



SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

FOR RADIO REPORTERS AND PRODUCERS

(Or ... finding your way in the sometimes baffling world of NPR!)

NPR® depends on freelancers and member station reporters to help meet the huge demand for news each day. We welcome your contributions. We set our standards high and are here to help reporters reach and exceed those standards. Like everyone in public radio, the editors are often stretched thin – and have to budget time carefully. So we have put together the following guidelines to help make the process as smooth and efficient as possible for everyone.

THE DESKS

Most stories that make it on the air at NPR begin their journeys at one of the four editorial desks – National, Foreign, Science and Arts Information Unit . Story proposals (pitches) should be made directly to a National Desk bureau chief or to an Arts Information Unit, Foreign, or Science desk editor. This applies to independent producers, freelancers and reporters at NPR member stations.

Each region of the U.S. has a National Desk bureau chief, who works closely and directly with station news directors, station reporters and freelancers. Bureau chiefs screen story pitches and coordinate coverage with the appropriate desk editors in Washington. Working with desk editors, the bureau chiefs assign, edit and occasionally produce pieces from station reporters. The desk editors assign stories, edit their content and distribute them to the various newsmagazines. Desk editors are divided by subject specialty or region. The list of contacts is at the bottom of this document.

Some Helpful Hints

- Don't call NPR shows directly.
- Establish a relationship with your regional bureau chief. If you can't meet face to face, schedule a time for a telephone meeting.
- Don't wait for us to call you. If something is happening in your region we should know about, tell us — even if you can't cover the story.

THE PITCH

Don't underestimate the importance of the pitch. It needs to get our attention and make us want the story. Keep it brief, but be specific. The key is knowing what the story is and why it would interest NPR's national audience. Do some investigation before calling us with the idea. Have a clear sense of the issue, what's at stake and how you will tell the story. Know the context of the story and its broader implications. Be prepared to answer basic questions.

Some Helpful Hints

- Unless it's breaking news, bureau chiefs and editors prefer a written pitch via e-mail.
- If you don't get a response within a day or two, call to make sure the pitch was received and set a time to talk about it. Have a good sense of scene and sound possibilities, but don't make that the main focus of the pitch – think substance first.
- Only send the script of a story you did for your station in lieu of a pitch if it has been requested.
- If an idea is rejected, please don't take it personally. Your editor will be happy to explain why it was turned down. And don't let it stop you from sending another.
- If you haven't worked with us before we will probably ask you to file your first piece on spec. That is, if we like the piece, we buy it; if not, no hard feelings.

THE EDIT

The edit of a story actually begins with the pitch. It's important that before you head for the first interview, you and the editor have the same idea of the focus, angle and general length of the story.

Don't hesitate to ask questions or call for clarification during your reporting. You may discover that there's a more interesting angle or that a situation has changed. Just make sure the editor knows about the change before you write the script. It's often a good idea to touch bases with the editor before you begin writing to make sure you're both on the same page. If you have not worked much with the editor, or if it's an especially long piece, you may be asked for a short outline before you start writing.

The Moment Of Truth

In most cases, you'll read your script and play the tape over the phone. Before you call in for an edit, have your edited actualities lined up in order, ready to play in the appropriate spots in the script. We don't want a piece to be mixed and

actualities may have to be cleaned up. You may have to play your actualities through a headset placed on the telephone. But try to have the piece as close as possible to how it would sound on the air.

Once you play it through, the editor will probably suggest some adjustments. These may be minor or could involve reorganizing the piece entirely. The goal is to make the best piece of radio journalism possible.

If you disagree with a suggested change, speak up. This is your piece. You did the reporting, and you should know the subject the best. Please try not to be unreasonably defensive.

Some Helpful Hints

- Unless you're on a deadline, set up an edit time.
- Please keep your piece to the length you and your editor agreed upon. A little longer is okay. 7:00 instead of 5:00 is not. If you need more time to whittle it down, please reschedule the edit.
- Read your script aloud while you write. Better yet, say it aloud before you write it. Remember: You're telling us a story. Transcribe your actualities fully on the script and note the length.

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

Contracts

If you are filing the first time, your editor will ask you to sign a contract. Like all news organizations, NPR has the legal responsibility to ensure we have the appropriate rights to the material that we distribute. The contract sets forth certain rights for both you and NPR. Under this agreement you will retain the copyright to your work. NPR gets non-exclusive permanent rights to use the content in all media, which may include posting it on our Web site or distributing it as part of a show tape or transcript.

This contract guarantees you payment within 30 days of filing your story. Also, payment will be based on the length at which you and your editor finalized the piece (including intro). If the piece has to be trimmed after it is filed, you will still be paid the original amount.

Payment

No one gets rich freelancing news stories for public radio. Station reporters may be able to augment their income by filing for the network, but each station sets its own policy on whether a staff reporter will keep all, part, or none of that

payment. Non-station-based reporters are advised to have some other form of income. There are some reporters who manage to recycle a story in another medium, e.g., repackaging for a newspaper, magazine or foreign broadcast outlet, such as CBC or BBC.

Fees are paid at a per minute rate that currently starts at \$55/minute, with a guaranteed minimum of \$300 for the first 3.5 minutes. Your editor will guide you through the payment process.

Expenses

Reimbursement is made for story-related expenses such as telephone calls, travel, etc., but only when approved before they're incurred. Talk to your editor. You may be asked to put together a simple budget if the expenses are more than a few hundred dollars. Shipping fees can usually be charged to an NPR account. Expenses should be invoiced separately, with all relevant receipts attached and sent to:

National Public Radio
News Administration Desk
635 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20001-3753

Kill Fees

If we commission and accept a story which does not air for some reason, you will be paid the full fee based on its length. If a piece is killed before it is accepted, you must negotiate the amount of the kill fee with your editor.

Some Helpful Hints

- Get approval before incurring the expense. This is essential.
- If unexpected expenses arise or if reporting the story takes more time than expected, raise the issue of additional payment before the edit begins.
- Don't be shy about talking money. This is business, and that's expected.

MASTERING THE CRAFT — ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Before You Head to the Field

- Make sure your equipment is working and you have all the extras you might need (cables, batteries, cassettes, fish pole, duct tape, etc.).
- Know the environment you'll be in as best you can.

- Think about scenes and sound possibilities. What roles will people play in the piece? Make sure they will be in the appropriate environments when you interview them. Need family interaction? Need sounds of work? Did you schedule enough time to get all the elements you need?

Interviews

- Pre-interviews. Sometimes they can help you sort out the most interesting things a person has to say so you can better focus the interview. That means less tape to slog through. But pre-interviews are difficult to do on deadline stories.
- Have an idea of what you want from each interview. Write questions ahead of time that will help you zero in on those points. You may not look at them during the interview, but by having written them down, you help focus your own thoughts. But don't be afraid to ask different questions if the story leads you there.
- Get comfortable with a good microphone position. If you're relaxed and keep eye contact, they'll forget the microphone.
- Nod your head. Use your eyes. Avoid uh-hums and other vocal responses while your subject is speaking.
- Tell people ahead of time that if they get tongue-tied or stumble that it's fine to stop and begin their answers again. It's not a live interview.
- Keep your questions short and to the point. Make sure they will elicit a statement, not a yes or no answer. A moment of silence after your question may mean the interviewee is thinking. Don't try to fill the space by extending the question.
- If they say something crucial, but not clearly, ask if they can restate it another way. If it's still not clear, later in the interview ask the question again in a slightly different way and see if you get a better response.
- There is no dumb question (well, within reason). Know-it-alls don't make good interviewers. Pretend you're an 8-year-old, and make your subjects explain things clearly. Don't let them get away with jargon.
- Gather at least 30 seconds of ambient sound at the interview, no matter how quiet the background is. Record before or after – just so it matches the sound during the interview. It's fine to tell people you need to do it. Ask them not to talk, or they can leave while you remain to gather the sound. Better to feel a little silly than kick yourself in the studio later. Make sure you get enough sound!

Sound

This is one of the main things that distinguishes public radio from other radio: Sound. Think about it before, during and after you go out to record. Even if the people you interview aren't in a scene with sound, think about how to insert it into the piece.

- Gather sound at various distances from the source.
- Get plenty — at least a minute!!! Two or three is better if it's a long piece.
- Wait for the moment if you have to — the dog barking, rooster crowing, car honking, kids laughing. Patience is as important as good ears!
- If there's music in the background, record an entire song. Move the interview to the quietest place you can find.

Writing for the Ear

- The greatest sound in the world won't mean much if the writing doesn't complement it. The old advice about radio writing — to tell it as you would over the dinner table or telephone — is still the best.
- Write like you talk. Read your scripts aloud as you write. Really. Don't just quietly mouth the words. Say it out loud as you write.
- Avoid long sentences, prepositional phrases and other qualifiers. Keep it simple. Choose words carefully; make each one matter.
- Think about the rhythm and pacing of the piece. Vary sentence length and use of tape.
- Grammar and spelling count. Forget about the belief that spelling isn't important in radio. Scripts are used as references for program advisories to member stations. Scripts are used as the basis for content on the NPR Web site. And scripts become the official transcripts of our broadcasts. Be sure the names or people and places are spelled correctly.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Most often you will be feeding your story directly to NPR over an ISDN, Switch 56, FTP, satellite or telephone line. Sometimes features will be sent by overnight delivery or mail if the piece is not deadline sensitive and the station does not have a high quality feed line. Plan to feed your piece as unmixed elements.

Intake Numbers

You will be assigned a slug and intake number at the time your story is assigned. Please include it on all scripts, when you file and in labeling all of your elements.

Record Central

Record Central is more commonly called "the RC." It is into there that you'll feed your story and an engineer will record it. Be sure to give the engineer your intake number, story slug and editor or desk it is for. tape is for. The RC is staffed 24-hours a day, seven days a week. If you aren't on deadline for that program, avoid filing in the two hours before any show airs.

The phone numbers are: 202-513-2525 or 800-235-1212 ext. 2525.

Filing Elements

Send elements in this order:

Host Intro

TRAX (narration)

AX (actualities)

SFX (sound/music/ambience)

TRAX

- Unless you are sending elements by mail or overnight delivery, put a three-two-one countdown on each track. If you leave pickups, always say three-two-one. If the cutter is crashing and listening at high speed, pickups without a space and a three-two-one countdown are hard to catch and may make air.
- Avoid excessive pick-ups in your track to lessen chances for error. If you aren't on deadline, take a break, relax and try again later.

AX

- Don't clip them. Leave some ambience at the head and tail of each one. If the person is speaking before or after the in and outcues, leave a few seconds at the head or tail of the actuality. Make sure you also send SFX of ambience during the interview.
- Another option is to feed the act longer than intended to allow the producer fade it at the outcue rather than clip it — or to cut him/herself.

SFX

- More is better! If you want to cover a :45 audio track, don't send just enough to cover :45. Send much more to give the cutter leeway for fades and dropouts and level problems. The same goes for music.
- Make sure the ambient sound you gather is audible. If you can't hear the traffic, singing, or chirping on the tape at full volume, then the audience won't hear it behind the track.
- If there are specific points in the ambient sound (a bell rings, a baby cries, etc.) include a log that indicates when those points occur.
- If you want sound beds cut together, make sure they're the same sound, that they can cut together seamlessly.
- Train yourself to collect ambient sound on the spot every time!

Mixing Instructions

- Think of these as a recipe for a person who doesn't know how to cook. Be specific and detailed. Make instructions idiot proof — assume nothing.
- If you are sending elements already edited and ready to mix, the instructions are needed only on the script.
- Leave 2-3 seconds of silence between each element and 10-15 seconds between each set of elements.

- If filing on deadline or at an odd hour when you can't verify that your script is in the hands of the person cutting and mixing, it's best to record mixing instructions on the tape. Make them idiot proof — assume nothing! Be as specific as possible. Say precisely where SFX should begin and end, whether they cross fade and how long to post (leave up full).
- If you're calling for something within a track – for instance, a piece of ambience rolled dead under your voice – don't interrupt the track to say, "Here's where the ambient sound should be rolled in." Instead, say it before or after the track.
- If you want something to come up at a certain place, say "back time ambient sound so it posts at the sounds of cars honking after the track."
- If you have different sound beds, some of which sound alike, be sure you let us know which one's which. If there are problems of any sort, warn us!
- The basic point is be specific. Be complete. Know and use radio nomenclature.
- Of course, deadlines and other factors can prevent you from doing all these things every time you file. But anything you can do to fulfill the above requests will make your piece better.
- Put telephone numbers where you can be reached (home, too) on the script in case there are questions during the mix.

Here's a sample of mixing instructions as they should be presented when filing voice TRAX .

Begin with: "Here's the host intro." (Read it onto the tape.)
 "Trax begin in 3-2-1."

Track one: "... Joe Shmoe says that's not the case." (PAUSE)
 "Here's where the first actuality goes. The incue is: 'Mr. Doe is crazy.' The outcue is: '... knows better than that.' "
 "After the actuality, bring up the first piece of sound. Deadroll it under the act. Back time it so it posts out of the track at the sound of children playing about, eight seconds into the sound bed. Leave it in the clear for a few seconds ... and take it under the next track. Cross fade the sound of children with the second piece of sound ... that of traffic noise ... when I say 'down the street aways.' "
 "Track two in 3-2-1."

Track two: "On the playground near the school children still ..."
 End of track: "... along the street." (PAUSE)
 "Now bring up traffic sounds for a couple of seconds ... and take it under the next track. Leave it under until I say: 'forces they can't control.' Then fade out the sound."
 "Track three in 3-2-1."

Track three: “While the battle over ...”
End of track: “I’m Mike Stand in Cleveland.”

That’s it! If you have any further questions regarding submission guidelines, please contact the appropriate editor/desk.

If, after reading this list, you are unsure whom to contact, please call or e-mail Assistant Managing Editor Peggy Girshman. pgirshman@npr.org 202-513-2210.

CONTACTING THE DESKS

NEWSCAST UNIT (202) 513-2100 (800) 433-1277

Our 24-hour newscasts air primarily breaking or same-day news. The average news spot length is :45.

Supervising Senior Producer Greg Peppers gpeppers@npr.org

The National Desk

The National Desk is divided into the Washington Bureau and four geographical regions, each with its own editor and bureau chief. Besides traditional hard news, the desk covers political, economic, legal, social, educational, environmental and urban issues affecting the United States. Business news and features also originate within the National Desk. Before contacting the editor, please review these submission guidelines.

Welfare & Education Editor

Steve Drummond sdrummond@npr.org

Midwestern Bureau Chief

(Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota)

Ken Barcus kbarcus@npr.org

Northeastern Bureau Chief

(Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, Virginia)

Andrea De Leon adeleon@npr.org

Southern Bureau Chief

(West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Kentucky, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma)

Michael Fields mmfields@npr.org

Western Bureau Chiefs

Alisa Joyce Barba (California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Hawaii)

mabarba@npr.org

Kate Concannon (Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Alaska, Montana)

kconcannon@npr.org

Business

Les Cook lcook@npr.org or Uri Berliner uberliner@npr.org

Washington Bureau

The Washington Bureau covers Congress and the White House, the Supreme Court and federal agencies. It handles very few stories from non-staff reporters.

Deputy Supervising Senior Editor, Washington - Ron Elving relving@npr.org

Foreign Desk

Please contact Senior Supervising Editor Loren Jenkins ljenkins@npr.org

Science Desk

Science covers health, health policy, and the environment, in addition to science and technology. Please contact Senior supervising Editor Anne Gudenkauf gudenkauf@npr.org

The Arts Information Unit

The Arts Information Unit, which is responsible for covering film, theater, books, music, dance, art, media and cultural trends, works with many freelance reporters and is in the process of growing.

Supervising Editor Laura Bertran (202) 513-2383 or lbertran@npr.org

Music Editor Tom Cole (202) 513-2192 or tcole@npr.org

Cultural Trends Editor Loretta A. Williams (877) 398-4268 lawilliams@npr.org