

## Conference 2002: Radio Writing Survey

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### *Radio Writing*

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GATHERING news for radio offers a chance for print journalism students to sharpen their writing skills. The Western Institute of Technology Journalism course is print oriented, but radio newsgathering and writing are covered, mainly as an aid to teaching concise writing.

The radio module is introduced during a one-week session, which features presentations by radio journalists working in New Plymouth and the manager of NewstalkZB, and workshops with the radio journalists on news writing for radio. After the radio training week, the class is divided into three groups for a module which includes two weeks of gathering news for radio and a one-week field trip to The Daily News. The two groups working on radio operate as separate reporting teams for NewstalkZB and Energy FM, the two commercial radio stations in New Plymouth.

The two teams attend news conferences at the WITT newsroom each morning. They gather their news from the WITT newsroom, as normally happens during newsgathering for local newspapers. Two students from each team are rostered each day to work at NewstalkZB and at Energy FM. Students working in the WITT newsroom must have their stories signed off by the tutor before they are submitted for broadcast.

Students working at the two radio stations have their stories signed off by the radio journalists. Copies of any stories written at the two radio stations for broadcast are returned to the WITT newsroom so that they can be recorded in the students' story tally.

Each student is expected to produce five radio stories per week, but they can do more. On the last course one student in particular was struggling with news writing. He had all the attributes of a good news-gatherer. He related well to people of all ages and backgrounds, had a wonderful sense of humour, and seemed to have a nose for news.

However, back in the WITT newsroom after conducting his interviews, he struggled to write the story. He seemed unable to grasp the concept of finding the angle to the story, or to marshal the information he gathered in his interview into any sort of order. Writing an intro, let alone a story, seemed beyond him.

Before the radio module commenced, he had completed only seven stories, well short of the required number of 13. The requirement for the semester was 23 stories, which essentially consisted of 13 print stories which should have already been completed by the start of the radio segment and Daily News field trip, and 10 radio stories.

In two weeks of newsgathering for radio, that student who had been having such a problem with his news writing produced a total of 19 stories, to bring his tally for the semester to 26. It was interesting to watch his development during those two weeks. Probably as early as the second day of newsgathering for radio, he suddenly gained an appreciation and understanding of news. In some ways the revelation seemed quite sudden. I recall him saying something like, "Oh! So THAT's what news is."

Perhaps it was the relative simplicity and brevity of the radio news story, in comparison with the eight-par print news story that precipitated this leap in his progress. As we all know, the eight-par news story is deceptively difficult to write, and perhaps that also was one of his difficulties. He couldn't understand why something that looked so simple was so difficult.

He could actually write – his command of English, and his grammatical skills were excellent. His problem was working out what was news. He enjoyed radio as a medium, although he often declared that he hated commercial radio. He had previously worked in student radio, and after the radio segment became a part-time announcer at WITT's own radio station. The Most FM is operated by students but also has a management structure and its own sales staff.

The student wrote another five news stories before the end of the course, which meant he exceeded the required number. In the last five weeks of the course, when our focus on news writing resumes, he had no problem finding news or writing news stories.

The radio module proved an ideal medium for him to overcome his difficulties with news writing, and allowed him to successfully complete the course.

I have since conducted a survey of the students on the last WITT course to establish the premise that writing news for radio is in fact an aid to concise writing. As I'm new to teaching journalism, I surveyed only the students I taught on the radio module on the 2001-02 course. Of the 20 who passed the course, 10 took part in the survey for a 50% response – so the results are hardly definitive. The student I referred to did not respond, and as far as we know, he is not actually working as a journalist.

All 10 who replied agreed the radio module was a worthwhile component of the course. They also all said that the module helped them write more simply and concisely, and that it helped them to summarise the key facts. Nine said it helped them to find the essential elements of news stories. One commented that the module “makes you realise the newsworthy bits of information and what the story is really about.” Another said having to choose a small amount of information from what might be a lot of material was a valuable exercise.

Nine found the module useful in establishing which quotes were important in news stories. One commented that the radio module means he now consciously thinks about trying to cut out words in his newspaper articles.

Nine students found the module helped them to write short, sharp intros, while eight said it helped them to assemble their data when writing a news story.

In this year's module, which we have just completed, no student appeared to experience the revelation like the student I discussed earlier. However, I did note that three of the class of 18 particularly seemed to benefit.

It seemed to give them a huge boost in their confidence, which they all remarked on. One also said the module helped him focus on the “news” in his stories.

The students on both courses seemed to enjoy the change of pace offered by the radio module, and for some on the last course it was a highlight. They also said they appreciated the exposure to the medium, and the opportunity to assess whether to pursue a radio career.

In the survey all 10 students said that writing stories that we to be read aloud helped them write more simply. This year I particularly noted the benefit of reading stories aloud. After I subbed the story for the students, they then read them aloud, and I was surprised at the number of changes that we made after hearing the story. Reading a story silently and hearing it are two quite different processes – what looks right doesn't necessarily sound right. The changes we made after listening to the story improved it, quite dramatically in some cases, and always produced a crisper result. However, reading aloud did not always prompt changes. But I do think that journalists who read aloud the newspaper stories they write might be surprised at the changes they make and the crisper writing that would result.

GATHERING news for radio offers a chance for print journalism students to sharpen their writing skills. “Oh! So THAT's what news is!”

**Survey of 20 students who passed 2001-02 WITT Diploma of Journalism course (10 responses).**

*The radio module in the Diploma of Journalism course*

Was a worthwhile component. 10

Was a waste of time. 0

Was of limited benefit. 0

*Comments:*

- In fact it was one of the most enjoyable.
- It gave us an insight into how radio worked and how different it was to newspapers. The experience allowed us to consider radio as a career.
- Provided a good outline of radio journalism. Was useful in tightening copy. Based on work environments and expectations at Taranaki radio sites, if anything I was discouraged from pursuing a career in radio.

*The radio module*

Helped me write more concisely. 10

Did not help me write concisely. 0

*The radio module*

Improved my ability to assemble my data when I was writing a news story. 8

Did not help me assemble my data when I was writing a news story. 0

Made no difference to how I assembled my data when I was writing a news story. 2

*Comments:*

I often think about trying to cut words out of my newspaper articles since doing the radio component.

The radio module

Helped me write short, sharp intros. 9

Did not help me with writing intros. 0

Made no difference to my intro-writing. 1

Yes! It would be wrong to answer this question with an essay.

*The radio module*

Helped me find the essential elements of news stories. 9

Did not help me find the essential elements of news stories. 0

Made no difference to my grasp of the essential elements of news stories. 1

*Comments:*

·Because of the time allowed for each news story, you have to be concise.

·It was valuable having to choose a small amount of the information available to put into a radio story.

·Yes, eight-par was reduced to three-par.

·It makes you realise the most newsworthy bits of information, and what the story is really about.

*Writing stories that were to be read aloud*

Helped me write more simply. 10

Did not help me write more simply. 0

Made no difference to my writing. 0

*The radio module*

Helped me summarise the key facts of news stories. 10

Did not help me summarise the key facts of news stories. 0

Made no difference to my ability to summarise the key facts of news stories. 0

*The radio module*

Helped me establish which quotes were important in my news stories. 9

Did not help me establish which quotes were important in my news stories. 0

Made no difference to my grasp of which quotes were important in my news stories. 1