

## Module 2: Writing for the ear

[00:00:02] Writing for audio storytelling is different than writing a print piece. You're writing for the ear, not the eye.

[00:00:08] The eye's quick to take in lots of things that once. The eye can process complex sentences. The ear can't do either well. When we write, we often use big words and we write with complex sentence structures packed, chock full of lots of ideas and maybe even lots of numbers. Because, you know, a reader can always reread a sentence if they didn't get it the first time. That's really not quite as easy to do if you're listening to audio. And we humans can really only grasp one idea per sentence when we take in something through our ears. Short, simple sentences might look bad on a page, but they actually sound great when they're read. Here's an example.

[00:00:46] So this is the first sentence from a story in The New York Times.

[00:00:50] "President Trump gave the go ahead for Microsoft to pursue an acquisition of Tik Tok, in his first public comments about the popular Chinese owned video app after he had threatened to ban it from the United States entirely."

[00:01:02] Wow, hard to even read. And really, how much of that did you really digest? Now that you can see it on your screen, it's pretty easy for your eye to take it in and understand it. But I'm guessing you found it kind of hard to listen to. It was certainly hard for me to read out loud. And I used to be a newscaster and do voice overs.

[00:01:21] By contrast, here's the first sentence from the same story done for audio by NPR.

[00:01:27] "TikToc is on the market."

[00:01:29] Yeah, that's the first sentence. One sentence. One idea. Super short. Here's the second sentence of that story.

[00:01:37] "President Trump says he's giving the company that owns the video sharing app about a month to sell it or he wants Tik Tok banned in the US."

[00:01:44] That second sentence has a lot more than one idea in it, but it's still a lot simpler than what The Times wrote. And in both of those sentence, we still haven't gotten the name Microsoft in there. So, yeah, audio is a heck of a lot less fact dense, but it was really easy for me to read the NPR version and was probably really easy for you to understand it.

[00:02:05] So when you write for audio, information really has to come at a slow, steady pace. One thought per sentence. Simple, short, subject verb object sentences, kind of Hemingway usque. And please keep numbers to an absolute minimum. Ears really hate numbers. They don't know what to do with them.

[00:02:23] So as you write for audio, you really need to be reading out loud what you write. Your mouth is really good at knowing what an ear can take in. Your eye and your hands kind of suck at this. So really trust your mouth. If it feels natural to say it like you're talking to your friend, what you're writing will be good copy for your audio story. Avoid big fancy words. Use the language you would normally use in a conversation with somebody. There are lots of good tips in the reading I gave you this week, and Hannah and I will talk more about some of the other writing tips in our conversation.

[00:02:56] The thing to remember is that the power of audio storytelling is about the power of the human voice. We're deeply hardwired to respond to human voices. It's a big part of how we emotionally connect with one another. So you're writing may seem simplistic, but just know you're tapping into a really powerful storytelling tool. When you're working with stories told through the human voice.

[00:03:18] This is particularly true now that so many of us listen to audio stories through earbuds. It becomes really intimate. One person standing really close and telling a story right to someone's ear. And this is the other key thing to remember about effective audio storytelling. This is really a one to one medium. It isn't about you orating to a big audience. You're not performing for a crowd when you tell an audio story, you're talking directly to one person. And that's the experience the listener has. It's you talking to them. So talk directly to one person. Think about a friend or a mentor or someone you respect and care about. As you craft your story and think about telling the story to them and think about the language you would use to best communicate to that one person.

[00:04:05] So there's other storytelling tips I mentioned that we've learned from data. A big one is to start strong. Make the beginning of your story really great. Don't save things for the end. A lot of listeners never even get to the end of a podcast or any on demand or skippable audio. So use the beginning of the story to make sure someone's invested and cares about your story. Listeners decide in the opening minutes of an audio story whether to keep on listening. And they need to know right from the start of the story why they should care. The topic needs to matter to them. The stakes need to feel high. And there needs to be some tension that your story promises it will resolve.

[00:04:43] Another tip is that you need to reengage people periodically throughout the story, remind them of the stakes, foreshadow a development, and suddenly remind them who the characters are because, you know, we get distracted easily. Help make sure your listeners stay oriented to what's happening in your story. As we talked about in the first lecture in this module. Like so many other story forms, the most important thing you can do to be effective at telling your story is to think about who you're talking to. Who is your audience? What do you want them to know? What is the story you want to tell them? And what do they need to know to understand what you're trying to share with them? And then what are the things you can do to keep them interested in your story?

[00:05:24] A great storyteller cares about their audience, and that's definitely true in audio. Next, we'll talk with Hannah Allam about making the jump from writing for print to writing for audio. And then we'll get a mini masterclass in sound design from Ramtim Arablouei from the podcast Throughline.