

A Storytelling Sampler

[A]s Louis Pasteur famously said in another context, “Fortune favors the prepared mind.” “If your story is airing tomorrow or later,” David Kestenbaum says, “you’ve got no excuse for not doing something really good.” Pedestrian writing, dull actualities, a boring structure, or a lackluster delivery can undermine outstanding reporting—especially if the news you’re presenting is not so powerful that it demands people’s attention.

While editors can help revive a dull story, they can’t help you pose the right questions in your interviews or collect the right sound when you’re on the scene. So think about ways to bring your story to life while you’re doing your reporting.

Kestenbaum remembers trying to come up with an imaginative way to report on scientists’ success in determining the genetic sequence for a plant called *Arabidopsis*. “I wondered, ‘What is there to say about it?’” But his editors felt it was important—and clearly the scientists did too. “They were having a big, earnest press conference the next day, and the press release had ‘10 Reasons Why We Sequenced Arabidopsis.’” In hopes of getting something that didn’t sound like scientists droning on an a lectern, he arranged to interview one of the researchers the night before the press conference; but when he got to the hotel room, the guest had the “10 Reasons” PowerPoint display up on his computer—a sign that the interview might not be any more interesting than the news conference. “The first reason was something like, ‘Arabidopsis grows everywhere,’” Kestenbaum recalls. “So I said, ‘Okay—let’s go find it.’”

That moment of inspiration—the idea to get the scientist to show him some examples of this plant that grows “everywhere”—ended up shaping the whole top of the story:

KESTENBAUM: People always ask Joe Ecker, “Why Arabidopsis?” Why not the rose? Why not iceberg lettuce? Ecker is a biologist at the Salk Institute. He was in D.C. for yesterday’s announcement. On a laptop in his hotel room, he’s pulled up a top 10 list of reasons why Arabidopsis. Mostly, it was easy, he says. The plant has a small, compact genome, but it is related to broccoli and its genes could be used to design crops that would grow almost anywhere.

ECKER: Arabidopsis is found from the equator to the Arctic. And there are -- a number of varieties of Arabidopsis will grow under a whole host of different conditions. So, cold, hot, increased salt, etc.

KESTENBAUM: Ecker says you could probably find one growing in a sidewalk crack. So we go on a little field biology expedition. Ecker checks the soil of plants in the hotel lobby -- no luck. Outside in the cold night air, the sidewalk cracks are bare. So Ecker picks through a bed of decorative cabbages on 11th Street.

[Sound of traffic]

ECKER: It’s kind of dark here. No, it looks like the gardeners have done too good of a job of weeding. You know, one would pull it out if you saw it. It’s a garden variety weed. It’s a good weed. It grows fast, it sets seeds and it gets the heck out of there.

KESTENBAUM: That's another reason plant geneticists are fond of Arabidopsis. You can cram a lot of them in a small space and they reproduce quickly...

Even though they couldn't find Arabidopsis growing nearby, Kestenbaum managed to get the scientist out of the hotel. In the process, he created a scene of the researcher examining plants in the lobby and crouching down to peer at sidewalks in the winter darkness.

When Noah Adams wrote a piece on the eightieth anniversary of the Scopes trial, he began it in Dayton, Tennessee, where the trial took place. That's not in itself unusual. But Adams let a local farmer start his story:

ADAMS: If you drive into Dayton and go to the Courthouse Square, the first person you might talk with is O.W. Wooden. The tailgate of his truck is open, and he's selling pickled okra and jams and jellies. He has a farm in the hills outside of town. Mr. Wooden, when he was young, got to travel a bit in the service.

WOODEN: I was in Panama, see, and this Panamanian lived there, you know, and he asked me what part of the States I was from. And I told him I was from Tennessee -- Dayton, Tennessee. "Oh," he said. That's Monkey Town," he said. Yeah. And I reckon that's known all over the world everywhere I've been.

ADAMS: And the second question then, everywhere he's been, is: "Well, what do you think about the theory of evolution?"

WOODEN: They's trying to, you know, tell you that people come from monkeys, you know, and all that stuff, and it couldn't be right. Monkeys, to me, is like a chicken, and you know what a man is. It's just one of them things, and people's people.

Adams doesn't have to say something like, "Eighty years later, the debate over evolution continues"—because he's *shown* us the same thing by introducing us to this man who fervently believes "people's people."

All of the reports we've been considering are constructed around specific locations—from the Supreme Court to downtown Dayton, Tennessee. The most powerful radio stories are often built around scenes, but those scenes can be evoked in different ways.

Reporter Robert Smith is a master of using sound to put us in a place quickly, and to set the tone of a story. Here's how he got us into the subject of a Seattle high school that was teaching science by the "inquiry method"—letting students ask and answer their own questions:

SMITH: Here's today assignment in intro biology: test different parts of the school for the presence of bacteria. Take a guess which room every teen-ager wanted to check.

[Sound of toilet flushing]

SMITH: That's right -- the boys' bathroom. Freshman Joseph McMurry is a brave scientist facing the great unknown.

McMURRY: We're about to put this tape onto the bathroom toilet seat and take it back off, collecting the bacteria.

SMITH: He leans over the rust-stained porcelain.

McMURRY: Now I don't know whether to touch the rim of the toilet or the actual seat.

SMITH: And he realizes too late why most real scientists wear gloves.

McMURRY: (sighs) I'm going to wash my hands as soon as I'm done with this.

This is a serious education story that looks at the value and purpose of an unconventional approach to teaching science. Stated that way, however, it would itself have come across as a lesson. Smith knew the sound of a toilet flushing would be like nothing else on the air that day—and would be sure to get a laugh. “What we do is both informative and entertaining—part of our mission is to keep people listening, and keep people engaged with the radio. And so you use sound, or a technique or a trick, to make people pay attention.”

If you're going to be there to record scenes like this, you have to do plenty of homework; otherwise you're sure to arrive at the school the day *after* the students have done their experiments. So plan ahead. “I went up to West Point to do a story there,” Smith says, “and I asked everything like, ‘There’s some sort of reveille, right? What time does that happen? *Where* does it happen? What do they do there? They fire off a cannon? Where is that? What time is that? They raise the flag? When is that going to happen? Is there some sort of bell system between classes? Do they eat lunch all together?’ You start to track all of these moments when you want to be there.”

Smith says it's especially important to know about “transition” moments—when a school event begins, when a factory is shut down for the day, when the shifts at the diner change, and so on. For example, he says if you're doing a story on commuting, make sure to think about where and when you'll do your interviews. “These are a lot of things that may seem tangential to the actual content of the story, but when you start to think about how you're going to put the story together, you realize, ‘I really want to talk to this guy about his commute and I guess I want to do it in his car.’” Ask yourself how you'll get into the scene. Should you start recording as he enters the car, turns on the engine, and pulls out of the driveway? Do you want to have the sound of him pulling into the parking place at his job? “Any story worth its salt has an action,” Smith says, “and the action has to take place somewhere, and you just think about what is that action and how can I be there?”

Tom Goldman asked that question—and included the answer in his profile of fitness guru Jack La Lanne:

GOLDMAN: Be there between 7 and 7:30 in the morning, I was told. That's when Jack La Lanne finishes his daily two-hour workout. Hitting the weights at 5:00 every morning is not bad for an 89-year-old. Still, driving to his home in the rolling hills near the central California

coast, I wondered how much old age had changed him from the days of his TV show when a young, vital Jack La Lanne was frozen in time.

[Sound from the Jack La Lanne show]

LA LANNE: I'm not talking about the hangover, the kind that you get from overindulgence. I'm talking about the kind you get from a lack of exercise and eating too much of the wrong foods. You know, you're hanging here and hanging here and everything's hanging. That's the kind of hangover I'm talking about, and I'm going to show you how to firm up, how to...

GOLDMAN: Trim and muscular in his trademark one-piece jumpsuit, La Lanne was the perfect balance of chirpy optimism, you can do it and drill sergeant discipline, counting, forever counting as he led the exercises.

[Sound from the Jack La Lanne show]

Mr. LA LANNE: One, two, three, four.

[Sound of water splashing]

GOLDMAN: When I finally meet Jack La Lanne, he is -- What else? -- counting his way through a morning workout. Wearing a bright red bathing cap and blue swim trunks, he's doing water resistance exercises in an outdoor Jacuzzi. The rippled weightlifter's physique is gone and there's 89-year-old sag here and there, but there is muscle definition in the arms and shoulders. When he turns away, his back is broad. And La Lanne is working as much as he ever did.

Goldman gives us two scenes here—one of La Lanne as he appeared (though of course we can only hear him) many years ago, and another as he looks today.

He also puts himself in the piece—something most reporters are reluctant to do. But there are situations and occasions where that first-person approach is an essential part of the story. When Rob Gifford took listeners along with him as he traveled across China on Route 312—the Chinese equivalent of our Route 66—he interacted with the people he met. And his interactions told NPR listeners a lot about what modern China is like:

GIFFORD: This is the former Communist heartland where the Communist Party first expanded in the 1930s. Now, though, the area is dotted with churches. In the whole of China, according to some estimates, there are as many Christians as there are Communist Party members. That's roughly 60 million people, and it's not just the old.

LOU LIUXIN: (Chinese spoken)

GIFFORD: (Chinese spoken)

GIFFORD: Thirty-year-old Lou Liuxin says she became a Christian when she was 20. "I felt a complete emptiness in my life," she says. "I was attracted to Christianity as soon as I first read the words of the Bible."

Many people in these poor, dry, hopeless villages put all their hope in Route 312 and the journey east to find work, but Lou Liuxin has found the hope that will sustain her

right here, and she's not going anywhere. After a long wait, it becomes clear that the pastor is not going to show up today. It's then that the situation for the visiting foreigner takes a surprise turn.

The service was supposed to start at 10:30 and the pastor is not here.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Chinese spoken)

GIFFORD: OK. So the people in the church are sitting, waiting for the service, and they've asked me if I will preach the sermon. This is not something I was expecting when I arrived.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Chinese spoken)

Unidentified Woman: (Chinese spoken)

GIFFORD: OK. Here's an 83-year-old lady who is asking me to preach the sermon.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Chinese spoken)

GIFFORD: (Chinese spoken)

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Chinese spoken)

GIFFORD: I'm trying to explain that this isn't really something I'm used to doing...

In the end, Gifford *does* preach the sermon, just as in other pieces from this same series he engages Chinese factory employees, cross-country bicycle riders, migrant workers, and many others. Still, he isn't the focus of these stories; *they* are. He is a guide. His presence helps us to understand and visualize the Chinese people he meets, none of whom speaks English.

Many other reporters put themselves in their stories—and the technique can be effective, as long as it doesn't come across as self-indulgent, or affect the truth or outcome of the story. Consider this opening of a piece by science reporter John Nielson. The intro described it “the first of three stories on the links between transportation decisions and environmental changes” (which one editor described as “more of a threat than an intro”). But the moment Nielsen starts to speak, you realize he's in a plane, talking over the roar of the engine:

NIELSEN: At dawn, looking down from a metro traffic news plane, the Washington, D-C freeway system looks like an urban planner's dream. Tiny little cars, evenly spaced, zoom towards the city along three main highways, and then around the city on an eight-lane Beltway. Traffic seems to be light. Everything seems to be moving smoothly.

Then people get up and go to work.

TRAFFIC REPORTER: We'll hit about ten miles per hour southbound on the 270 spur. We still have a slow drive. Oooh, eastbound 66, it's an accident, gang, near

Nutley Street. If you're heading to the Wilson Bridge out of Virginia, delays begin at Van Dorn Street...

Once again, the reporter has gotten us involved quickly by putting himself in the first scene. And he gave us the first-person point of view without even writing in the first person.

There are many other production devices that radio reporters can use that would not as effective—or even possible—in other media. Here's how Don Gonyea began a piece on the Bush Administration's reaction to a human rights report:

GONYEA: ...Top administration officials denounced a recent report from the group Amnesty International about alleged human rights abuses at the U-S military detention center at Guantanamo Bay. Listen to the list of adjectives. President Bush.

BUSH: It's absurd.

GONYEA: Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

RUMSFELD: Reprehensible.

GONYEA: General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

MYERS: Irresponsible.

GONYEA: Press secretary Scott McClellan.

McCLELLAN: Ridiculous.

GONYEA: And this from Vice President Cheney.

CHENEY: Frankly, I was offended by it.

With this series of one or two-second actualities, Gonyea immediately gives us a sense of how the Administration members felt. He could have said—using the language of diplomacy and politics—that they were “sharply critical.” Instead, he just let us hear it.

There's no way to illustrate all the ways successful reporters can and do use sound and editing to enhance their reporting, but a few examples may suggest the range of possibilities. When Scott Horsley was doing a historical piece on Roosevelt's wartime acceptance of the presidential nomination in 1940, the historian he was interviewing put him on hold; Horsley worked the historian's “hold music”—the wartime hit “The Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy”—into his story. When Robert Smith was reporting on the launch of the liberal radio network Air America, we heard its star anchor, Al Franken, banging on the door as he was accidentally locked out of the building. When the future of a brain-dead woman in Florida became a hot political issue in Washington, Andrea Seabrook and Don Gonyea interlaced their reports—handing the story back and forth—to depict what was happening simultaneously in Congress and at the White House. In a piece on Boston using ice-breakers to keep its harbor open, WBUR reporter Fred Thys graphically

represented how cold it was by including the moment when his MiniDisc recorder stopped working!

It's easy to scoff at these sorts of creative approaches as mere gimmicks—as distractions from the real story—but they were all very effective. The best production devices are always at the service of the reporting. Chris Joyce has done sound-rich pieces about coral reefs in the Philippines, about penguins in Argentina, and about a mountain wilderness in China. But he's a reporter first and foremost. "I love ambient sound," he says. "I think it's great for painting a picture. But it's not the main event. You can have fabulous sounds of lions roaring. But after four seconds, I know what lions sound like. People want story first of all."

Even a straightforward radio story can be more powerful than most newspaper articles. Though Bill Marimow spent most of his career as a print reporter and editor, when he came to NPR he quickly came to recognize what radio can do. "Hearing the human voice in all sorts of situations—whether they're emotional, poignant, humorous, somber—has an impact that far outweighs the one-dimensionality of the printed word," he says. As a case in point, consider this excerpt from Linda Wertheimer's piece on women soldiers wounded in the Iraq war.

WERTHEIMER: The explosion blew Connie Spinks out of the top of the Humvee. As she came down, her flak vest caught on the open door. She was hanging from the door of a burning vehicle, struggling and thinking of her mother.

CONNIE SPINKS: I'm not dying over here. You know, my mom is not going to have to bury her daughter from Iraq. It is not going to happen. So I was screaming. I was trying to do everything I can. That's why, like, when I was caught on that door, I wasn't going to just sit there and dangle, you know, I was trying to move, and, like, these two fingers are broken, you know? Like, I could see them, they were split open—like, I could see my bone, I could see the blood. I didn't care that, like, I was on fire. I didn't care that I could smell burning flesh. And I was trying to live.

WERTHEIMER: She got her vest un-Velcroed and fell to the ground screaming, she says, because she could not move her legs. Members of her unit pulled her to safety, and she began the journey to Brooke Army Medical Center. Her parents, who had never flown before, flew to San Antonio to see her. Her mother has stayed since October.

ANNETTE SPINKS: My husband couldn't deal with it. He had walked in the room, he turned around and walked back out. And he went to the room and he just cried. He cried and he cried. "But my daughter is hurt."

The actualities of the soldier and the details added by the reporter combine to tell a story that is as vivid as a war movie. "Someone recounting a story is just as good as being there, and often better," says science reporter David Kestenbaum. So always try to get *stories*—not just sound bites—from of the people you interview. "The odds that you're going to be there at the moment of some exciting action are really pretty small. But the odds that something interesting *did* happen to them—and it's a story they can *tell* you—the odds of that are very high."