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Sound for the Eyes: Writing Visually for Audio

Grab listeners' ears with stories they can see.

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[Valerie Geller](#) travels the world evangelizing for radio journalism. In the last 17 years, she has worked with more than 500 radio stations in 27 countries. Valerie teaches radio journalists about visual writing. It may sound odd, writing visually for a medium that delivers stories often less than 30 seconds in length. And yet, the lessons she teaches for radio reporting are also perfect for print journalists who are trying to learn to write for audio and video. TV journalists can learn from her how to write short, rich copy.

Q You teach "visual writing" for radio. What does that mean, and what are the keys to it?

A I heard Paul Harvey accept an award. At the end, he thanked his hosts for the overnight stay at the Marina del Rey Marriott. At the end of his speech, he thanked the organization (Radio and Records) for the "memory of dancing with his wife" in their hotel room, and "Tahitian moonlight filtered through a Venetian blind." You're there.



[In the "Creating Powerful Radio" book](#), there's a lot about this. The following excerpt is reprinted from the book with permission:

See It on Your Radio

Many people do not think of radio as a visual medium. But a talented storyteller who writes with dazzling detail can tap into all of the imagery and emotion stored in the listener's brain and make him feel that he really is "seeing" the story. While telling a story in just a few words is key in writing powerful news copy, the visual element is important to keep listeners engaged.

Many songwriters have mastered this in their lyrics.

Take, for example, Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man." When you hear the line "To dance beneath a diamond sky with one hand waving free," you can see it. And that makes it more powerful.

In 2004, I was in Australia during the Athens Summer Olympics. Part of my job was to listen to some of the Australian Broadcasting

Corporation's coverage of the events. I didn't have much enthusiasm for an item that began, "Up next, it's the women's archery competition ..." until I heard the reporter tell the story.

REPORTER: *You are about to meet a young woman who picked up a bow and arrow when she was just a child. Her parents are right here beside me. Here's what she's got to do: Hit a black target the size of a grapefruit, across three football fields.*

Two minutes ago, I could not have cared less about the women's archery competition. Now I was paying attention and fully engaged in the story being told. If you can get a listener to "see it" or "feel it," then they will care and pay attention.

Visual descriptions are especially important to men. Brain research shows that men are more stimulated by visual details, and language that describes events with accurate visual elements tends to make them pay closer attention to a story.

Sports announcers are the best in the business at visual description.

They are mostly men, talking to men, in a way that men understand. If you have ever attended a baseball or football game, you will notice men listening to radios while they watch the game with their own eyes. The play-by-play announcers enhance the visual experience for these men.

Women, on the other hand, are emotive. If a woman can "feel" an emotional connection to a story, she is more likely to listen closely and take in the information. For a story to appeal to both men and women, it should deliver information using both visual and emotional language.

Here's an example from England:

A reporter, working from a camera-phone video taken by a bystander, paints the visual and emotional scene of a pit bull attack on a small child. He uses both kinds of language to make men and women see and feel what happened in this story:

The boy and the pit bull were about the same size. The dog had its jaws embedded in the little boy's neck. The child screamed in terror and pain. Within moments you couldn't tell the difference between the red and white pattern in the child's shirt from the blood. And can you imagine how his mother felt, standing by helplessly as the vicious beast attacked her child?

You can improve your visual writing and learn to speak more visually by imagining you are talking to a blind person.

Write for the blind man. Talk to ONE listener at a time and describe what you see using every sense you own. Smell, taste,

feel. Take those powerful "images" and boil them down, and use them. Start by seasoning your everyday off-air conversations with descriptive details. Use all the color in your verbal paint box. Make observations of little things in life a part of your normal speech. Get out to places where you will have a lot of interesting things to see.

Find new places where you will experience things to talk and write about.

Q How can a city council meeting or a courtroom hearing be "visual" for the radio?

A Take a look around. What are the issues? Who are the people involved? What would you say to someone *off* air about this meeting? Visual writing creates a movie in the mind. If you can write so that the scene is set in color instead of black and white, it will never be boring.

Visual or experiential writing keeps any story engaging.

Instead of:

Last night's city council meeting lasted only 45 minutes. The vote was 10-1 against the StanleyPark issue. Mayor Losier dismissed the city council meeting early because the air conditioning didn't work due to a power outage. Next week on the agenda: power upgrades for the municipal buildings.

Try this visual writing:

A round of applause erupted after last night's city council voted down the StanleyPark issue, 10-1. Mayor Losier cut the meeting short releasing the nine glistening, exhausted and sweaty city council members from the heat and humidity of the airless council chambers. The power went out after the first few minutes of last night's meeting. Mayor Losier promises that next week's agenda will include power upgrades for the city's municipal buildings.

Q I often hear you talk about "storytelling," which seems to mean you think there is a difference between a story and a report or an article. Say more about that. What makes a great "story"?

A WHO
WHAT
WHERE

WHY
WHEN
HOW,

but also

HOW does this story affect my listener?

HOW can I describe things more visually?

HOW can I make someone care about this?

HOW, or in what way, do I care about this?

HOW come I am putting this story on the air?

If a problem is presented, HOW can it be solved; what are the solutions?

HOW did this happen; could it have been prevented?

HOW else can I tell this story?

HOW would I tell it to a friend?

HOW can I make it better?

HOW would I tell it if my very life depended on *not* losing a listener?

and HOW would I put this on a demo to get another job if I needed one?

Q You do a lot of international teaching with radio journalists. What is happening outside the United States that we should know about?

A Actually when you work overseas, the first thing you notice is the technology. The equipment and what it is capable of is amazing. Technically they have it all over us. And the attention span in Europe is a little longer than in the U.S. The stories can be a bit longer. But that is changing.

Q So many print folks these days are starting to do multimedia stories online. They are coupling pictures and sound with their text. What could they learn by listening to radio news?

A Great storytelling is great storytelling. If you listen to any great writer, *you* get better. Listen to the great radio writers: [ABC Radio network's Gil Gross](#), [Paul Harvey](#), [Sam Litzinger](#), [Vicki Barker](#) in England for CBS.

And write shorter.

We no longer have the luxury of just being a "radio reporter." Every reporter, journalist and storyteller will be stronger if he or she has the chance and the ability to do everything. A story is a story. Learn to write

well, and it will serve you in print, Internet, TV and radio ... and whatever is coming next!

Q Even now, surrounded by online, iPods and even gas pumps that deliver news, you are enamored with radio. Why?

A There's nothing like radio.

If you understand and "get" what the radio means to someone who is alone, perhaps in a room, or a car, isolated, by themselves, then suddenly, you flip on a black box and you are no longer alone. There's someone there, a person, talking to *you*.

A powerful personality on the air feels like a "friend." And nothing goes in as deeply as radio. Seeing pictures of a place, event or something happening is very important; however, the imagination is so powerful. It's why the book is usually better than the movie.

Q Give me an example of a time when you think radio really "pegged the meter" for great, important storytelling.

OK, here's one from a "fire story" I saw and heard last night.

On the TV, you saw coverage of a fire in the New York area. The TV story showed the fire, the firefighters, the after photos of the home and the woman crying, wrapped in a blanket.

You got a lot of facts about how the fire destroyed the home and how the fire department spokesman said they suspected an electrical problem.

Then I heard the radio story.

On radio, the woman talked about what "home" meant to her. And while she said that she knows she is lucky to be alive, what you heard in the radio piece was the sense of her overwhelming anger and sadness at losing her family photographs, her computer, her clothes, her books. The sense of how quickly, in an instant, your whole life can change.

The version that stayed with me was *not* the TV report.

More in this series:

- 6/12/2007 2:36:36 PM: [Veteran Radio Reporter Shares Secrets to Writing Short](#)
- 6/13/2007 2:30:39 PM: **Sound for the Eyes: Writing Visually for Audio**

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