

# Story Structure

Story structure can be the most difficult part of writing and producing a report. In an effort to include facts, figures and tape we often lose our sense of the natural progression of a story .

In truth it is very difficult to say that a story should be structured a particular way—for every rule we give there will be a reason to break it. On the other hand, if you are approaching each story with a sense of bewilderment, These ideas should help.

## Beginnings, Middles and Ends

Beginnings give the listener the reason they are hearing the story and the context to understand it. It's a simple rule. Anything that makes the rest of the story understandable needs to be in the beginning.

Broadcast news stories are grounded in the present, immediate future (tomorrow). or immediate past ( last night). Whatever happened most recently should start your story — in other words, don't start with the history behind an event.

Beginning elements answer these questions:

What happened? (the news)

Where did it happen?

When did it happen?

Who is involved?

Listen to an All Things Considered or Morning Edition story. Identify the beginning elements.

What happened \_\_\_\_\_

Where \_\_\_\_\_

When \_\_\_\_\_

Who \_\_\_\_\_

If you have written your intro. FIRST (and correctly) it should be obvious where your first paragraph should pick up the story.

The easiest way to proceed through a story is chronologically.

## Middles

Tension, conflict, conflict history

This is where the obstacles or problems or arguments are outlined. A story does not require out and out conflict but if it does not have conflict it must have tension.

How and why are usually middle elements. How did the situation come to exist? How did the opponents respond? Why do the proponents feel they can win? Also any studies, facts, figures and information related to the arguments belong here.

Go back to the ATC or Morning Edition story and identify where in the story the reporter addressed how and why. Listen again for the use of statistics and other factual information.

There is more than one way to organize a middle. Some reports lend themselves to alternating arguments giving two or more sides of a point. Others are best organizing by hearing all the points of one side, then hearing another view discuss all the points from their side.

The End

Ends should be easy but frequently they're not. Some stories seem unstoppable. Here are a few options for ending stories.

Look forward. What will happen next?

Analyze. After hearing the arguments fill some holes for the listener. What hasn't been considered by either side? What larger force may come to bear on the issue?

Give the listener a final thought. Your insight into an issue may make the story memorable.

## Sounds & Scenes

Most good stories give the listener or reader a sense of place. In print this is often accomplished by description, in TV with pictures — in radio we use a combination of description and sound. Not all stories lend themselves to the use of sound imagery or what some producers call the “sound scape” but if you want to place the listener where you are, you have to bring an image to the mind’s eye of the person listening to your report.

### Think Visual

Our ears and eyes capture a scene in a similar fashion. Some things happen in the foreground, some mid ground, some in the background. Scenes are dynamic. Sounds in the background move to the foreground (often when we don’t want them to such as airplanes going overhead) mid ground sound moves back. This is why headphones are important!

As a reporter you are almost always in the foreground either as an observer or as a participant. The person you are interviewing is in the foreground, and sometimes an illuminating sound will be in the foreground.

Midground sound tends to be sound that helps us understand where we are but doesn’t necessarily need to be noted.

example: the sound of a door as you go from outside to inside. A truck pulling up to a stop, an ice cream truck going by in a neighborhood.

True background sound doesn’t call attention to itself unless it’s not there. Hubbub at meetings, traffic ambiance, anything you can make a into a bed and loop is background.

A story composed of trax, acts and background sound probably could have been done without sound.

Distinct sounds are best— ones that have some activity to them.

Let the interviewee help with imagery. Get her out of the office to give you a tour. Have her describe what she sees.

Close your eyes. What do you hear that needs no explanation, what do you hear that will? Think about where you are, choose the sights and sounds that are unique to that place.

Outside sound is difficult to control. Do a mix of outside and inside interviews.

### Make Your Written Description Count

If you describe a street scene as a crowded boulevard with taut, tan bodies with everyone parading by in expensive sunglasses you’ve narrowed the place down to Los Angeles or Rio De Janeiro.

Pick details that mean something to the story.

The fact that someone wears sneakers is unimportant until you learn that this person rarely has time to sit down.

Take notes on where you are. Be specific. Not just fence — split rail fence, not just tree — lodge pole pine. If you have time, use a camera.

# Radio Writing

**Write for the Ear**

**Write the Way You Speak**

**Write Simply**

**ALWAYS read copy aloud**

- One thought per sentence  
commas, ands and buts should be clues to place a period
- Use nickel words for dollars words  
three syllables words become two syllable words, two syllables become one

*“The city will **utilize** the funds soon.”*

vs.

*“The city will **use** the funds soon.”*

- Use active verbs  
avoid conjugations of to be, especially was, has been, will be. use verbs that work.

*“Karen Owens was fired from her job at Conoco last Friday.”*

vs.

*“Conoco **fired** Karen Owens last Friday.”*

- Present tense  
avoid words that end in -ed, ing or -ly
- Avoid dependent clauses  
avoid separating subjects and verbs

- Round off numbers  
say half instead of 50 % less, double instead of 100% more  
*\$8,510,000 becomes eight and a half million dollars, not \$8.5 million.*
- Watch for fudge and clutter words  
somewhat, appears, however, although
- Check attribution  
attribute information, make sure name attribution is close to actuality
- Word choice  
refine your choice: the river is dark vs. the river is murky
- Look for redundant words and ideas
- Rewrite clichés
- Remember: radio paints pictures for the mind.

## Print

*Making good on its promise to crack down on hospital administrators who withhold information about disciplinary actions against doctors, the state Medical board filed it's first ever civil action Monday against the former head of a Gilroy Hospital for failing to report actions against two physicians.*

*The action was taken against Brian Ballard, the former cheif executive officer of South Valley Hospital in Gilroy, and seeks \$10,000 in fines, \$5,000 for each doctor.*

## Radio

*On Monday the state Medical Board filed a civil action against the former head of a hospital in Gilroy, California. The Medical Board claims that Bryan Ballard, former cheif executive officer at South Valley Hospital , withheld information about disciplinary action against two doctors. The Board seeks \$10,000 in fines from Ballard. This is the first civil action ever filed by the California Medical Board.*