

The Commentary

1. Introduction

Radio listeners have a right to objective and factual reporting. They rely on journalists giving them correct, unprejudiced and balanced information about events and developments.

Listeners do not want to be manipulated – and they shouldn't be. For us journalists, this means that we should report the facts and give background information. Our listeners are hardly ever interested in our personal opinions. They should never become visible in the news we write, or in our reports, analyses and background pieces. We will not be credible with these informative formats if our personal opinions shine through.

However, there is one journalistic format that is different. A format that is more or less in total contrast to the above-mentioned rules: the commentary.

2. Definition

A commentary contains and explains a journalist's personal opinion about a controversial issue. Unlike a radio report, it can not be objective or balanced. It always reflects a subjective point of view and the subjective judgement of the author.

The main aim of a commentary is **not** to inform the listeners about facts, events or developments. **That** should be done in other parts of the programme. Instead, the objective of a commentary is to complement the reporting about a current issue, to discuss and evaluate the issue and show possible consequences. A commentary confronts listeners with a clearly stated opinion about the issue and aims to make them think about how they themselves feel about this issue.

Length of a commentary: between 2 and 4 minutes.

3. When and why do we use this journalistic format?

Strengths and weaknesses of the format

A commentary is a journalist's critical evaluation of a topic. This personal opinion and line of argumentation should help listeners form their own opinions. Listeners will either agree or disagree with the journalist's judgement. In any case, the journalist's clearly stated opinion will not leave them indifferent.

Different commentaries concerning one subject will make the listeners more critical and aware of problematic issues.

A commentary never stands alone. In a radio programme, it may, for instance, follow the news block or a report. It is important that the topic of the commentary has already been covered in the programme. That way, listeners already know the basic facts before they are confronted with an opinion about the issue. However, the commentary must be clearly separated from the informative parts of the programme through an introduction and a back-announcement. These studio announcements should tell listeners that they are about to hear a commentary and give the name of the commentator.

Example:

Host's introduction:

"As we heard in the news, Government Ministers and a representative of Company PILLCO have signed the contract to build the new factory. We now hear Mary Miller's commentary on this subject."

<Commentary>

Host's back-announcement:

"That was a commentary by Mary Miller on the building of the new chemical plant."

The studio introduction and back-announcement tell listeners that this part of the programme reflects only one person's opinion – that of the commentator – and not the broadcaster's opinion.

Commentaries in newspapers usually reflect the political standpoint of the journal, of its publisher or owner. Public broadcasters, however, must give room to all relevant political standpoints in their programmes. Therefore, they have to make sure that they broadcast commentaries from authors with differing opinions: if the programme includes a "pro" commentary today, it should contain a "con" commentary tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Opposing commentaries can even run back-to-back in one programme. This creates pluralism within the programme and listeners can derive new ideas and arguments from the different opinions presented.

Radio commentaries can deal with politics, business, culture, social issues, religion, ecology, sports, etc. - practically anything. But is "anything" really of interest to the listeners? Of course not. The subject of a commentary should be **topical, controversial, and of common interest**. It must be an issue, about which people can have vastly different opinions. And it must be possible to express these controversial opinions on the radio and present them for discussion.

Even though, commentaries usually deal with current affairs, it can in some cases also make sense to write a commentary about something that happened years ago – for instance if new aspects have been unearthed and are now being discussed, which show the facts in a different light. This will turn even a topic that is a century old into a current issue worthy of a commentary.

In most radio stations, there is a question of who *should* or who *could* be allowed to write commentaries. Are only senior editors qualified to share their views and opinions with the listeners? Or could a younger journalist also be allowed to do this?

The rule of thumb is: anybody who qualifies can and should write commentaries. Journalists who want to write commentaries must have expert knowledge about the topic in question. They must have an opinion on it and be willing to make the reasons that led them to this opinion public. They have to be able to make their standpoint clear.

And they should have a strong personality. They will need it to be convincing and credible, and to confront any criticism that their commentary may trigger. Commentaries often lead to animated discussions if superiors, colleagues or listeners do not agree with the argumentation. It is important that the commentator can then stand the pressure arising from such a situation. And commentators can only do this if they have a strong and steadfast personality.

Pros and cons of a commentary

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Structures facts, developments and background information and evaluates them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Commentator must have comprehensive knowledge of the subject in question (must have spent a lot of time researching the topic).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Helps listeners form their own opinions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Not every commentator has the strong personality and charisma that are required.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Authentic (strong and convincing expressions of opinion).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Commentators might face criticism from people who think differently.

4. How is it done?

In a commentary, radio journalists can do something they are not allowed to do in a news item or a report. They can clearly voice their opinions and do not have to remain neutral and objective. But this is by no means as easy as it sounds.

Radio commentaries have to follow certain rules. After all, radio is not a coffee shop, where everybody can just blurt out what they think.

A housewife, a university student or a manual labourer may also have their own opinions – but they will not be heard on the radio. So what gives the journalist the privilege to present his or her views on the air?

First of all, any journalist who wants to write a commentary must meet certain criteria: they must have expert knowledge about the topic of the commentary. They have to know the background and the context, must know the pros and cons. They also have

to have their own opinion on the issue and be courageous enough to express it. And they must be able to present facts and logical reasons backing up their opinion. Listeners will not take a commentary seriously if they realise that the journalist is critical or disapproves of something, but is unable to provide good arguments for this point of view.

A commentary is a value judgement, but it must never turn into emotional gossip or even hate-speech. When writing a commentary, you can use very lively and persuasive language. You can play with words, use irony and sarcasm and other rhetoric means. After all, you want to sound convincing to your listeners. But you must always make sure that you are not insulting or hurting anyone personally. A commentary is a well-worded opinion piece – but no place for personal insults or calls for hate and violence.

As your objective is to convince your listeners with your commentary, it is essential to plan its logical structure and think about your argumentation beforehand. Write down the answers to some key questions before you start writing your commentary:

- What is the issue about which you will write a commentary?
- What question about this topic do you find controversial and worthy of a commentary? (Be sure to articulate a specific question here.)
- How would you answer this question? Or rather, what is your opinion about this question?
- What evidence do you have for building an argument to persuade others that your opinion is valid?
- What are some opposing arguments to your opinion, and how will you counter those arguments?
- What resolution do you want listeners to walk away with after hearing your commentary?

Structure

4.1. Opening statement

A strong opening statement is essential for a good commentary. This is your first opportunity to express your opinion and to attract the listeners' attention.

Example

Strong opening statements:

“This is hard to believe! ...”

“Today is a bad day for the residents of BIGTOWN! ...”

“What on earth was the government thinking? ...”

“The day has finally come! ...”

“This is great news for the residents of BIGTOWN! ...”

“The government deserves praise! ...”

Opening sentences like these “catch the listeners by the ears” and get them interested in what follows. They will want to know how you continue, what reasons you give to back up this strong opening statement - regardless of whether they share your point of view.

As you now have the listeners’ undivided attention, you have to make sure that they will keep listening.

4.2. The facts

You should now quickly summarize the most important facts. Even if your topic is in the news and of general interest, you cannot automatically assume that your listeners remember all the relevant details. That is why you should include the most important facts in your text.

Examples:

- **Con:** “So, the contract will be signed after all. A contract that will allow the pharmaceutical company PILLCO to build a plant in BIGTOWN and to tap into yet another never-ending source of profit. But for many people living in BIGTOWN, this will mean relocation and pollution. Relocation, because their homes will be demolished. Pollution, because the plant will pollute the area with harmful substances. And no modern filtering systems will be able to stop that...”
- **Pro:** “After long and difficult negotiations, everything has finally come to a good end. The pharmaceutical company PILLCO can start building its new plant in BIGTOWN as soon as the old, dilapidated houses have been removed. This will be a happy day for many residents of BIGTOWN: they can move into new and modern apartments, and they will be able to find new and urgently needed jobs at the factory. In addition, prices for prescription drugs will go down in our country, once the new factory operates...”

You have now mentioned the most important facts:

- The contract for building the new plant has been signed;
- Before it can be built, the old houses will have to be torn down and residents rehoused;
- There is the risk that the new plant will cause pollution;
- New jobs will be created;
- Medications will be cheaper.

The listeners have the basic information they need – they know what the commentary is about. The fact that you have already emphasized some of the facts and left out others is in the nature of things. After all, you are not writing a report, but a commentary.

4.3. Argumentation:

This is the central part of your commentary. Here, you should give further details, possibly some background information.

Present arguments and details that support your opinion, but also devote attention to the arguments of your opponents in the form of a critical discourse. You can weaken their arguments by counter-balancing them with your own, much stronger ones. This way you can unveil your line of argument to your listeners step-by-step and hopefully convince them.

Example

List of arguments:

- Residents of BIGTOWN are demonstrating against re-housing;
- Protests against the dependence on foreign investors;
- What happens if it turns out in a couple of years that the factory is not profitable for the pharmaceutical company PILLCO?

but also

- New opportunities for domestic suppliers;
- Potential for further investments;
- The neighbourhood is so run-down that the houses would soon have to be demolished anyway;
- The plant is urgently needed because many poor people cannot afford expensive imported prescription drugs.

You have now presented the facts, numerous pro and con arguments. Be careful that your commentary stays an opinion piece and does not develop into a background report. Make sure that you weigh the arguments - that you tell your listeners why you think some arguments are more valid than others. Tell them your personal opinion on the issue. The listeners can then decide whether they agree or disagree with your conclusions and make up their own minds about the situation.

This is followed by:

4.4. Assessment / Conclusion

At the end of the commentary, you can summarize your point of view again in one strong, clear statement. Avoid being indecisive in your closing sentences.

Example (not good):

“By signing this contract to build the new plant, the government may have made a big mistake because the majority of residents in BIGTOWN is against it. But the pharmaceutical company’s decision could also trigger more urgently needed investments from other foreign sources. Only the future will tell us whether today’s deal was good or bad.”

With this wishy-washy ending, the commentator leaves the listeners guessing. They will think that the commentator does not know what to think about the issue, because he (she) does not make his (her) standpoint clear. In this case, the “commentary” was a waste of time and effort. The objective of making it easier for the listeners to form their own opinions was not achieved.

An effective ending is just as important for commentary as a strong opening sentence. Try to build a bridge between your first and final sentences. Do not let your commentary simply fade to nothing.

Examples (strong ending):

- **Con:** “...The demonstrations of the residents, the warnings from environmentalists, the sceptical analyses of countless experts – all this was in vain. The factory will be built – totally disregarding the will of the people. And that is truly scandalous!”
- **Con:** “...With the signing of the contract today, the fate of BIGTOWN was sealed. The people who live in this part of town will be torn away from their old familiar neighbourhood and forced to live in faceless new apartment blocks. And where children once played in the gardens, factory chimneys will soon pollute the air. Today was a terrible day for the people of BIGTOWN!”
- **Pro:** “...Reason has triumphed. Those who wanted to stop progress were not successful. The pharmaceutical plant will be built despite all efforts to torpedo this project. Now, foreign investors will undoubtedly also start constructing roads and rail links, and possibly even a new airport. Millions of Euro in foreign investment will rain down on BIGTOWN. There is only one way to put it: today was the first day of BIGTOWN’s bright new future!”
- **Pro:** “...Building the plant will only have positive effects for our town. The local economy will prosper and new jobs will be created. And many people of BIGTOWN, who still live in run-down houses without sewage and electricity today, will soon be able to move to bright new homes. This is a very good development for the residents of BIGTOWN!”

Presentation

It is not only the contents of a commentary that is important, but also the way it is presented. A commentary is one person’s subjective opinion – the author’s. He or she is convinced of the line of argumentation and of the conclusions drawn. And that is why a commentary will sound more authentic and powerful if it is read on the air by the author.