

HOW TO WRITE WITH ACTIVE SOUND

Escape the acts and tracks formula. Think creatively. Break up the pattern. Surprise us.

Bring sound to the foreground. Think of it as important as your voice and the characters in the story. News is about action... so the action sound should be central to the story.

Try to get the best sound/scene up top. It gives the audience hope for an interesting story. But don't put ALL the sound at the beginning. Save something for the listeners who work hard to get to the end.

Break the deadly rhythm of acts and tracks... or even sound – act - track, sound – act - track. Put two sounds together. Insert sound in your narration. Go from tape to tape. Don't be predictable.

Drop "gold coins" along the path. Put something interesting every 60 seconds or so... whether it's an action, a new scene or a nice bit of writing. Keep them listening.

Not every part of a story needs sound. Sometimes running sound under an entire piece can dilute the value. It's often better to leave a scene and then return.

Listeners need to know what they are hearing. If the sound is obvious, let it be. If it's a little cryptic, you'll need to write into it with context. If the sound is unfamiliar, you'll need to tell us what it is before you play it. Create suspense without creating confusion.

Write to your tape. Don't just plop it in, or fade it up. Listen while you're writing, include sound in your edit. Think about where the sound was recorded. How did the place look, smell, feel. Don't describe in generics – often one interesting detail is more powerful.

Starting with ambiance. This has become a bit of an NPR stereotype and the pet-peeve of many editors. In general, only start with sound if the ambiance is distinctive, core to the story and set up well in the intro.

DO NOT DISTORT REALITY Don't let the enthusiasm for sound lead you astray. It's okay to combine or highlight elements from a single scene. It isn't okay to combine elements from different places or different dates to make the sound more engaging.

Many of the ideas and examples here were freely lifted from years worth of handouts from NPR Training; APRN Focus News Workshops; Howard Berkes; Terry FitzPatrick; and Ira Glass.

HOW TO RECORD ACTIVE SOUND

Now that you know what you want, make sure you bring it back alive.

Multiple takes. Mic up close. Mic further away. Mic the action without people talking. Mic it again with people explaining what they're doing. Mic it again and again.

Don't just stand still. You can "zoom" the mic into an action. You can pull away. Picket lines, protestors chanting, food booths, and phone rooms are good places to keep the microphone moving so you get bits of different people.

Always mic yourself when you are asking or trying something. You never know when you'll need it.

Deconstruct the scene. Try and isolate individual elements – a bird overhead, water flowing, twigs underfoot – these can be used in the clear or mixed in the studio.

Watch out for music. It is very difficult to cut tape that has even soft music in the background. Record the scene with music and then ask them to turn it off for interviews.

And because you can never be reminded enough....

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF RECORDING

Thou shalt always get a minute of ambiance.

Thou shalt keep the same mic placement when recording room tone.

Thou shalt not walk on the end of sound bites.

Thou shalt always wear your headphones and keep them holy.

Thou shalt shun the evil hums: fluorescents, computers, fridges.

Thou shalt not interview people with music playing in the background.

Thou shalt always have the person say their name for proper pronunciation.

Thou shalt check thy tape before thy departure from the scene.

Thou shalt mic closely.

Thou shalt get another minute of ambiance... just in case.