it is a picture painted with sound, an acoustic film. In radio journalism, the feature is something between a current-affairs report and a radio play. It tells an interesting story – not simply as a collection of informative data, but so lively that abstract issues become clear and understandable. To achieve this, the radio journalists leading through the feature have a wide range of possibilities at their disposal: sound bites, ambience sounds, historical clips, music, vox pop and, last but certainly not least, their own words. Journalists can – and indeed must – let their imagination run free. Only this will provide the desired result: to evoke a ‘theatre of the mind’ among the listeners. Length: between 3 and 5 minutes.

## Strengths and weaknesses of the format

A mini-feature brings the listener up to date with a complex issue. We achieve this by linking the topic to characteristic personalities with whom the listener can identify. In this way, we lend the topic a personal face – or ‘feature’. We produce mini-features when we want to use creative stylistic means that would not be suitable for other forms of broadcasting: News and reports, for instance, mainly consist of spoken words, at the most enriched by the odd sound bite or

two. Nothing but the pure word is allowed in commentaries. And interviews come to life only through questions and answers; additional sounds or music have no place in an interview and would only seem disturbing. But in a mini-feature, things are different. All the sound elements that are banned for other formats are a must in a mini-feature.

A mini-feature is much livelier than a report that is only made up of spoken words. The alternation between different stylistic means, voices and sounds prevents listeners' concentration from fading. It stimulates their imagination and creates images for their inner eye – it creates a 'theatre of the mind'.

In BIGTOWN, bulldozers have started to tear down the first buildings to make way for the planned new pharmaceutical plant. Protesting residents are trying to stop the demolition work. Your aim is to inform your listeners about these events. You could do this in the form of a report with two or three sound bites. You would say in your own words what is happening in BIGTOWN and have sound bites of two residents and a city representative. The listener would be well informed. But can you really convey all the information regarding what is happening on location? Hardly. You could paint a better picture by producing a mini-feature: sound bites of the residents, statements from the responsible parties, demolition sounds, music appropriate for the subject, etc. These acoustic aids make it easier for the listener to really imagine what is happening in BIGTOWN.

### Strengths and weaknesses of a mini-feature

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Makes complex topics understandable</li> <li>+ Is often more interesting than a report with or without sound clips</li> <li>+ Makes the programme lively, as various stylistic means are used</li> <li>+ Stimulates the listener's imagination and creates a 'theatre of the mind'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Risk of confusing the listener if there is no logical structure</li> <li>- Time-consuming production</li> <li>- Is technically challenging for editor and technician</li> <li>- Does not stand alone; is linked to other parts of the programme, e.g. part of a magazine programme</li> </ul>

## How is it done?

### Selecting a topic

Before you decide to produce a mini-feature, you should consider whether your topic is suitable for this format. A mini-feature always concentrates on one topic – although you will have room to present various aspects and viewpoints regarding this topic. The spectrum of possible topics ranges from politics and business to sports and religion, social issues and every-day problems. The best topics for mini-features are those that move people and which allow you to make use of the various radiophonic means. Of course, it is important that the story is of general interest to ensure that the mini-feature attracts the attention of the highest number of listeners. The story should be good, topical and, if possible, exceptional.

### Writing the script

Since a mini-feature consists of many individual parts, it is never broadcast live, but always pre-produced. As with other pre-produced pieces, a manuscript is required. The script for a mini-feature almost resembles a movie script. Right from the outset, you need to have an exact idea of the sequence of your feature. First, you should outline the logical structure, the so-called ‘red thread’ running through your story. Then you should consider which sound elements you would like to use. As mentioned before, you can make use of ambience sounds, music pieces, short interviews, voice clips, sounds, vox pop, archive material and, last but not least, your own link texts. Be creative! Don’t be afraid to try out something unusual. It is important that the finished mini-feature is interesting and entertaining and that it paints an understandable and logical picture of the chosen topic.

### Strong beginning

Try to find a strong beginning that draws your listeners into the story, one that gets them interested and makes them want to hear more. A strong beginning can mean a whole variety of things when it comes to a mini-feature: an excerpt from a musical piece, a clip containing a strong statement, an interesting and easily recognizable ambience sound or a sound that evokes a certain mood or atmosphere. You can make use of any of these sound options to begin your mini-feature. But you will be wasting your chance of making a dramatic entrance if you just start out with your own narration.

## Strong ending

A mini-feature should not only have a strong introduction, but also a strong ending. This ensures dramatic tension from the introduction all the way through to the end and the listeners' attention will be maintained throughout the entire feature. At the end, the listener will feel that it was worth his while. If your mini-feature does not have a strong ending, if it just peters out, your listeners will be confused, having expected more. They will be disappointed because their expectations will not have been met. And a disappointed listener can become an ex-listener only too easily.

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You have decided to produce a mini-feature dealing with the repercussions that building the pharmaceutical company will have on BIGTOWN. To make space for the new plant, the buildings in the area have to be demolished. Some people are in favour of the project, as they anticipate new jobs. Others are against it, because they will have to move from their homes and their neighbourhood. Today, there will be demonstrations in BIGTOWN both for, and against, the construction of the new plant.

You start your mini-feature with ambience sound from one of the demonstrations: chanting, drums, whistles, etc. These kinds of sound bites paint a picture of the scene. They almost take the listener to where it is all happening – as if they were really there. They catch people's attention and create tension and suspense. You could then use the same kind of ambience sound to end your piece.

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How you continue the mini-feature after the opening depends on the topic and on your creativity. There are infinite possibilities. Your strong introduction could be followed by a link text (narration) spoken by you, a voice clip from one of the protagonists, or a short vox pop with voices from the demonstrators. Or you underlay your narration with some ambience sound. Depending on the kind and number of sound clips it might even be possible to avoid intermittent texts altogether. When it comes to a mini-feature there are no limits to your imagination.

## Collecting and choosing the right sound clips

Sound clips are the fundamental elements of a mini-feature. That's why choosing the right kind is particularly important. Try to figure out what your sound clips are supposed to achieve. The following list may be helpful:

Type of sound bite	Effect
Voice clips (by themselves or as a vox pop)	Authentic, informative, credible, emotional; option for conveying various points of view
Musical elements	Can act as a bridge between the voice clips and other sound elements, create a mood, emphasise the message or statement; caution: music can be very suggestive, this may create the impression of manipulation
Ambience sounds	Appeal to the listeners' imagination, take them to a certain location, emphasise the reality
Link texts (narration)	Ensure a smooth and logical flow of the feature; journalist provides facts and explains; always stays neutral and objective, must not – under any circumstance – provide commentary

Accurately research where and when you can best record the sound bites you need. If you plan to include voice clips, make appointments for your interviews and explain what the interviews are for. If it is impossible to record sound clips or ambience elements on location and you have to fall back on your station's sound archive, make sure that the sounds and music you want to use in your mini-feature are available. Only use sound bites that are easily recognizable and characteristic. The sound bites should instantly create an image in your listeners' minds – and not leave them guessing as to what it is they are hearing. If you are not entirely sure that your sounds will be immediately recognized by everyone, you should explain them to your listeners in a few words.

---

**not good:**

Sound bite: *sound of demolition equipment*

Speaker: *This was the demolition crew that has been operating in BIGTOWN since this morning.*

**better:**

Sound bite: *sound of demolition equipment*

Speaker: *The time has come for the demolition crew...*

After this short explanatory statement, every listener should understand that the sound was produced by the demolition equipment.

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## Producing the mini-feature

After you have collected all sound clips – at least as raw material – the most difficult and time-consuming stage of the project begins: the production. Before you enter the studio with your material or get to work on the tape machine or editing computer, you should know all your sound clips well. If you were not able to record all the sound bites or sound effects you need, you may be forced to make changes to your script. Ambience sounds, sound effects and music are always faded in and faded out. Make notes as to where these fade-ins and fade-outs should begin and end, how long these sound elements should be heard.

Before you start editing, you should know which parts of your interviews you would like to use as voice clips. Sometimes, it helps to jot down the wording of your raw material and to mark which passages you plan to use. This may be a lot of work, but it is helpful during the editing process.

## Structure

You will save a lot of time if you begin production with a clear concept and do not start thinking about the order of things only after you've gone into the studio to produce your mini-feature.

- 
- Ambience sound of demonstration (fade out after a few seconds, but leave it audible underneath the following narration)
  - Narration (over ambience sound of demonstration)
  - Short music element (fade in and fade out at the end)
  - Narration
  - Sound of demolition equipment (fade in and fade out at the end, but leave it audible underneath the following narration)
  - Narration (over ambience sounds of demolition equipment)

- Short vox pop
  - Statement from the mayor (possibly over ambience sound of demolition)
  - Music (fade in and fade out at the end)
  - Statement from environmentalist: This is why we are against this project ... (last words of the statement over the following ambience sound)
  - Ambience sound of demonstration (find a striking end otherwise fade out)
- 

Always remember: your finished mini-feature should feel and sound like a complete entity. This means that there has to be a logical sequence to your sound elements. The transitions have to flow. The technical aspects of the production must also be excellent. The sound quality of the clips has to be very good and the volume has to be uniform throughout the entire feature. All this requires a lot of care and attention and is very time-consuming. Therefore, make sure that you will have sufficient production time.

## Stumbling blocks

### Illogical structure

Although the mini-feature is like a small work of art in radio journalism, it must not, unlike a painting, leave any room for interpretation. Therefore, listeners should never have to ask themselves the question: ‘what is the artist – in this case the journalist) trying to tell me?’ They must immediately know what the message is. They can only hear the mini-feature once and they have to understand everything immediately, otherwise the whole production is lost on them. The mini-feature – which comprises so many individual parts – must have a clear and logical structure. Artistic licence is welcome, but should never lead to confusion.

### Long link texts

A mini-feature has its very own identity. It is an acoustic film and not just a report with lots of sound bites. Ensure that your link texts are as concise as possible and never more than a bridge between texts. Your narration should contain the basic facts – the sound clips, on the other hand, should convey the emotions and opinions of the parties involved.

## Not enough sound bites

As shown in the example above, you will need a good number of ambience sounds and voice clips for your mini-feature. Make sure that this material is ready when you start your studio production. If you suddenly realise during production that you do not have enough sound of the demolition equipment, for instance, your whole mini-feature could be in jeopardy. At this point of the production, it would be too time-consuming to go back to the site to record additional sound material. And using material from your sound library may create inconsistencies and break up logical transitions.

## Imbalanced mixture

Your sound bites, ambience sounds and voice clips can be as striking and as powerful as you want – if the mix is wrong, the mini-feature will not be good. Ambience sound elements and sounds should fit the text – and vice-versa. If you use sounds of demolition equipment, you should be talking about this equipment and not about the demonstrations. Too many voice clips in succession – especially when they are without ambience sound – are boring and make it difficult for the audience to follow. A short music bridge can relax the story and help you achieve your objective: to produce a feature that makes the ‘theatre of the mind’ come alive.



**07**

# The Commentary

## Introduction

Radio listeners have a right to objective and factual reporting. They rely on journalists giving them correct, unprejudiced and balanced information about events and developments. Listeners do not want to be manipulated – and they shouldn't be. For us journalists, this means that we should report the facts and give background information. Our listeners are hardly ever interested in our personal opinions. They should never become visible in the news we write, or in our reports, analyses and background pieces. We will not be credible with these informative formats if our personal opinions shine through. However, there is one journalistic format that is different. A format that is more or less in total contrast to the above-mentioned rules: the commentary.

## Definition

A commentary contains and explains a journalist's personal opinion about a controversial issue. Unlike a radio report, it cannot be objective or balanced. It always reflects a subjective point of view and the subjective judgement of the author. Commentaries in newspapers usually reflect the political viewpoint of the journal, of its publisher or owner. Public broadcasters, however, must give room to all relevant political viewpoints in their programmes. Therefore, they have to make sure that they broadcast commentaries from authors with differing opinions: if the programme includes a 'pro' commentary today, it should contain a 'con' commentary tomorrow. Opposing commentaries can even run back-to-back in one programme. This creates pluralism within the programme and listeners can derive new ideas and arguments from the different opinions presented.  
Length: between 2 and 4 minutes.

## Strengths and weaknesses of the format

A commentary is a journalist's critical evaluation of a topic. This personal opinion and line of argumentation should help listeners form their own opinions. Listeners will either agree or disagree with the journalist's judgement. In any case, the journalist's clearly stated opinion will not leave them indifferent. Different commentaries concerning one subject will make the listeners more critical and aware of problematic issues.

The main aim of a commentary is not to inform the listeners about facts, events or developments. That should be done in other parts of the programme. Instead,

the objective of a commentary is to complement the reporting about a current issue, to discuss and evaluate the issue and show possible consequences.

A commentary confronts listeners with a clearly stated opinion about the issue and aims to make them think about how they themselves feel about this issue.

A commentary never stands alone. In a radio programme, it may, for instance, follow the news block or a report. It is important that the topic of the commentary has already been covered in the programme. This way, listeners already know the basic facts before they are confronted with an opinion about the issue. However, the commentary must be clearly separated from the informative parts of the programme through an introduction and a back-announcement. These studio announcements should tell listeners that they are about to hear a commentary and give the name of the commentator.

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Host's introduction: *As we heard in the news, government ministers and a representative of company PILLCO have signed the contract to build the new factory. We will now hear what our commentator C thinks about this subject.*

Host's back-announcement: *That was a commentary by C on the building of the new chemical plant.*

---

Radio commentaries can deal with politics, business, culture, social issues, religion, ecology, sports, etc. – practically anything. The subject should, however, be topical, controversial, and of common interest. It must be an issue about which people can have vastly different opinions. And it must be possible to express these controversial opinions on the radio and present them for discussion. Even though commentaries usually deal with current affairs, it can in some cases also make sense to write a commentary about something that happened years ago – for instance if new aspects have been unearthed and are now being discussed, which show the facts in a different light. This will turn even a century-old topic into a current issue worthy of a commentary.

At most radio stations, there is a question of who should or who could be allowed to write commentaries. Are only senior editors qualified to share their views and opinions with the listeners? Or could a younger journalist also be allowed to do this? The rule of thumb is: anybody who qualifies can and should write commentaries. Journalists who want to write commentaries must have expert knowledge about the topic in question. They must have an opinion on it and be willing to make the reasons that led them to this opinion public. They have to be able to make their viewpoint clear. And they should have a strong personality. They will need it to be convincing and credible, and to confront any criticism that their commentary may trigger. Commentaries often lead to animated discussions

if superiors, colleagues or listeners do not agree with the argumentation. It is important that the commentator can then stand the pressure arising from such a situation. And commentators can only do this if they have a strong and steadfast personality.

### Strengths and weaknesses of a commentary

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊕ Structures facts, developments and background information and evaluates them</li> <li>⊕ Helps listeners form their own opinions</li> <li>⊕ Authentic (strong and convincing expressions of opinion)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⊖ Commentator must have comprehensive knowledge of the subject in question (time-consuming through research)</li> <li>⊖ Not every commentator has the strong personality and charisma that are required</li> <li>⊖ Commentators might face criticism from people who think differently</li> </ul>

### How is it done?

In a commentary, radio journalists can do something they are not allowed to do in a news item or a report. They can clearly voice their opinions and do not have to remain neutral and objective. But this is by no means as easy as it sounds. Radio commentaries have to follow certain rules. First of all, any journalist who wants to write a commentary must meet certain criteria: they must have expert knowledge about the topic of the commentary. They have to be familiar with the background and the context, must know the pros and cons. They also have to have their own opinion on the issue and be courageous enough to express it. And they must be able to present facts and logical reasons backing up their opinion. Listeners will not take a commentary seriously if they realise that the journalist is critical or disapproves of something, but is unable to provide good arguments for this point of view.

A commentary is a value judgement, but it must never turn into emotional gossip or even hate-speech. When writing a commentary, you can use very lively and persuasive language. You can play with words, use irony and sarcasm and other rhetoric means. After all, you want to sound convincing to your listeners. But you

must always make sure that you are not insulting or hurting anyone personally. A commentary is a well-worded opinion piece – but is no place for personal insults or calls for hate and violence.

As your objective is to convince your listeners with your commentary, it is essential to plan its logical structure and think about your argumentation beforehand. Write down the answers to some key questions before you start writing your commentary:

- What is the issue for which you will write a commentary?
- What question about this topic do you find controversial and worthy of a commentary? (Be sure to articulate a specific question here)
- What is your opinion about this question?
- What evidence do you have for building an argument to persuade others that your opinion is valid?
- What are some opposing arguments to your opinion, and how will you counter those arguments?
- What resolution do you want listeners to walk away with after hearing your commentary?

## Structure

### Strong opening statement

A strong opening statement is essential for a good commentary. This is your first opportunity to express your opinion and to attract the listeners' attention.

-----  
**pro:**

*The day has finally come!*

*This is great news for the residents of BIGTOWN!*

*The government deserves praise!*

**con:**

*This is hard to believe!*

*Today is a bad day for the residents of BIGTOWN!*

*What on earth was the government thinking?*  
-----

Such opening sentences catch the listeners by the ears and get them interested in what follows. They will want to know how you continue, what reasons you give to back up this strong opening statement – regardless of whether they share your point of view or not. As you now have the listeners' undivided attention, you have to make sure that they will keep listening.

### The most important facts

You should now quickly summarize the most important facts. Even if your topic is in the news and of general interest, you cannot automatically assume that your listeners remember all the relevant details. This is why you should include the most important facts in your text.

---

**pro:**

*After long and difficult negotiations, everything has finally come to a good end. The pharmaceutical company PILLCO can start building its new plant in BIGTOWN as soon as the old dilapidated houses have been removed. This will be a happy day for many residents of BIGTOWN: they can move into new and modern apartments and they will be able to find new and urgently needed jobs at the factory. In addition, prices for prescription drugs will go down in our country, once the new factory operates.*

**con:**

*So, the contract will be signed after all. A contract that will allow the pharmaceutical company PILLCO to build a plant in BIGTOWN and to tap into yet another never-ending source of profit. But for many people living in BIGTOWN, this will mean relocation and pollution. Relocation, because their homes will be demolished. Pollution, because the plant will pollute the area with harmful substances.*

---

You have now mentioned the most important facts:

- The contract for building the new plant has been signed
- The old houses will have to be torn down and residents rehoused
- There is the risk that the new plant will cause pollution
- New jobs will be created
- Medications will be cheaper

The listeners have the basic information they need – they know what the commentary is about. The fact that you have already emphasized some of the facts and left out others is in the nature of things. After all, you are not writing a report, but a commentary. The most important facts are followed by the argumentation.

### Argumentation

This is the central part of your commentary. Here, you should give further details and possibly some background information. Present arguments and details that support your opinion but also devote attention to the arguments of your

opponents in the form of a critical discourse. You can weaken their arguments by counter-balancing them with your own, much stronger ones. This way you can unveil your line of argument to your listeners step-by-step and hopefully convince them.

---

**pro:**

- New opportunities for domestic suppliers
- Potential for further investments
- The neighbourhood is so run-down that the houses would soon have to be demolished anyway
- The plant is urgently needed because many poor people cannot afford expensive imported prescription drugs

**con:**

- Residents of BIGTOWN are demonstrating against rehousing
  - Protests against the dependence on foreign investors
  - What happens if it turns out in a couple of years that the factory is not profitable for the pharmaceutical company PILLCO?
- 

Be careful that your commentary stays an opinion piece and does not develop into a background report. Make sure that you weigh the arguments – that you tell your listeners why you think some arguments are more valid than others. Tell them your personal opinion on the issue. The listeners can then decide whether they agree or disagree with your conclusions and make up their own minds about the situation. This is followed by the conclusion.

## Conclusion

At the end of the commentary, you can summarize your point of view again in one strong, clear statement. Avoid being indecisive in your closing sentences.

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**not good:**

*By signing this contract to build the new plant, the government may have made a big mistake because the majority of residents in BIGTOWN is against it. But the pharmaceutical company's decision could also trigger more urgently needed investments from other foreign sources. Only the future will tell us whether today's deal was good or bad.*

---

With this shallow ending, the commentator leaves the listeners guessing. They will think that the commentator does not know what to think about the issue, because his or her viewpoint has not been made clear. In this case, the commentary was a waste of time and effort. The objective of making it easier for

the listeners to form their own opinions was not achieved. An effective ending is just as important for commentary as a strong opening sentence. Try to build a bridge between your first and final sentences. Do not let your commentary simply fade to nothing.

---

**pro:**

*Reason has triumphed. Those who wanted to stop progress were not successful. The plant will be built despite all efforts to torpedo this project. There is only one way to put it: today was the first day of BIGTOWN's bright new future!*

**con:**

*With the signing of the contract today, the fate of BIGTOWN was sealed. The people who live in this part of town will be torn away from their old familiar neighbourhood and forced to live in faceless new apartment blocks. And where children once played in the gardens, factory chimneys will soon pollute the air. Today was a terrible day for the people of BIGTOWN!*

---

## Presentation

It is not only the contents of a commentary that is important but also the way it is presented. A commentary is one person's subjective opinion – the author's. He or she is convinced of the line of argumentation and of the conclusions drawn. And this is why a commentary will sound more authentic and powerful if it is read on the air by the author.

**08**

## **The Round-table discussion**

## Introduction

Any group of friends, colleagues or family members is bound to have animated discussions now and again. During such a discussion, everybody wants to have a say and convince the others of his or her opinion. The discussion gets louder and louder, tempers heat up and what began as a civilised conversation turns into a shouting match. Before you know it, angry words and insults fly. This kind of chaos can develop whenever there is nobody leading and steering a discussion properly. In radio, such a chaotic discussion would be pointless for the listeners. They would not understand what the individual people are saying and switch off. This is why round-table discussions or panel discussions on the radio should be lively but structured. The host of a round-table discussion has to be in control of the debate. He or she has to safeguard that all participants can express their opinions and explain their points of view. And they should be able to do so without being interrupted by any of the other participants in the discussion. The host also has to make sure that the listeners understand the subject and know who represents which opinion. And the host has to guide the discussion so that all relevant aspects of the topic will be covered in the designated time.

## Definition

A round-table discussion is a debate about a controversial topic between two or more people with contrasting views. A neutral host chooses the participants and then leads a structured, yet lively debate. At the end of the discussion, the host briefly summarizes the different points of view and the key arguments that were brought forth. A round-table discussion can be broadcast live or it can be pre-recorded, with or without an audience and with or without audience participation.  
Length: between 15 minutes and 1 hour

## Strengths and weaknesses of the format

There are numerous elements that make a round-table discussion an attractive journalistic format for radio listeners. They will hear an exchange of different opinions on a controversial topic. Complicated contexts will become transparent through the direct exchange of views and arguments. The arguments and counter-arguments will provide the listeners with new insights. The discussion may help them find new arguments that support their own point of view or which are an inspiration to think differently about the topic. Round-table discussions are usually very lively components of your programme because of the different voices and personalities of the participants. Round-table discussions can be surprising, revealing, entertaining or enlightening. And this is what makes them interesting for the listeners.

Round-table discussions can take place at different venues:

- In the studio: the participants in the discussion are alone with the host and discuss a clearly defined topic
- In the studio: with members of the audience or listeners contributing questions and comments, which the panel will respond to
- On a public stage: in front of an audience

### Strengths and weaknesses of a round-table discussion

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>+ Authentic, credible</li><li>+ First-hand information and opinions</li><li>+ Stimulates the listeners and helps them form their own opinions</li><li>+ Includes spontaneous elements that cannot be planned and are surprising and attractive for the listeners</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Risk of confusing the listener, if the host does not structure the discussion logically</li><li>– Can be boring if the wrong participants are selected</li><li>– Experts sometimes use incomprehensible jargon; in this case, the host has to intervene and ask the experts to repeat what they said in simpler words</li><li>– Not every subject is suited for a round-table discussion</li></ul>

## How is it done?

### Choosing the topic

The topics of round-table discussions can be from the world of politics, business, culture, social issues, religion, ecology, sports, etc. Almost any topic is conceivable – as long as it is interesting and relevant for as many listeners as possible. Most importantly, however, the topic should be controversial. If the participants do not hold diverse or even opposing views on a topic, the result will be mutual agreement, but not a fruitful debate.

---

The international pharmaceutical company PILLCO plans to build a new plant in a poor neighbourhood of BIGTOWN. Houses in this neighbourhood will have to be torn down and residents rehoused to make room for the factory. The company and the regional government have already negotiated a contract, which will be signed today. At the same time, opponents of the project are demonstrating in the streets of the city.

**not good:**

Discussion topic: ‘Are demonstrations against the building of this plant permitted?’ The right to organize and take part in public demonstrations is enshrined in the constitution of the country. Therefore, any discussion about the legality of this demonstration is pointless.

**better:**

Discussion topic: ‘Are demonstrations against the building of this plant justified?’ There are different opinions on this question, ranging from: *Yes, demonstrations are legitimate because many residents will have to lose their old homes to No, because the factory will create new jobs and many residents who have to move away will get new and better apartments.*

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### Selecting the participants

The most important factor for the success of a round-table discussion is that you find good participants. It is essential that your participants be well informed about the topic of the discussion. They have to have opposing opinions and must be able to explain their points of view. The more the participants enjoy debating, the livelier your round-table discussion will be.

The participants can be decision-makers (politicians, business people), experts (scientists) or people affected by the issue.

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For a round table discussing the question ‘Are demonstrations against the building of the new pharmaceutical factory justified?’ you could invite:

- The chairman C of PILLCO’s Board of Directors
  - The mayor of BIGTOWN
  - The organizer of the demonstrations
  - The spokesperson S of the citizens’ group Initiative Against Rehousing
- 

It depends on the length of the discussion and the size of your studio, how many participants you can invite. Here are some general suggestions:

15 minutes: 2–3 participants + host

20 minutes: 3 participants + host

30 minutes: 4 participants + host

60 minutes: 6 participants + host

These suggestions should guarantee that every participant has enough time to present his or her opinion and to discuss with the other participants.

### **Briefing the participants**

As the host, you should brief your participants about some things before the discussion starts or goes on the air. The main purpose of this briefing is to agree on a set of rules and a structure for the round-table discussion. In the briefing you should introduce your guests to each other to create a good atmosphere for the round table. You should also tell the participants exactly what the discussion will be about. Explain what aspects of the topic you want the debate to focus on. And tell your guests how long the discussion will be. All this will help prevent them from digressing later on. The briefing should not turn into a meaningful discussion before you actually go on the air. If the participants want to begin debating before you start recording or broadcasting, you should politely stop them. An off-air debate about your topic at this point would certainly deprive the round-table discussion of its spontaneity.

During the programme, the participants and the host usually sit in a circle around a studio desk. Everybody should see everybody else and be able to make eye contact. This applies especially to the host who has special responsibilities in a round-table discussion.

### The role of the host

You will have to prepare extremely well if you want to host a round-table discussion. You will need very good knowledge of the subject of the discussion. In addition, you have to know the points of view and the lines of argumentation of all your guests. And you should know in advance, which of them tend to talk a lot and which are a little shy. As the host, you should be self-confident and tolerant. Your most important task is to steer the discussion. Make sure that your listeners get a clear idea of all your guests' views and arguments. It goes without saying that you should remain impartial and unbiased. In a round table, you as the host of the debate should never present your own opinion or comment on what your guests are saying. At the beginning of every round-table discussion, you must introduce all the participants: their title, first name, last name and function. If necessary, briefly say what position this guest has with regard to your topic or explain the reasons for inviting this guest.

Give each participant a chance to say a few words during the introductory round, so that the listeners do not only learn their names, but also get to know their voices. Keep addressing your guests by name throughout the programme to ensure that the listeners always know who is speaking. At the beginning of the discussion, you should give your listeners a short introduction into the topic of the discussion. If necessary you could also add some background information. Then, open the discussion with an interesting question to one of the participants.

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Question to the chairman C of PILLCO's Board of Directors: *Mr. C, there are demonstrations against your company's plans to build a new pharmaceutical factory in BIGTOWN. Have you ever thought about dropping this whole project?*

C: *Well, we don't see any reason to go that far. We cannot understand why these demonstrations are taking place in the first place. The people should be happy that we are investing in this neighbourhood.*

Question to the spokesperson S of the Initiative Against Rehousing:

*Mr. S, I imagine you are not very happy about what Mr. C just said. What is your opinion on PILLCO's viewpoint?*

Answer: *PILLCO's plans are inhumane. But I am not in the least surprised ...*

Interruption by the mayor: *Inhumane, don't get me started ...*

Host: *Mr. Mayor, one moment please, it will be your turn shortly and you will be given sufficient time to explain your viewpoint. Please let Mr. S finish first.*

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## Tips for the host

- Do not allow any of the participants to take control of the discussion. You are the host – you are the one who should be in control. Point out politely but persistently that every guest will get an equal chance to have their say.
- Dig deeper, if one of your guests does not make his or her viewpoint clear or tries to be evasive.
- If one of your guests uses technical terms or jargon that some listeners might not understand, ask that guest to explain it again using simpler words.
- Make sure that all aspects of the discussion topic which you consider relevant for your listeners are addressed.
- Briefly summarise the state of the discussion a couple of times during the debate. This will work well as a structural element whenever you have finished discussing one aspect and would like to move on to another. It is also a service to your listeners: not every one of them has been following the discussion from the beginning. Through brief summaries, you can bring all listeners up to date and you can remind them, which participant represents what viewpoint.
- Keep an eye on the time. Breaking off the discussion because you have run out of time is both embarrassing and unprofessional. If you do not have a clock in the studio or at the venue of the discussion, place your watch in front of you and check the time out of the corner of your eye every now and then.
- At the end of the debate, give your listeners a final brief summary of your guests' position on the topic and possibly the main arguments they presented during the discussion. It is vital to stay neutral and objective in your summary. Your own opinion and the conclusions you personally draw from the discussion are of no interest to your listeners.

## What to do if ...

### ... one of the participants tries to dominate the discussion?

As the host, you have to make it clear that you set the rules for the discussion. In the interest of the other guests and your listeners, interrupt the monologue of the participant who tries to dominate the discussion. Address one of the other participants by name and ask him or her the next question.

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Chairman C: ... that's why there can be no doubt whatsoever that we respect the rights of every resident of BIGTOWN. Those whose houses will be torn down will get new homes and financial compensation ... (takes a breath) This is where you as host can intervene: Mr. S, do you as the spokesperson for the Initiative Against Rehousing agree? You have stopped the PILLCO representative's endless monologue and given another guest the opportunity to explain his position.

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### ... the discussion gets so heated that participants talk at the same time?

You have to intervene immediately whenever the situation gets out of control. The participants in the studio can always see who is talking. They can read what the other guests are saying from their lips, their gestures and facial expressions. The listeners, however, cannot see any of this. They only have their ears to try to identify who is saying what. To your listeners, the scene will sound chaotic. As soon as two or more participants talk simultaneously, your listeners will not understand anything.

### ... one of the participants complains about being ignored?

Do not let the participant who is complaining have his or her say immediately. This would give other participants the idea that such interventions are always successful and an easy way to grab the microphone.

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Mayor: *Listen, this is not working! All the others have been talking for hours and I cannot even get a word in. I want to say something now...*

Host: *One moment please, Mr. Mayor. I am paying close attention to ensure that everyone gets their say. You will have a chance to express your opinion shortly. But please, let Mr. S finish first.*

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### ... one participant insults another?

Personal insults are unfair and have no place in a civilised discussion. Make this clear to participants insulting each other. Stay polite, but be persistent. Steer the discussion in another direction – if necessary, by turning to another aspect of the topic and addressing a participant who is not involved in the clash.

# Our ideals and approach

DW Akademie is Germany's leading organization for international media development.

## Our ideals

**We believe** that independent media and responsible journalism are essential worldwide. Given Germany's history, we believe that people should be able to freely express their views and have access to independent sources of information. We consider this to be an important prerequisite for peace and democracy.

## Our approach

**We support** the development of independent, transparent media systems, quality journalism and media expertise. We help rebuild media in post-crisis and post-conflict environments and contribute internationally to the advanced training of media professionals.

**We respect** the cultural identity of our partners and work closely together in designing our projects. It is important for us that these projects are practice-oriented, interactive and innovative. We consider our work to be successful when our partners seek change and are able to follow through with reforms.



