

## The News

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### 1. Introduction

It's a daily routine for all of us: whenever we want to know what is going on in our region, in our country or in the world, we simply tune into the news on the radio.

The radio newscast will bring us up to date on the most important events and issues within a few minutes. The News is precise, brief, neutral and nevertheless interesting and intriguing. At least that's how it should be.

A radio programme without news is like flowers without a scent or a birthday without a cake – possible, but not the real thing. Hardly any listener wants to do without regular newscasts. The news is the calling card of each and every broadcaster.

If the news is credible and understandable, listeners will also rate highly the radio station as a whole.

That's why it is essential for journalists to prepare and phrase their news with the utmost care and to adhere to certain rules. Above all, journalists must ask themselves: is this information really new? What is important about the information? Is it interesting or useful to the listener?

Only once these questions have been answered affirmatively, can the journalist start to write a news item and compile a news broadcast.

### 2. Definition

Radio news is current, topical information on events, facts and opinions. It is **objective** and **must not contain the journalist's opinion**. The language of the news is simple and precise.

In most cases, news reports are spoken texts only. Sometimes, news items also include short sound bites from a reporter, a correspondent or a statement from a person mentioned in the news item.

A news broadcast is made up of news items about a variety of topics (politics, economics / finance, culture, sports etc.). These news items can again be subdivided into categories like world news, regional news and local news.

<b>What is news? (Examples)</b>
- Political activities (government, opposition, parliament, political parties)

- Political developments / decisions
- Wars
- Natural catastrophes and disasters
- Accidents / misfortunes
- Crime
- Conferences
- Rallies / demonstrations
- Business activities
- Social issues and problems
- Cultural activities
- Outstanding scientific / cultural achievements
- Awards / awards ceremonies
- Unusual / exceptional events and issues
- Sports results
- Human-interest-stories
- The weather

### 3. When and why do we use this journalistic format? Strengths and weaknesses of the format

The news informs listeners about current events and developments. The information has to be new, interesting and relevant to the lives of the listeners.

The news can also update listeners' knowledge about ongoing developments and events.

Furthermore, the news supplies listeners with the information they need to form their own opinions about things that are happening and make them more aware of certain issues and problems.

#### Example:

The international pharmaceuticals company PILLCO plans to build a new factory in the run-down neighbourhood of BIGTOWN. People living in this neighbourhood will have to be relocated so that the factory can be built. The company has already negotiated a contract with the state government, which will be signed by the responsible parties **today**. This will be followed by a reception and a press conference. At the same time, opponents of the project are demonstrating on the streets of the city.

The listeners already know that the factory will be built, that the contract has been negotiated and that many people from BIGTOWN will have to be rehoused. So all **this is no longer news**.

However, the fact that the contract will be signed **today** is, in fact **news**. The news

also includes who will be signing the contract and what will be said in the subsequent speeches and the final press conference.

All of this is topical and relevant to the listeners (possibly because it affects them personally or somebody they know). Furthermore, what is said at the press conference may have an effect on listeners' opinions or give them cause to rethink their positions.

The fact that opponents of the project are demonstrating today is also news.

News is usually broadcast at certain times: on the hour, on the half-hour or at other regular intervals. It is important to stick to a certain time schedule so that listeners know when they can tune in for the news.

## Pros and cons of the news

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Informs listeners about relevant events, facts and opinions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Only supplies the essential information – not all details of the story</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is objective, unbiased</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is restricted by a tight time framework (much information in a very short time)</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gives listeners the information they need to form their own opinion</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The journalist is often confronted with too much material (agencies, internet, press releases etc.). The journalist therefore needs to make quick and precise decisions as to what is relevant to the listeners</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is broadcast at regular intervals, usually on the hour. Listeners can form a habit of tuning in at these times to find out what's new.</li></ul>	

## 4. How is it done?

Writing the news is not only a highly-responsible activity, it is also very work-intensive. A news editor is frequently inundated with material from the most varied sources.

Where can a news journalist find information?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- News agencies</li><li>- Correspondents</li><li>- The Internet</li><li>- Government offices</li></ul>

- Politicians
- Press releases
- Public announcements
- The police
- Hospitals
- Personal contacts
- Insider sources
- Newspapers / other media
- Interviews run by the journalist's own station or other media
- Through personal observation

Information from all these sources can pile up on the news editor's desk. It's now his or her task, to separate the relevant from the irrelevant information. The editor might also have to do additional research: to verify whether information is true or to get an opposing view from other key players.

Then, the news editor has to write all the individual news items for the broadcast. They have to be brief, precise, easy to understand and objective.

All this happens under extreme time pressure. And that's why the news editor has to go about his or her tasks in a systematic manner.

At the beginning of compiling a news broadcast he or she has to ...

#### 4.1 Select the information that's relevant to the listeners.

**What is new?** This is the first question that news editors always have to ask themselves.

One of the greatest assets of the radio is that it's a very fast medium – only surpassed by the internet at times. Radio journalists can supply their audience with information much quicker than tv- or newspaper journalists.

In the example mentioned above, **news** is the fact that the contract for the construction of the pharmaceuticals factory will be signed **today**, that there will be a subsequent reception and press conference and that the opponents of the project are demonstrating.

#### 4.2 What is important about this new information?

This should be the second question that the news editors ask themselves.

What is **important** is that the contract is being signed **today** because this represents a decisive step on the way to implementing the project. It is also **important** for the listeners to know **who** will be signing the contract, so that they know who is responsible. And finally, it's **important** for the listeners to find out **what** is said at the

subsequent press conference: Is there news relating to possible compensation for those people being rehoused? Will there be an announcement with information regarding the number of new jobs the project will create? What environmental protection measures are planned?

All this is important because it affects a great number of people and because it interests an even larger number of the listeners. It's important because it takes place "right on the listeners' doorstep". It's important because it helps them understand things happening in their community. And it's important because it points out potential hazards of the project (for instance if no environmental protection measures were planned).

Of course, news editors will also find a great deal of irrelevant information among the material they get every day. Particularly press releases and political statements are often nothing but hot air. Sometimes – especially on slow news days – news editors are tempted to use such material for the news. But the result is that in the end, the whole news broadcast sounds boring. The listeners will switch off – first mentally and then the radio-set.

That's why it is important for the editors to apply strict rules on what's news-worthy and what's not. The words of presidents or ministers do not automatically have weight just because these people hold a high office. These dignitaries should only be quoted in the news if they are actually saying something substantially new or if their statement adds a new twist or angle to an ongoing issue.

### 4.3 Verifying information

If you have two or more independent sources of information for a news item, you can usually assume that that bit of information is correct. You can begin to write your news item. However, if you only have a single source of information, you should be very careful. Always try to double-check the information through personal research.

#### **Example:**

News agency A is the only source to report that the Chairman of PILLCO's Board of Directors has guaranteed all those being rehoused substantial financial support.

Before you include this information in your news item, you should double-check by calling the pharmaceuticals company. Ask them – as your second source – whether this statement is really correct. Once you've established that it is true, you can include the statement in your news item.

If you cannot get confirmation, leave the chairman's statement out of your news broadcast. Just imagine what would happen if you broadcast this news, only to discover that the information is not correct: the affected listeners would be expecting financial support, only then to find out that they will not receive any money. You

personally, but particularly the station, would suffer a huge loss of trust and credibility, which would be very difficult to reverse – if this is at all possible.

**It's better to be correct and reliable, than to try to be the fastest and broadcast unchecked information. If you don't know it, don't say it.**

Of course, the following could also happen: you've received information which you think is so important that it should be broadcast immediately – even though you only have a single source. In this case, you have to make it absolutely clear in your news items that this is a non-confirmed event or information.

**Example:**

News agency B reports: "A court order is due to put an end to the demolition of buildings in BIGTOWN before the end of the day. This means that the project to build a pharmaceuticals factory in BIGTOWN is dead."

As you only had one single source for this information, you tried to double-check by doing additional research on the subject – but to no avail. The court did not provide any information. Neither PILLCO nor the Ministry for Industry knew anything about it.

You have to make all this crystal clear in your news item.

**Example:**

"The demolition of the buildings in BIGTOWN **will allegedly** be blocked by a court order later today, B news agency **claims** to have **heard** from court sources. There is no confirmation for this yet. When asked, the pharmaceuticals company, PILLCO, and the Ministry for Industry said that they knew nothing of the supposedly pending court order. They both assumed that the construction of the factory would go ahead as planned."

With your choice of words, you have made it clear that this development is still unconfirmed, based on considerable uncertainties. Furthermore, you have informed listeners about the standpoints of those involved. You should pick up on the further development of the story in a later broadcast. Either: "The courts have stopped the demolition of the buildings in BIGTOWN." (which would be news anyway) Or: "The demolition of the buildings in BIGTOWN has not been stopped, according to the responsible courts in BIGTOWN. A spokesperson for the court said the report issued by B news agency relating to a pending demolition injunction was nonsense."

#### **4.4 Sequence of news items within a new bulletin**

When you determine the sequence of the topics, a seemingly simple principle applies: the most important issues first. Listeners must be able to rely on this.

However, this is not always as simple as it sounds, because this selection process seems to contradict the principle of objectivity and neutrality in the news. After all: determining the “most relevant” issue is a value judgement by the news editors.

Everybody – even a news editor – has their own opinion on how to rank a topic. Editors select what **they** believe to be the most important topics for the listeners, the second most important, the third most important etc. But this subjective selection is the only solution.

However, often the sequence of the first news items is automatically determined by the nature of the events in question. If, for example, you work as a news editor of a local or regional broadcaster, the report relating to the construction of the new pharmaceuticals factory will definitely be at the beginning of a news broadcast. The project directly affects many of your listeners, it is controversial and hotly debated in your community.

Which event takes second, third or fourth place in the rundown often depends on the tastes of the editors in charge.

## 4.5 Writing news items

The principle of writing news is very simple: be precise, brief, neutral and objective, but nonetheless interesting. This is what news language is all about.

Make short sentences to ensure that listeners can understand everything quickly. Do not overload the sentences with information to make sure that the listeners are able to take in what is being said. Be neutral and objective to make sure that listeners can make up their own mind about the news.

In news, the most important information comes first – though not necessarily at the beginning of the sentence. The first sentence or the first two sentences contain the core of the information (“lead sentence”). Everything that follows just adds further detail or background, which will help listeners understand the issue and put it into perspective.

Imagine you are on a railway platform, saying good-bye to a friend. Your friend has already boarded the train and the doors will close at any moment. At this moment, you remember that there’s some information you still want to pass on to your friend. Obviously, you don’t bother with complex sentence structures or elaborate language. You express yourself clearly and precisely, since your friend will not have a chance to ask what you’ve meant:

“There was trouble during the demonstration against the construction of the new pharmaceuticals factory. Five demonstrators and three police officers were injured.”

With just a little polishing up, these sentences could almost be the lead of a news item:

“Several hundred people demonstrated against the construction of the new pharmaceuticals factory this morning. The demonstration culminated in clashes with the police outside City Hall. Five demonstrators and three police officers were injured.”

Always remember that a news item has to have a logical structure, so that listeners can understand it immediately. Each new sentence must follow logically from what has already been said, don't jump from one aspect of the information to another and back.

In a news item, the journalist should answer the six “key questions”: who, what, where, when, why and how.

**Who?** and **what?** The answers to these two questions generally form the core of the news item, i.e. this information will definitely be included in the first sentence. The answers to **when?** and **where?** are sometimes also included in the first sentence, but can often wait until the second or third sentence.

News need attribution. The **source** should be mentioned in the second or, at the very latest, third sentence. Listeners need to know where the information originated – especially if the information is controversial.

In the case of our demonstration, the police and the organizers of the protest might give you different figures for the number of participants. “Police say 400 demonstrators took part in the protest. Organisers of the demonstration put the number of participants at 2000.” If you mention both figures in the news item and where you got them from, your listeners will know that police and the organizers differ on this issue, yet you are not taking sides with either party. That way, your news stays credible and neutral.

If you are quoting a particularly controversial statement in your news item, the source must be mentioned in the first sentence.

## **Example**

### **Not good:**

“PILLCO has bribed the Minister of Industry to secure planning permission for the construction of a new factory. This is the view of the Chairman of the Environmental Protection Party, John Taylor.”

The first sentence in this version of the news item will sound like a fact to your listeners. They might even be so shocked by it that they fail to listen to the second sentence. Only later will they discover that they took a statement of opinion for a fact – because the news item was badly written. Listeners will lose trust and may never tune into your station again.

### **Better:**



“The Chairman of the Environmental Protection Party, John Taylor, claims that PILLCO has bribed the Minister of Industry. Taylor made this statement in an interview with our station. Taylor says that PILLCO only got the building permit for the new pharmaceuticals factory because it bribed the minister.”

The answers to the questions **why** and **how** will further explain the issue. They will follow once the most important facts have been presented. This information could possibly even be left out if the news item has to be very short.

## Example:

“Several hundred people (**who**) protested against the construction of the new pharmaceuticals factory (**what**) this morning (**when**). During the demonstration, demonstrators clashed with the police outside City Hall (**where**). Doctors at city hospital say (**source**), they had to treat five demonstrators and three police officers for injuries incurred during the demonstration. According to eyewitnesses (**further source**), the police used tear gas and rubber bullets against the protesters after stones were thrown at the police (**how/why**).

## News language

Radio news gives the listeners a lot of information in a very short time. Therefore, the news has to be worded in a way that it is easy to understand and to follow. News language has to be absolutely concise and neutral. And since the aim is to convey a maximum of information in a minimum of time, there is no room for literary style in the news.

- Repeat key words rather than using synonyms. Synonyms are often difficult for listeners to understand and sometimes lead to misunderstandings.
- Beware of foreign words. Do not base your manuscript on what **you** understand. Consider whether your listeners will understand it. If there is no alternative for a foreign word, you should use it and then explain it.

**Example:** “Members of the *Bundestag*, the German parliament, voted in favour of...”

- Abbreviations and acronyms need to be explained the first time they appear in a news item. Do not assume that all listeners know what UNICEF means (United Nations Children’s Fund) or UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).
- Keep numbers and figures to a minimum. They are hard to understand on the radio. If you have to use numbers, try to round them off

**Example:** not good: “987 meters...”  
better “close to 1000”

However, there are cases when it is absolutely necessary to give the exact figures and numbers down to the decimal points - particularly when reporting election results, inflation rates or exchange rates.

- Percentage rates often sound very abstract. Wherever possible, try to find different expressions for them: 50 % can also be described as “*half*” – 200 percent as “*twice*” or “*double*”.
- Draw comparisons to visualise information about size and / or distance. If, for example, you mention that a building site is about the size of two football fields, most listeners will visualise this better than if you say that the site is 29 400 square meters.
- If possible, write your news in the active voice. This will make the news item sound livelier and more natural. The passive voice often sounds like an official announcement: dry and boring.

**Example:** not good: “Rubber bullets were shot at the demonstrators by the police.”  
better: “Police shot rubber bullets at the demonstrators.”

- There are no “quotation marks” on the radio – unlike in print. So if you quote someone, use a phrase like “end of quote” to tell the listeners where the quote ends and where your journalistic text continues. Or better yet: use indirect speech.

**Example:** Direct speech: “At the press conference, PILLCO’s Chairman of the Board of Directors, David Miller, said: ‘Signing the agreement to build the new factory is important for the industrial development of the entire country. It will create new jobs, which will – in turn – increase local spending power.’”

Indirect speech: At the press conference, PILLCO’s Chairman of the Board of Directors, David Miller, said that signing the agreement to build the new factory was important for the industrial development of the entire country. Miller said it would create new jobs, which would – in turn – increase local spending power.”

## The form of the individual news items

Your station or news department should decide on a common policy regarding how all news items should begin. There are various options:

- Each item is preceded by a date-line (e.g. "New York: .... Berlin:... Moscow: ...")
- Each item is preceded by a buzzword ("Demonstrations. ...")
- Each item is preceded by a full headline "Demonstrations over pharmaceutical plant turn violent. ..."
- Each item simply starts with its lead sentence.

## The form of the news bulletin as a whole

It's just as important for your station or news desk to agree on a uniform design for all news bulletins as it is to define a certain format for each individual news item. Once again, you have numerous options:

- Musical introduction of the news broadcast (News jingle / intro)
- Music bed underneath the whole news bulletin
- Stings or short jingles between the individual news items
- A short overview of the most important news headlines at the beginning and / or at the end of the bulletin
- The weather report at the beginning or at the end of the bulletin
- Giving the name of the editor at the end
- Giving the exact time before and / or after the news bulletin

## 5. Caution – stumbling blocks – “What to do if...”

### Caution: Stay neutral and keep a distance from what you report

Carelessness in writing the news can easily lead to using tainted words and phrases. This means that you lose your professional distance and neutrality.

### Example

#### Not good:

“Today, the contract for the construction of the new pharmaceuticals factory was finally signed.”

The word “finally” creates the impression that the journalist was hoping the contract would be signed. However, this sentiment may not be shared by many of the residents of BIGTOWN. It is not neutral.

#### Better:

“The contract for the construction of the new pharmaceuticals factory was signed today after weeks of negotiations.”

#### Not good:

“The demonstrators are protesting against pollution that will be caused by the new factory.”

(Will the factory really pollute the environment or is this primarily the opinion of the environmentalists?)

**Better:**

“The demonstrators are protesting because they believe the new factory will be harmful to the environment.”

**Caution: Biased instead of neutral words**

When we try to add color to our news language, we can easily make the mistake of introducing tainted words. For instance, we may sometimes grow tired of using the word “say” (says, said etc.) in our news over and over. So we start replacing “say” (says, said etc.) with words like “emphasise”, “explain”, “claim”, “highlight” or “underline”. But unfortunately, none of these words is as neutral as the word “say”. Each of them will taint your news item in a certain way.

**Caution: Sticking to press releases, agencies and other texts**

News items often sound artificial and stilted because the news editors copied a lot of text from the original source material – for instance from an agency report or press release. But such texts are hardly ever written in good radio news language. And very often, they’re not objective – especially in the case of press releases.

So it’s your job as a news editor to “translate” this material into neutral and easily understandable news language.

It’s best to read the original agency report or press release, write down some key points and then put the source material aside. Without constantly glancing at the original text, it will be easier for you to rephrase the information in proper news language.

**What to do if...**

**a news item is too long**

This should not be a problem. As outlined in Point 4.5 (Writing news items), the most important issues come first in a news item: The core of the information is always contained in the lead sentence.

Therefore, you should be able to shorten any news item that is too long from the end. And even if you have to cut the last sentence or two, the listener will still understand the core of the information – as you’ve left the lead sentence untouched.