

"WAVELENGTH"

A guide to producing audio recordings.
Produced by Ko-An Arts CIC and funded by:



We have a limited number of Tascam DR-05 digital audio recorders available for loan for you to use with your project.
Please contact us via our web site for further details.

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The following provides a few tips on developing two types of audio programmes that could be potentially broadcast or used on web sites :

- A) THE INTERVIEW PROGRAMME
- B) WRITING RADIO DRAMA

A) THE INTERVIEW PROGRAMME

Recording Technique

Use a handheld digital recorder (*look at the programme on our web site about using a Tascam DR-05 available for loan via Koan Arts CIC*), boom or handheld mic as close to the subject as possible. If you are using a separate microphone, **know what mic to use** and the pros and cons of each.

Always use headphones to check sound. Make sure the recorder or microphone isn't picking up any sound from you as you move the recording device around.

Keep an eye on recording levels. Make sure your recording isn't over or under recorded. Your audio recorder will indicate an over recording by flashing into a red zone. Over recorded sound is often distorted and therefore difficult to adjust at edit.

Keep an ear open for **background sounds**. If too intrusive stop. If sound starts during an answer assess whether you can let it go (think of edit cutting sound)

Before recording, record about 30 seconds of **ambient sound**. Even the quietest room or studio has a sound quality that can be detected. This recording can be used at edit to create pauses.

The Introduction

Because listeners are unable to see who is talking and where they are, you should consider setting the scene by developing a brief introduction e.g. explaining who and where you are, who you will be talking to and the theme of your interview. If you have more than one interviewee make sure you initially name who you are putting the question to. Although your listeners should be able to identify different interviewees, it is worth occasionally using names to ensure they can follow the discussion.

THE INTERVIEW

Know **the objective of your programme** and know how your interviewees can contribute. Then prepare **a list of issues** you want the interviewees to address and perhaps decide on a short list of questions (4 or 5) that should force an answer.

Use **open questions** not ones that can just be answered YES or NO. Have the questions with you plus the "hit list" of issues you want to hear in the answers

Think of the interview as a chat. **Use informal language**. This will encourage more relaxed responses. Explain to interviewee that hesitation, word stumbles, 'ums' and 'ers' are part of everyday speech and will appear natural in the recording. Often these can be edited out (this is where the ambient recording is so useful)

Give your interviewees **a short briefing** about what you will be doing, objectives of the programme, areas you would like to see covered in reply etc are all that's usually needed.

Try and avoid the interviewees **rehearsing answers** - go straight in and record everything.

If possible try and get some **answers that 'stand alone'** i.e. not needing a question to explain to listeners what is being commented on. One technique to consider is to get interviewees to paraphrase a question at the beginning of their reply.

Try and **give natural pauses** between putting questions and getting responses. This is often the most difficult skill to develop as you want to ensure a relaxed interview takes place but do not want a problem at edit if people talk over each other e.g. answering a question before it has been fully given or interrupting an answer with a secondary question.

As an interviewer, **avoid any comments during reply** e.g. 'Yes', 'Right' as these may distract the listener. Nod or shake head to ensure interviewee knows you are following their answer and avoid reading notes while they are talking. It can give the impression that you are not paying attention.

Be aware of the time you have allowed for the final edited programme. If answers seem too long **ask for a briefer response and don't be afraid of silence or pauses** during answers. Most interviewees will need time to gather their thoughts and decide on the best answer to give.

The GOLDEN RULE

It may seem obvious but **LISTEN TO THE ANSWER**. Often comments will be made that require either further explanation or may open up an area of debate that had not been considered but is pertinent to your theme.

THE EDIT

Although your planned programme may only be scheduled to run for 5 minutes, in most cases your recorded material will run for much longer than that. You will then have to look at what to retain and what to delete. Once you have downloaded all your interview recordings, it is sometimes worth **creating a transcript** of all the material you believe is the most useful and that will potentially be in your final programme.

This has two benefits:

- can provide a more accurate idea of final running time. This is can be achieved by timing perhaps five lines of dialogue. If this takes 30 seconds and your maximum running time is 5 minutes then you know you have roughly 50 lines of transcript to work with.
- you can quickly glance over the content of all the material recorded and decide using a marker pen what could be potentially used or moved around in the final programme.

2) WRITING RADIO DRAMA

Writing and producing drama successfully for radio requires specific skills that take into account two conflicting aspects:

*First you only have sound to work with but
Secondly because of that you have freedom to create.*

What are the disadvantages of just working with sound?

Can be confusing - Listeners may find themselves asking - Where are we? Who are these people we're listening to? What are they doing?

Needs to be simple - too many characters can muddle the story

Little chance to create reactions to dialogue - in visual media - aside glances, frowns, anger etc can be used. These are not available to audio programmes.

Very few dramatic pauses or silences. Too long a gap may bet your listener wondering if the audio is still working!

Viewers can be easily distracted - through boredom, lack of concentration, too complex plot

What are the advantages of just working with sound?

Less expensive to create - no scenery, locations, costumes, props, make up plus it's **technically less expensive** with lower costing equipment, production and edit time

Can work with a limited cast - one person playing several roles

Simpler to reach a wide audience - radios cheaper, more of them, very little format compatability issues, can be listened at home, in car

Sound engages the imagination by creating a "picture" of locations and cast

To create successful radio drama you have to be aware of both its limitations and its possibilities. The following outlines some of the issues you may wish to consider before commencing with your writing.

1) THE CHARACTERS

Cannot have a cast of 100's as audience unable to retain all of them. **TIP - limit number of cast to a maximum of 5 per scene**

No character can stay silent for too long otherwise they risk being forgotten by the listener. **TIP - regularly refer to characters by name to keep the listeners informed**

Listeners can get confused if cast includes too many similar sounding characters. **TIP - make the characters easy to recognise, exaggerate their behaviour, speech, attitudes.** But not at the expense of becoming farcical or unbelievable

Listeners need to be interested in the characters. **TIP - give your characters personalities, create 'real' people and then write their dialogue on their behalf** Even those with one-liners need to convey a personality/motive. Therefore try and ensure your cast are identified as individuals each with their own character.

How can characters be revealed:

- By the way they speak and behave
- By comments from others in the cast - 'He's a real laugh' 'I wouldn't trust her'
- By using a contrasting character - not just good against bad but quiet against loud etc

The listener needs to want to know about the character and what is going to happen - whether good or bad - this will only happen if listeners believe in the characters. **TIP - you need to ensure that every main character has an objective.** Why are they in the programme? What are they going to contribute towards the plot?

Ensure that your characters have motivation - there's a reason why they did or said that. A key question you need to ask yourself as a writer is -

'Did they say or do that because they wanted to or because I, as the writer, wanted them to do it?'

2) THE DIALOGUE

Radio relies on dialogue. Action has to be conveyed simply and dialogue is used to support the storytelling to ensure the listener follows the story. But that does not mean you have to resort to lengthy explanations.

- Keep the dialogue relevant to the personality - ensure the words relate to the character being developed
- Keep the dialogue simple - too many complex words, long sentences or drawn out speeches will bore the listener
- Keep the dialogue relevant to the plot - don't swerve too far away from your story, keep the dialogue to your structure plan
- Use appropriate dialogue - language that works in comedy could be out of place in horror - use the correct 'genre' language
- Make the dialogue 'spoken' language - again based around the characters
- Make conversations/conflicts realistic - don't be afraid of pauses, hesitation, interruption

The Role of The Narrator

The narrator approach is viewed by many as the easy way out - 'I'll tell you a story'. It is often seen as a crutch that holds you back from thinking about more creative ways of entertaining your listeners and can also interfere with the flow of your programme. But it can be used effectively to achieve several purposes. For example it can be used to :

- quickly establish new locations, changes of time
- create 'flashbacks'
- create 'thoughts' heard by the listener from the character
- recreate an original or unique style of writing e.g. horror introduction

The following extracts from scripts show two examples of different narrator roles.

a) *The narrator can be impersonal, commenting similar to an author.*

SFX: Outdoor, winter wind, sleigh bells, horses trotting

LARA: (drunkenly) Let me! I want to drive! I'll sit by the driver! (ad lib under narrator)

NARRATOR: She stood up in the sledge. Her husband Michael and childhood friend Sarah held her arms to prevent her falling

MICHAEL: I told you not to give her any brandy

NARRATOR: Michael knew from experience that too much drink for Lara first brought laughter but always ended in tears

b) *The narrator can be one of the characters taking part in the dialogue as well as the narration. But be careful to ensure that listeners know the two roles*

SFX: Outdoor, winter wind, sleigh bells, horses trotting

MICHAEL: (narrating) Lara was standing up in the sledge and Sarah and I were holding her arms to keep her from falling out...

LARA: (drunkenly) Let me! I want to drive! I'll sit by the driver! (ad lib under next dialogue)

SARAH: Be careful! Don't fall!

MICHAEL: (in scene) I told you not to give her any brandy
(narrating in disgust) I knew from experience that too much drink for Lara first brought laughter but always ended in tears

3) DEVELOPING A STORY STRUCTURE

Stories contain parts. The way that these parts are arranged creates the structure of the story. These structures shape the audiences' expectations. Though not every story follows a predictable pattern, most do.

Exposition - In the exposition, readers are introduced to the setting (time and place of the story) and some or all of the characters. The exposition ends when the conflict or problem is introduced.

Inciting Incident - The moment when the conflict is introduced. A story isn't much of a story if it doesn't have a conflict - hero against villain, a problem to get out of etc.

Rising Action - During the rising action, the main character of the story may struggle with the conflict but is unable to resolve it.

Climax - The climax is the turning point of the story. It is the moment in the story when the main character may change, learn a lesson, or meet an important person, and this change will prepare the main character to resolve the conflict in the story. Identifying the climax or turning point is the first thing that you should do when identifying the structure of a story. Doing so will allow you to separate all of the events into rising action and falling action.

Falling Action - Falling actions are events that occur after the climax or turning point of the story. The falling action of a story is often developed in one of two ways: if the problem of the story was solved during the climax, the falling action will simply "wind-down" to the end of the story; however, if the conflict was not resolved during the climax, the falling action may have the main character preparing to address the conflict in a moment of final suspense.

Moment of Final Suspense - This is the last part in the story when there is tension. However, not every story has a moment of final suspense.

Resolution - If the story had a moment of final suspense, the resolution will include all of the events that follow. If the conflict of the story was resolved during the climax, the term resolution may just refer to the final moments of the story.

4) ESTABLISHING THE SCENE

Unless your story requires you to deliberately withhold what is happening you need to establish within the first few seconds:

- Who's in the scene
- Where they are
- What they are doing

To do this you need to make sure all the main characters speak as soon as possible. Here are a few examples of establishing location-

A) Using sound effects and backgrounds plus clues in dialogue

SFX : Fade up pub interior, music in background, laughter, chink of glasses

SUE: (sarcastic) Brian I'm glad you could make it. I've got you a drink in....relax

BRIAN: (annoyed) Alright Sue what's this all about?

SUE: (still sarcastic) Just wanted to see an old friend ... that's all

BRIAN: But why here of all places?

SUE (sharp and angry) Don't give me that.

B) Simple introduction by a narrator

NARRATOR: Early the next morning, John and Steve were in court determined to make sure their version of what had happened would be heard.

C) Or you can set up a scene in the previous one:

FRANK: Louise, where are you going?

LOUISE: (shouting) To the factory where else?

MUSIC fades to exterior factory sounds

SECURITY: Hey, you can't come in here. Can't you see the signs.

LOUISE: I need to see Mr Wallace urgently, quickly I haven't got time

D) Or the dialogue used can create the location and reasons behind the location

VOICE: (quietly and ponderous) Something you need to tell me?

PAUL: I... um yeah.... it's nothing new

VOICE: Is it about what we were discussing in our last session

PAUL: Sort of

VOICE: Would talking about it help?

PAUL: I don't know where to start.

VOICE: Start with the thing that is most troubling you

PAUL: I.... I think I've killed Sally

5) CREATING YOUR OWN BACKGROUNDS & SOUND EFFECTS

RECORDING LOCATIONS for backgrounds

Although a wide range of sounds can be purchased or are available free on line, it's often necessary - and good fun - to create your own. Sound effects include recordings of locations that can be used to complement your programmes. If you are on private property e.g. in a coffee house, a shop, make sure you **get consent** from the owners to record there. As with all sound recordings, it is vital that you use headphones so that you can monitor the recorded sound. For locations, you want to avoid picking up too much personal talk e.g. discussions from pedestrians walking past. Also make sure that you try and **record more than what you need**. It's surprising how many times you want just a few extra seconds at the edit!

Apart from recording general atmosphere also try and get what are classed as "cutaways" at the same location - additional sounds that can be included to vary the recording e.g. in the coffee house - record the machines working, cups being put into saucers, the till ringing, the entrance door bell etc. Try and get these as single recordings i.e. the background is as quiet as possible. These can then be added over your general atmosphere without a conflict of sound.

SOUND EFFECTS

The following are just a few ideas from people creating their own sound effects. You need to experiment yourself to find out how sounds can be created using a wide range of materials. In most cases you need to get your microphone or digital recorder as close as possible to the sound source and - again - USE HEADPHONES. All the sounds can be manipulated at the edit stage - playing sounds slower or quicker, playing the recording backwards, adding more bass/treble/echo etc.

Airplane prop engine - A large fan run and recorded at different speeds and power up/downs.

Aliens - Canned dog food make useful sounds as the food comes out of the can. The tightly packed all-one-mass kind makes gushy sucking sounds when the air on the outside of the can is sucked into the can.

Arrow flyby - Use a thin bamboo stick, such as the type used to hold up plants in a garden. Whip it past the microphone.

Bats flying - use an umbrella opening and closing rapidly.

Blood rushing in veins - use the sound of a sponge squeezed into water to make the air come out.

Blow to the head - get a water melon, stick cream crackers to it and then whack it with a hammer

Body and face hits - Rolled up newspapers being hit with a (soft wooden) stick. Or use wet mud hit with a bat.

Chainmail movement - A bunch of keys.

Dragon/beast roar - use a plastic patio table and drag it across the patio.

Driving/walking on snow - Flour in open tray

Earthquake ground cracking - Wood broken and sound slowed down. Try rubbing on an inflated balloon.

Electrical current - stick various strands of packing tape to a firmly mounted window, and pull it off to create a stuttering sound. (The window amplifies the effect)

Elevator door - Closing a filing cabinet in conjunction with a hotel reception bell.

Explosion debris - hit a large cardboard box filled with rubbish with a hammer and then slow the sound down.

Fire crackling - Breaking the air bubbles in plastic wrapping sounds like the pops from firewood. Crisp packets slowly compressed also make a convincing crackling of fire.

Glass breaking - use metal wind chimes and lay them on a surface. Move a small bottle over them and it sounds like glass being broken.

Gun cocking - Briefcase catches being closed slowly.

Helicopter rotors - shake an umbrella half opened.

Ice breaking - use a large piece of polystyrene. Give a twist so it slightly squeaks then make it snap.

Ice freezing - Push a wire brush firmly against a large metal container, roll it slowly so that the individual bristles flick off the surface. Put the microphone in the container.

Ice skating - Get a Tile Cutter and drag across a smooth glazed tile. You can get different effects by putting salt on the tile .

Insect wings - Use a pocket fan with nylon fabric or sticky tape on the wings. Bring it close to your fingers and record the flapping sound. Find a fan with extra-quiet motor.

Jet aircraft - Record a compressed Air line at a garage.

Rocket engine - Chalk squeak on a blackboard.

Skiing / ski jump - Slide paper over sandpaper at various speeds to achieve a variation of ski sounds.

Space Door opening - Put a piece of paper in an envelope and slide it out. What they used in Star Wars.

Spear or sword piercing flesh - Biting into an apple.

Stone coffin opening - Slide off top of a ceramic toilet tank.

Stone doors /ancient tomb opening - Rub two rough stones together - in a slow circular motion. Slow the sound down.

Sword, swinging - Take a plank or another long object and swing it around rapidly as you would with a real blade. This produces a swooshing sound.

Sword, wielding Get a large metal cooking tray. Put it on a solid surface and drag it off - make sure it's sliding off in contact with the surface.

Thunder - Shake a large piece of sheet metal to simulate a thunderstorm.

Walking robot - banging boots or heavy shoes against a metal heater.

Walking in swamps or mud - heap of wet toilet-paper "Walk" on it with your fingers.

Wings flapping (bird takes off) A pair of leather gloves flapped about.