

WELCOME TO KIERAN COOKE'S 'BEST GUIDE TO RADIO PRESENTATION IN THE WORLD...EVER!'

Hopefully you'll find this useful! I've tried to think of EVERYTHING you'll need to know in order to get the most out of being a radio presenter. Thanks to Chrissy Rosenthal for the use of some of her ideas, too!

I've included a basic guide to 'the studio', interview skills, and an overview of editing pre-recorded material. Also I've put together a section on 'How to plan a programme', and a rough guide to 'on-air' etiquette.

Each section contains 'tricks of the trade' gained from personal experience, and there's also a few 'exercises' to help develop various skills.

All of the advice is intended to be reminders for trainers and trainees, and should form the basis for lots of practice!

Apart from the information already contained here, there are two more things to remember. The first is (in the words of Douglas Adams) DON'T PANIC. Most of this stuff isn't as frightening as it may initially appear. You'll soon get the hang of it! The second is even simpler. ENJOY it!

‘Ooooh, it’s like the Concorde flight deck...’: IN THE STUDIO

Every radio studio is filled with very technical looking pieces of equipment, but once you actually look at them properly, most behave surprisingly like the Hi-Fi equipment found in living rooms across the land.

THE ‘MIXING DESK’

Easily the most intimidating looking bit of any radio studio is the mass of knobs, lights and buttons on the console known as ‘the mixer’ or ‘the desk’. Each desk looks slightly different, but the basic idea is always the same. It is simply the link between all the equipment in the studio, and a ‘master control’ for them. Nothing goes ‘on-air’ without going through the mixing desk first. Remembering the advice ‘DON’T PANIC’, here’s a quick rough guide to what you can expect to find on most desks:

Each ‘input’ in the studio: CD player, tape deck, minidisc deck, your microphone etc is plugged into the desk. Each of these has its own ‘channel’ (a set of buttons/knobs), so that it can be adjusted individually of all the other bits. These channels are arranged in strips, running from the back to the front (‘top to bottom’) and next to each other for convenience .

So for each channel you’ve usually got (not necessarily in this order):

1. At the top (back) of the desk, a meter or two with a needle to show how loud you are (usually **PPM** or **VU meters**).
2. A yellow knob which adjusts the stereo signal (**PAN**).
3. Tone (or ‘**EQ**’ in radio speak) controls, which are usually a row of grey knobs.
4. A red ‘master volume’ or ‘**GAIN**’ control.
5. Another volume control for each channel which allows easy control because it doesn’t twist round but ‘slides’ up and down (**FADER** or ‘**SLIDER**’). Whenever the fader is ‘up’, that channel is ‘going out’ on air. Get the engineers to show you how to set the faders up initially as each desk is different. Some ‘fade’ all the way to the top, but some only part way (and old BBC mixers fade back to front, just to really confuse you!)
6. Each channel also has another knob and a button or switch to allow you to listen to it’s output ‘off air’ so you can get CD’s cued up or microphones ready without the listener hearing (**PFL** or ‘**pre fade listen**’).
7. Some desks also have ‘**fader start**’ buttons above each fader, which supposedly make your life easier because they are remote start/stop buttons which save you having to reach around to press play on your CD players or whatever.
8. And a load of other stuff that’s only there because the designers liked lights (only joking, ask your engineers to explain the quirks of whatever desk you are using).

The good news is that it REALLY ISN'T as scary as it looks (or sounds). Just like driving someone else's car, it usually takes a few minutes to get familiar with the layout of the particular desk in front of you, but you'll soon crack it! Let's look at how to get started in ANY radio studio...

‘Driving the Desk’

So. How do you ACTUALLY get a radio programme out of all this fancy kit then? Whether your mixing desk is connected to turntables, cartridge machines, CD players, minidisc machines or a computerised ‘payout system’, the basic operation is the same. the main RULE TO REMEMBER whenever you sit in front of the desk is:

Always wear your headphones. The studio may have monitor speakers through which you can hear the music you are playing etc, but these will cut out to avoid feedback as soon as your microphone is on, so you need to wear your ‘cans’ because you’ll get a much better idea of what you are ‘outputting’, and how your voice sounds in relation to any music or fellow guests’. Always check that the headphone volume is turned down before putting them on. Don’t use small ‘walkman’ style headphones or ‘in ear’ MP3 player types as they allow too much external sound in.

THE MICROPHONE

The first task once your headphones are comfy is to:

‘set the levels’ on your microphone. Use the meters on the mixing desk to help. The engineers will tell you what the maximum and minimum volume levels should be. Firstly check your own microphone, and then any others you’ll be using. **WITH THE MIC FADER DOWN** press the ‘PFL’ switch that relates to the mic channel and speak into your mic, counting to twenty **speaking at the volume you’ll be broadcasting at.** Adjust the volume using the red GAIN control on the mic channel. Set your ‘EQ’ controls to taste.

TRICK: *There’s no point setting your mic’ level while talking quietly, and then talking at a louder volume once on air! This is the most common mistake. Bear in mind that **everyone** ‘shouts’ on air, usually even without realising it. NEVER just say ‘hello’ into the microphone and assume you’ve set it up correctly! If you’ve got a cold or sore throat, use less BASS. Normally avoid getting too carried away with the EQ settings and try to keep them as close to ‘flat’ (middle) as possible. It is often recommended to ‘peak’ your voice slightly higher than the music, but basically just avoid the meter needles bouncing into the red zone, to minimise the first scourge of the presenter, **distortion.***

Get any on air guests to set their mic’s up in the same way (Everyone’s voice is different! Again, get them to count to twenty until you or your engineer, if using someone to do all the technical stuff, are happy).

TRICK: *Be aware of another scourge... **sibilance.** This is the ‘popping’ that occurs when you say ‘P’, ‘S’ or ‘T’ sounds into a microphone. Most mic’s have spongy covers to minimise this, but careful positioning of the microphone also helps enormously. Talking ‘across’ the mic rather than directly into it helps in worse case scenarios, but make sure you still sound ‘close’ and don’t pick up any background noise or echo.*

Once you are happy, release the PFL switch. When you want to talk on air, slide the mic fader upwards to the top (or position indicated by studio engineers) and speak! Lo and behold, you’ll hear yourself in your headphones, so you know you sound ok to the listener.

Microphone technique

While we are on the subject of talking on air, it is worth examining how to use the microphone. This is actually a bit more involved than it may initially appear.

EXERCISES:

- *Remember to talk more clearly than you would do at home. You are a ‘presenter’, after all, so make sure you can be understood.*
- *Don’t use slang which the listener may not understand.*
- *Develop a split personality which **doesn’t swear**.*
- *Practise reading things out loud...this helps you to develop the ability to read a few words ahead of yourself to avoid too many mistakes (this really does work!)*
- *When reading, practise varying the tone and pitch of your voice. It is amazing how dull a fairly short passage can sound if you don’t emphasise key words and phrases. Listen to Jeremy Clarkson on BBC TV’s TOP GEAR for an extreme example of how to do this well.*
- *Remember to react vocally to interviewee’s comments. Silence doesn’t work on radio! Not too many umm’s and err’s though.*
- *Practise how to introduce music, LISTEN to professional radio presenters and pick up on their tricks and techniques.*

‘CUE’ THE MUSIC

Of course there’s more to the studio than a microphone...

Before you play any pre-recorded material (music track, jingle, pre-recorded interview etc) on air you need to ‘prepare’ it, so it sounds ok and starts at the correct place. This avoids the presenter’s third scourge – ‘DEAD AIR’. 10 seconds of silence feels like an eternity on the radio, so everything must be ‘cued up’ to keep tumbleweed at bay.

Let’s take playing a track from a CD as an example:

1. Put the CD into the machine and select the desired track.
2. Ensuring the fader is down, press the corresponding fader’s PFL switch. (check all other PFL switches are off).
3. Press ‘play’ on the CD player.
4. You should hear the track in your headphones and/or studio monitor speakers.
5. Choose a loud portion of the track and adjust the corresponding GAIN control so that the highest volume doesn’t ‘peak’ too high (check with studio engineers).

6. Do not adjust the ‘EQ’ controls as these will have been pre-set by the engineers.
7. Depending on the CD player, press ‘cue’ or ‘track select’ to return to the start of the track.
8. The track is now ready to play. Release the PFL switch to return to the main output of the desk.
9. When you wish to play the track on air, slide the fader ‘up’ and press ‘play on the CD player (or ‘fader start’ on the desk).
10. You can carefully manually adjust the level once the piece is playing if there’s a really quiet section for example, but **remember to watch out for the loud bits!**

Use this procedure for every ‘pre-recorded’ input, using the corresponding PFL switches, gain controls and faders.

Once you’ve learnt how to set your microphone levels and cue your material, you’ve mastered the basics! The rest is all down to practice, and you’ll soon build up a personal ‘style’. Here’s a few tricks you could incorporate (or not!) these involve a technique known as:

‘RIDING THE FADERS’

Talking over the music gives the show real pace.

- Practice not ‘crashing the vocals’ for best results (it helps to know how long your intro is!)
- Avoid talking over too much of the track, usually no more than 30 seconds before the end, for example. If the track has an ‘end’, and not a ‘fade’, either talk before the end or after it, but DON’T start talking over the big finish as this REALLY ANNOYS LISTENERS!
- Learn how far down to fade the music for best results
- Some presenters have ‘backing music’ to avoid the risk of ‘dead air’ between tracks and during long ‘readouts’. Choose something that won’t put you off or be too messy and intrusive.
- Practice playing ‘jingles’ over song intro’s. Only use ‘dry voice’ jingles, and make sure you know that the jingle will stop before the singing starts! Fade the music slightly while playing the jingle.
- Talk show presenters usually use the faders more like ‘on-off’ switches, and they don’t need as much pace as a music based programme.
- Bear in mind that not all types of music lend themselves to being ‘talked over’. Do you really need to? Listeners normally prefer to hear the music than you, so don’t overdo it. Easy listening or classical type presenters usually avoid talking over the music for this reason, and to reduce the ‘pace’ of the programme.

EXERCISE:

- *Listen to professional radio presenters and pick up on their ‘fader technique’. Do you like it, does it suit the style of programme, do you agree with the way they use the faders? What tricks do they use (jingles over music, backing music etc)? How would you do it? Notice how fast moving breakfast shows differ from lunchtime programmes, and talk radio hardly uses any ‘fader tricks’.*

Apart from the mixing desk, the equipment in a studio is usually very individual to the station. Get the engineers to explain exactly how the various CD players, computer playout systems or whatever work, as they are all *slightly* different!

The key is to get as much practice as you can. After an incredibly short time you’ll suddenly discover that the array of once daunting controls are really not that bad after all, and you’ll be saying things like ‘I tweaked the EQ to knock the middle out but the gain was too low on the VU, so I faded it up before PFL’ing the next track in my ‘cans’...’ in no time!

‘You don’t say?...’: INTERVIEWS

- **MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL: KNOW HOW YOUR EQUIPMENT**

WORKS and how to set it up!!! This sounds obvious, but it is absolutely essential that you know how to work any piece of equipment you are using. This obviously includes the studio equipment if interviewing someone on-air, but if out and about, on absolutely no account turn up to do an interview with a borrowed minidisc or tape recorder which you’ve never used before, and say ‘Hang on a minute, let me just work out how to set this up....’ Your guest will be very unimpressed and probably treat you like an idiot if you do manage to get an interview out of them. You’ll also probably get a terrible recording (if anything) and have completely wasted your (and your guest’s) time. If you have to borrow anything, allow enough time to get familiar with it, and preferably practice first. Ensure you know everything from where the mic on/off switch is (has it got one?) to how to set the levels, to where everything plugs in, and how to get the thing to record. Oh, and make sure you use a new disc or your tape is rewound, too! There’s nothing worse than a ‘click’ noise during a great interview...

***TRICK:** Take spares with you, new batteries, spare tape/disc, and always carry a pen, notepad, spare pen and paper etc, also if you need mains power check beforehand if there is a convenient plug. It always looks impressive if you appear to be prepared for anything!*

If at all possible, find five minutes before the interview to set your levels, preferably using headphones (which you can take off before the interview!). Make sure you understand how to do this **BEFORE** you arrive at the venue, or your guest arrives. Don’t be afraid to ask them to count to twenty or give you their name and title to get their levels correct (this can act as a handy reminder in panic situations!), **BUT DON’T TAKE TOO LONG**. It’s better to get it right before you get half way through and realise that the readout isn’t moving....

***TRICK: BEWARE** that minidisc recorders and CD recorders need several seconds after recording to write the recording to a ‘Table Of Contents’ or ‘TOC’, which stores the information on the disc. **YOU MUST NOT MOVE THE RECORDER** while it is doing this, or it will erase what you have just recorded. I learned this the (very) hard way!*

Interview microphone technique

In a ‘live’ group interview, in the studio, if possible arrange for a mic for each guest, or at the very least one for you and one between them if there is a group. The sound quality will be far better! If you are only using one microphone ensure it is ‘omnidirectional’, so that it picks up sound from all directions.

Try to arrange the room so that you can place the mic on a table or chair between you and your interviewee, rather than holding it in your hand. Check it is picking both of you up before you do the interview. If you do have to stand up to interview someone with a handheld ‘unidirectional’ or ‘cardioid’ mic, avoid (a) clouting your guest on the nose with the mic, (b) holding it too far away or too close (c) waving it about too much! If you have to move the mic around, remember to face it towards the interviewee when they are talking, and towards you when it’s your turn! Beware of ‘clonking’ noises caused by bumping the mic, even the gentlest touch will create an explosion on your recording!

TRICK: *avoid sitting the mic on top of your recorder, as it will pick up the noise of the motor, which you won’t notice until you listen back to the interview later and wonder where the motorbike was in the Reverend’s front room.*

- **RESEARCH.** Do your homework! This saves embarrassing you and your interviewee. Know as much as possible about them or the subject beforehand.
- Know the names of anyone you are talking to, and any organisation/band name.

TRICK: *Quickly write down names on your pad before the interview, and if faced with a group do it across the page in the order left to right that they are sitting in front of you. Even initials to jog your memory will do if you can’t get the whole name fast enough. It sounds impressive to the listener if you appear to suddenly know a group of four people, especially when interviewing rock groups etc, and pleases your guest too. Don’t be afraid to check names or how people want to be addressed BEFORE the interview!*

- Bear in mind how much chat you *actually* need. Don’t set out to do a two hour interview if you are only after a 30 second soundbyte. Alternatively, don’t come away thinking ‘I wish I’d asked this...’ Check how long the interview can be before starting.
- Organise a mutually convenient venue for the interview. It may even have to take place on the phone, which is more difficult if pre-recording. Make sure YOU do the organising but that your interviewee is happy with your choice. Don’t expect your interviewee to put themselves out for you (Unless they are desperate to publicise something!). Bear in mind that you may be liasing with a manager or publicist, rather than the actual person you’ll be meeting. Make sure the setting is comfortable, and not too noisy with no distractions. Beware of church bells (What time are you starting?), police sirens, bad language from football games in the background if interviewing a player in the park etc. Bear the acoustics of the room in mind – a church hall will be echoey, but a front room may sound ‘dead’. Oh, and once you get set up, **SWITCH OFF ALL MOBILE PHONES!**

TRICK: *Mobiles make a ‘burbling’ noise when hunting for a signal, which you’ll only hear when using electronic equipment nearby. Your recording equipment WILL pick this up, so make sure the phone is off, and not just ‘silent’.*

- **TURN UP ON TIME!** They can be late, but YOU CAN’T!
- Make sure your guest is as comfortable as possible and forgets about the microphone, unless of course you are doing some hard edged investigative journalism, ‘Watchdog’ style!

The interview itself

- Think about the type of person you are interviewing. Rock star? Council official? War veteran? Use your common sense about how to talk to them.
- Ask ‘open’ questions whenever possible (How?.. Why?...), avoids yes or no answers.
- Don’t ask questions the audience will already know the answers to and your guest has answered a million times, ask any ‘standard’ questions in a different way.
- Let them talk! Don’t interrupt. And don’t ‘umm, err and uh,huh...’ too much while they are talking. You won’t notice you do this until you listen back to the interview!
- Don’t answer your own questions.
- Keep questions relevant to the direction you want the interview to take (and the expectations of the interviewee, are they there specifically to promote something?).
- By all means have a list of questions, it’s usually good to have three or four ready to keep the interview on track, but LISTEN and REACT to what is being said. Don’t just plough through a dozen written down questions which may have no relevance to the actual answers you are getting. If your interview sounds like a conversation, you’ve got it right. If your interviewee gets off the point, gently steer them back with pre-prepared questions. On that subject:
- Make sure you stay in control of the interview! Don’t let it get away from you! It’s good to have a rough ‘structure’ worked out beforehand if possible.
- Good basic questions are ‘When...’ ‘How long...’ ‘Why did you...’ ‘Tell me about...’ and a good last question often starts ‘And so what are your future plans..’ Don’t ask them about the future at the start of the interview, and any history at the end! Think about what type of questions you should ask, and what your audience would want to ask.
- If interviewing someone who has had some unfortunate event in their life, Make sure you check BEFORE the interview if there is anything they would rather not mention, to save embarrassment to all parties.
- Always thank your interviewee for their time, preferably in front of the audience.

‘Chop,chop...’: EDITING

‘Editing’ usually applies to pre-recorded speech, but can also include music. It allows you to fit an item into a particular time slot, or trim out anything irrelevant. Editing can also be putting things in, not just cutting them out. It can be done simply by recording from one tape or disc to another, making the edits using a pause button, using a chinagraph pencil, razorblade and ¼ inch tape, or cutting and pasting on a computer. In all cases the following apply. Oh, just in case, NEVER edit your master tape or disc directly, always ‘work’ on a copy! The only way to learn is practice, but here’s some tips :

Editing speech (interviews)

- Listen to the entire interview, and make notes about what to keep and what to chop. Listen more than once if you need to, and rewind any uncertain sections. If it’s an interview you’ve done yourself, don’t edit it on the same day as the interview if possible, come at it fresh the next day.
- Write down ‘in’ and ‘out’ cues and timings to help when you come to actually edit. For example:

IN (1’35’’) ”So how did you”

OUT(4’00) “...decided to go for it!”

IN(7’25’’) (after laughing) “It must have been...”

OUT(12’00)”...thank you very much.”

- Be ruthless! Don’t forget you’ve still got the master tape for yourself. Don’t leave anything in that doesn’t absolutely need to be there. Keep the interview as relevant as possible for the timeframe you are fitting in to, ensure it still ‘makes sense’, though.

TRICK: You can change the entire feel of a conversation – add gaps to slow it down, or take long pauses out. Also remove coughs and noises which spoil the flow. Keep anything which fits the interviewee’s personality, even if not strictly relevant. For example, suppose you were editing an interview with Billy Connolly, and he was having an off-day, you could edit the interview sympathetically to keep in all the funny bits, as that is what the audience would expect...it’s also kinder to your guest, they may be listening!

- Don’t chop too close or too much. A badly edited interview can be unlistenable! Keep the pace as natural as possible. Beware of cutting beginnings and ends of words.
- Listen back to the finished product, to check it sounds ok, and smile about your better edits!

Editing music

- Always make ‘cuts’ on the beat. Timing is *everything*!
- Use ‘fades’ between sections or ‘in’s and ‘out’s. Don’t start or stop suddenly unless that’s the effect you are trying to achieve.
- Unless you are a competent DJ, avoid ‘live’ editing. Pre-record whenever possible.

‘Wait a minute lads, I’ve got a great idea...er...’: PLANNING A SHOW

Whether you are intending to produce and/or present an entire programme, or a short feature to be included in someone else’s, there is one rule...

1. **ALWAYS PLAN YOUR SHOW.** The audience will easily be able to tell the difference between a planned, thought out programme, and a ‘throw it together as we go along’ one.

‘Planning’ simply means that you as the presenter know when things will happen, so nothing catches you out and you don’t forget things. It allows you to tell the audience about what they can expect to hear from you. They won’t listen if they don’t know what’s coming!

Make sure you plan around the music policy/general policy or ethos of the radio station if talk based. Ensure your programme is suitable for the time of day it will be broadcast. If it is to be recorded and repeated, will it fit (style and time wise) both times?

On the subject of recording, think about the logistics of how the programme will be recorded. Will you need to make arrangements with the studio engineers? make sure you avoid time specific references, or make them easy to edit out.

Remember that you can still present a programme without actually pressing any buttons or working the faders. You can ask any friendly engineers (or ‘Technical Operators’ in radio speak) to do all that for you if you really aren’t up to it, so don’t be put off. Many famous radio presenters use T.O.’s far more than they let on! Remember to sort any help out before you get too involved with planning a programme.

TRICK: Most radio stations feature news reports of some form or another at regular intervals, usually ‘on the hour’ or half hour. This immediately provides a framework for programmes, as it allows a clean break. There are exceptions, but try to avoid 23 ½ minute radio shows, most audiences like round numbers! With this in mind divide an hour long show into say, 15 or 20 minute sections. Some presenters even draw a circular ‘clock’ or pie chart with features shown at certain times as a reminder.

Bear in mind what research you will need to do for the programme. Is there anything you’ll need to borrow, or anyone who you may need to ask for assistance with anything? Remember, both talk and music shows benefit from good research!

Before getting too carried away, check to make sure the Programme Controller is happy with your idea. Bear in mind that there may be rules you should consider, or requirements (like playing ‘station ident’s or ‘jingles’ at certain times) which might affect your plan.

Remember that if the show is to be ‘live’, you’ll need to be there beforehand to set up (avoid turning up during the news at the start of your show out of politeness to the previous presenter, who will be in a panic wondering where you are.), and need to clear up after yourself at the end. Can you get to the studio for 05.30 for the 06.00 breakfast show? What about leaving at 02.00 in the morning after the ‘Late Show’, how are you getting home?

It may help to involve friends or family in the ‘planning’ stage, but beware of forming a ‘committee’...you’ll never get a decision! You could always get other people to present the actual programme for you, but don’t take too many liberties!

Consider that you may like to make a ‘trail’ or advertisement for your programme, so that listeners know when to listen, and why they should! this can simply be a few lines for fellow presenters to read out, or a ‘highlight’ tape, with a brief description. Try to avoid sounding like a naff movie trailer, though!

TRICK: *Keep it short, don’t use all your best bits, and don’t give too much away! You want them to listen to find out more, after all!*

Whatever type of show you want to do, it is generally possible, don’t be afraid to ask for help. Check with studio engineers before you attempt anything too ambitious however!

Pre-recorded material?

TRICK: *Try to avoid using cassette tapes for recording items for broadcast, if possible. The sound quality is usually very poor. Modern minidisc or CD recorders are preferable.*

Make sure you know how long any pre-recorded items are. You don’t want to start playing a 20 minute interview with only 5 minutes of the programme left! Ensure you know the ‘in’ and ‘out’ points of any items (see below), especially if presenting a live programme. Write them down clearly so you don’t miss them!

If you have prepared a programme or feature for someone else to play on air on your behalf, ensure you include a brief note about how it should be introduced, how long it is (to the second) and EXACTLY how and when it starts and finishes. Use ‘in’ and ‘out’ cues, for example:

‘IN 00’.00’’: start of music...’

‘OUT 23’.36’’: ‘...And that’s the end of the show.’

If ‘in’ and ‘out’ with music, write ‘music’, not ‘Gampaccini’s Violin Concerto No4, second movement’. Bear in mind that there may be more than one passage of music, of course, which is where the timings come in. Make it foolproof but not too complicated for someone else to understand.

TRICK: *Under ABSOLUTELY NO CIRCUMSTANCES turn up to present a live programme with your pre-recorded items on half a dozen half rewound cassettes, with a couple of items on each cassette, hand them to your T.O. and say ‘Right, so it’s track two on tape three, followed by the first half of track one on tape four, followed by...’ and then treat him like an idiot when he gets it wrong. This has happened to me on more than one occasion!*

Some different types of programmes/elements to consider

If you want to do a '**phone in**' on your show, consider whether callers will be put on air or not, whether the studio has the technology to do it, and whether you will need help to answer calls or not. Also bear in mind that you may not have an unlimited number of phone lines at your disposal, so don't get too ambitious without checking the logistics first! Remember to allow time for listeners to understand the subject and join in. Perhaps give out the subject and then cut to a completely different feature or some music to give them time. Consider that you may need help to answer the calls, if your hands are full with doing the rest of the show, also do you know how to put calls to air if that's what the show involves? Are the callers aware they will be on air?

If you fancy yourself as a 'Shock-Jock' like Howard Stern in America, be honest with yourself first. Are you REALLY good enough to take as good as you give? You MUST have all the facts, which absolutely MUST be correct, you MUST be able to stay in control on the air, and not let your callers tear you to pieces, (which they will, given the chance) and you must NEVER lose your cool completely! NEVER associate your own views with those of the station as a whole. Beware of slander or libellous situations. Check with the Programme Controller whether this is a sensible idea!

Competitions? Do you make them 'just for fun', 'write in' (or email!), 'live in the studio' or 'phone in'. Will you need help? How will phone callers get any prizes you may give away? Do you deliver or post them (who pays for it?) or do you get them to collect from the radio station? How will competitions actually work? A very important thing to remember is to ask the caller (off-air) their name and address if you are sending them a prize, or labelling something for collection.

News/Weather? Will the radio station be having news breaks or traffic/weather reports? Most BBC stations compile their own news, while most 'Independent' stations use a central 'feed', usually IRN or SKY NEWS. Bear in mind that if your station is taking an external feed for the news, that most major stories of national importance will be covered, so don't waste energy repeating what's already been said. You can exploit the fact that your station broadcasts to the 'local area', by following a national news report with 'And now the news in our area...'

Choose the order of news stories carefully. Do this BEFORE the programme! Don't have a pile of A4 sheets spread out in front of you and randomly choose while on-air! If you are the sole 'Newshound', and there is no external feed, start the bulletin with the major national story of the day, and then the major local one (unless the local is more exciting or relevant!), and then work your way through in the order of importance to your audience, leaving any very short or silly stories to the end. News reports often end with something lighter so that the listeners don't think that the world is ALL bad! Always try to devote more time to the first story than the others, as it is the most important.

Avoid 'live' interviews in a very short (maybe 1 or 2 minute) bulletin. Edit any interviews or pre-recorded reports to their absolute shortest to get the point across (this is why politicians learn to talk in 'soundbytes') and then make sure your engineer knows clearly when to play them (pointing and waving help!) and has the 'in and 'out' cues to help. If you are doing the lot on your own, make sure the pre-recorded pieces are in order on the tape or disc. Remember that minidisc and CD players are often set to 'autocue' to the next track, which is handy, but sometimes they re-cue to the start of what you have just played, which is not. WATCH OUT!

Sports reports and celebrity gossip stories always come at the end, or in their own section of the show, not just scattered throughout.

If doing **weather** reports, the standard trick is to nick from Teletext, as it provides an easy 'instant' report for the local area. Many radio stations have a TV with this on anyway, but if not, check JUST before you leave home.

Traffic reports are more tricky, nothing annoys listeners more than inaccurate or late information, which is why most national stations use central providers, such as AA ROADWATCH or METRO NETWORKS. Depending on how involved you want to get you may need a team of people with mobile phones reporting back to you from various 'hotspots' before the bulletin (or a 'live' link for more excitement, but more tricky to do), or a quick look at local traffic reports from TV or radio before you copy them. Remember that you are broadcasting to a small community, who probably aren't interested in what the traffic is doing at the other end of the country! Keep it local because that is the advantage of being a local station. You will get more listeners if they know you are going to tell them about the roads they use. This can be a great 'selling point' for your programme. Be aware that traffic problems can clear very quickly, so even if you have just sat in a traffic jam to get to the studio, it may well have sorted itself out by the time you go on air!

Sports shows. Range from simply reading out scores from the telly during a music show, to 'live' reports from local matches and events. Bear the logistics of this in mind if you are going to have a half time report from the ground up the road, or a mate ringing you from 'The Kop' during the show. You need to know your sports stuff.

TALK BASED IDEAS

Interviews/guests on discussion programmes can be very rewarding, fun, or just a downright nuisance. Choose your subjects and guests carefully! Try to ensure they know what they are talking about. It's not a chat in the pub! Think about the pro's and con's. Have you got enough experience to deal with them or should you be asking for help?

'Plays' and readings on the radio, either sound great or dull and messy. Don't forget you may need sound effects! If you need a 'cast' make sure they have plenty of warning, and can all turn up at the same time. Rehearse just like a 'real' play. The good bit is that you don't have to memorise your lines! Print it on paper that won't 'rustle', perhaps bind loosely with no staples, or brief your players to turn pages quietly! NEVER start with loose pages...someone opens the door and....! Don't forget you'll need sound effects for full effect! Think about how you'll get these, and who will be in control of them on the night. Make sure there will be enough microphones available for all! If doing a recitation or reading, avoid reading too much in one go, have water handy for dry throats, but keep it well away from the studio equipment (especially the mixing desk). Pre-recording is preferable, as you can edit out any fluffs or bloomers.

'Magazine' programmes take a lot of research and preparation as they usually involve lots of pre-recorded items. They often cover a wide range of topics. You'll need to be up to date with any information you give out. They can be great fun to listen to as long as the pace is right. Here's a few things to consider:

- Decide whether you will have ‘live’ or pre-recorded interviews or features.
- Spread features throughout the show to avoid having to fill half an hour at the end with chat! This also allows you to promote later features at the start of the programme.
- Break up talk based programmes with music, even very short passages provide a bit of relief. Professional talk based stations started doing this when they realised that *no-one* can sustain a chat *all day*. (Mind you, we all know someone....).
- Avoid getting too bogged down with EXACTLY how long you’ll need to talk for on a live show. Even if you’ve written every word down, you’ll read it at a different speed from when you practiced it! It’s also very difficult to talk or read, *and* look at the clock at the same time. Just have a rough idea .

For Example: 09.00 Welcome...show today...phone in after this...

09.05 Pre-recorded feature (relevant to phone in)

09.20 Phone in and promote guest

09.30 Pre-recorded feature

09.40 Studio Guest

10.00 News

MUSIC BASED IDEAS

Prefer to be a **DJ**? If you are lucky enough to be given a choice, decide whether to do a **general music programme**, or a ‘**specialist**’ show, featuring one type of music. Bear in mind what type of audience you’ve got, will they really appreciate a cutting edge dance show if the rest of the station is talk based (and their average age is 78)? With a specialist show, make sure you really know your subject, and get as much information about the tracks you are playing as possible. Also bear in mind that just because you may like ‘Trad Jazz’, and want to do a regular programme have you REALLY got enough tracks to sustain more than 15 minutes of programming? If you are doing the same specialist show daily or weekly, avoid playing the same tracks every time! One or two are ok, but no more than that if possible. Borrow or buy more, or haggle with record companies who may be willing to help out (and send you free stuff! But don’t count on this if your station is very small or temporary) This really also goes for a ‘normal’ music show too. Don’t bore your audience!

Careful planning pays off, and means you feel much more relaxed in the studio, allowing you to concentrate on the show rather than panicking about how you are going to fill the time slot.

- **ALWAYS** write a playlist beforehand if possible so you can tell the audience what’s coming up. Try to use ‘peaks’ and ‘troughs’- don’t play fast – slow – fast – slow records ‘back to back’. Perhaps start with something catchy, gradually slow the pace a little with a couple of tracks, before picking up the pace again. Some radio ‘jingles’ are specifically designed to provide a transition between 2 different paced tracks, they can be very handy! Be prepared to under or over-run, always have some form of ‘rescue plan’ in mind, whether it’s a couple of extra records or a fixed length interview/feature. Plan for about 12-13 pop singles in an hour. Time them all if you feel happier, have a couple spare in case you rattle through them too fast, and be prepared to cut some out too! ALLOW TIME during the week to do this. It can be fairly time-consuming!

TRICK: *Play something popular before and after a news break, which ensures you don’t lose your audience. You may even pick up listeners who switched on just to hear the news!*

- Get some info about the tracks, even just knowing the year of release can make you sound like you know what you are talking about. Not too much waffle though!

TRICK: *‘Back timing’ your last track to fit right to the end of the show always impresses the audience!*

- Even without a track by track playlist, have a plan. As an example here’s the first hour of my Hospital Radio show, which is in my head every week, but always follows this rough idea, the timings are approximate, but the features are at fixed times:

Example:

08.00	NEWS
08.01	Intro jingle/idents
	Current track
	80’s track
08.10	First link- welcome and feature rundown-ident/personal jingle
	60’s soul track
	Link-promote phone number
08.15	90’s track
	Link-artists on tonights show...
	Station Ident
08.20	Current track ?
	70’s track
	Link-promote next half hour, promote jazz & blues feature, next artist after this is...
08.30	Station Ident/Spoof ad break (feature)
08.31	Current track
	Link- promote feature which is after next track
	? track
08.40	Jazz/Blues feature (2 tracks)
08.50	Link-that was...
	Station ident
	Current/recent track
	‘classic’ track?
08.59	Link-in the next hour...back after the news with...(artist)...
09.00	News intro ident-NEWS

Notice that I spread a mix of music throughout, try to have a ‘station ident’ (‘jingle’) at regular intervals (in reality it works out about every 15 mins), but not too many! Also I have a ‘topic’ for each time I speak, promoting what’s on the way, especially immediately before news breaks and the record before a feature. This keeps the audience feeling part of the show. You’ll also notice that I tend to fit in around 12-13 pop single length tracks in the hour.

- Decide on the style and pace of the show, and the type of competitions or phone in’s you may want to do. A zany **breakfast show** is very different from a smooth **late night** programme!

TRICK: *Radio ‘anarchy’ is very difficult to ‘wing’. It may sound fun to you in the studio, but it will probably sound like a boring, self centred mess to your listener. Every great radio show, from Mark and Lard or Chris Moyles on Radio 1 to ‘I’m sorry I haven’t a clue’ on Radio 4, no matter how chaotic it may sound, is actually carefully planned. This may be a group of ‘producers’ in the background, with a well structured list of ‘what comes next’ or it may be in the DJ’s head, but there should ALWAYS be a plan that the person in charge of the microphone understands. NEVER simply turn up with a pile of CD’s or interviews and put them on in any old order and expect your audience still to be with you at the end. (Unless that’s what they are expecting, in which case that is your ‘plan’, so make it truly random, but NOT out of control).*

Live and loud?

Think about whether the programme or item will be ‘live’, or ‘pre-recorded’. There are pro’s and con’s to each. ‘Live’ programmes have a different feel to ‘pre-recorded’ ones. Most people prefer the ‘buzz’ of a live programme, and the danger with pre-recording an entire show is that you can tweak and tweak, and lose the ‘spark’ of excitement. Sometimes, however, pre-recording is the only way to do things, if you are doing a show with lots of very short interviews and sound effects, for example.

Reasons to go ‘live’

1. The programme will be more spontaneous, unpredictable and probably more exciting, both to present, and to listen to.
2. The presenter gets a great feeling of satisfaction when things go well on a live show, and the listener can feel more ‘part’ of a live programme.
3. Interview guests may be ‘sharper’ if they know they’ve only got one chance! Make sure your own preparation is VERY thorough!
4. You can usually just turn up and do the programme without spending hours ‘polishing’ it. It’s usually less ‘involved’.

Reasons to pre-record

1. It won’t be a problem if things go awry during the programme, you can stop the recording and start again. It is a more relaxed way of doing things.
2. You won’t need to worry about any nasty surprises, you can edit out awkward guests, and add information as you go along, rather than having to prepare thoroughly for just one session.
3. Interview guests will be more relaxed, because you can work under their terms, and they

can withdraw anything they say incorrectly. They are less likely to ‘dry up’.

4. You can prepare the programme so that it sounds EXACTLY as you want it to, and usually spend as long as you like doing so.

Decisions, decisions!

So! what sort of programme is it then? Long? Short? A series or a stand alone show? Is it a general music or specialist music show (more work but more fun if it’s your favourite music, but beware of being boring!)? Is it designed to promote something or someone, or just a general magazine show? Will it enrich the listeners knowledge or just give them a good laugh? What are you trying to achieve with the programme? If you are lucky enough to be able to choose your own idea for the show, bear in mind what direction (if any) it should go in. Are you trying to find something out? Will you present it yourself? if not, ASK your presenter before you get too involved with producing it. Remember that it is a RADIO programme, and you may need sound effects and music to add dimension. Especially with talk based programmes, give the show or feature a structure, preferably a beginning, middle and end, which ties up the ends and draws conclusions. If it’s going to be a series, make sure you can sustain it!

EXERCISE: Listen to professional radio programmes, either talk or music based, depending on what you are aiming towards. Notice how the programmes are put together, and how they are presented. **Freak out** other road user’s by practicing DJ’ing in the car...

‘...Hey, Mr DJ, play a song for me...’: DOING A RADIO SHOW

Whether live or pre-recorded, the same rules apply. Be prepared to lie a bit too! Some things apply to both Talk and Music based programmes. The Programme Controller will tell you their own Do’s and Don’ts, but here’s some useful ‘things to remember...’

...BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME

- When about to leave home to do a ‘live’ programme, **CHECK** to make sure you’ve got **EVERYTHING** you need...headphones, playlist, names of guests (!), CD’s, etc. You can’t stop the show and pop home once it’s started!

***TRICK:** If the station uses an external news feed, you’ll need to ensure that you’ve got an accurate clock or watch (to the second) so you don’t miss the first minute, or have 30 seconds of silence while waiting for the news to start. Most studios use ‘radio controlled’ clocks, which are supposed to be deadly accurate, but it’s usually a good idea to set your watch **EXACTLY** with the speaking clock before leaving home just in case the studio clock has gone wrong, and as a double check when you arrive at the studio. Be aware that CEEFAX and TELETEXT clocks are pretty accurate, for worst case scenarios, but usually a couple of seconds adrift.*

- Grab a cassette...some people think this is weird advice, (and I have had some strange reactions when I mention that I do this from time to time) but I always encourage people to tape their show or programme and listen back to it themselves, preferably a day or so after. You’d be amazed what you can teach yourself! Organise a method by which you can do this, either on your own equipment if broadcasting to your home area, or at the studio if facilities exist.

...AT THE STUDIO

- **NEVER DRINK ALCOHOL BEFORE YOUR PROGRAMME.** Don’t be tempted to have a bit of ‘Dutch Courage’ before your first show, it may be your last! Apart from the obvious lack of control, thinking you are funnier than you are etc, even a small amount of alcohol dries your throat, and you’ll also spend the whole show dying for the loo. Other drinks to avoid are fizzy ones, which make you burp on-air, and milk, which gums up your throat. Have water handy **outside** the studio!
- **DO NOT EAT, DRINK, OR SMOKE IN THE STUDIO!** Keep food and drink outside the actual studio, so that apart from talking with your mouth full, you’ll avoid potentially blowing yourself up, and the engineers won’t thank you if you pour a tin of Coke over the mixing desk. This is the most corrosive substance known to radio!

...ON AIR

- Once on-air, the main presenter is **THE BOSS!** They are responsible for the entire station as far as the listener is concerned, so what they say, goes. They have the power to throw anyone out of the studio, and control any activity which may affect the programme. Don’t let this go to your head, however! Be courteous to others in the studio by letting them know

when the mic is on so they stop talking before you go on air. A simple call of ‘Mic live...’ or similar is the best way. Make sure you’re ready to deal with problem guests or unforeseen emergencies.

- Even if the studio catches fire, or an earthquake knocks over all the equipment, **DO NOT SWEAR ON AIR!!!** You **MUST** stay in total control at all times, even in the most manic situation. By all means curse to your hearts’ content once the mic is off, but be **VERY** careful that it is first! It’s the fastest way to get the entire station taken off the air.
- Keep political/ religious views to yourself. This is the second.
- Promote the station positively. It **IS** the best radio station in the world! Never give the impression that you don’t want to be there, even if you’ve got a streaming cold and are only there because no-one else could cover for you. Always obey any ‘Programme Rules’ set by the Programme Controller, such as standard phrases or slogans used to identify the station ‘...Your **BEST** Music Mix.’ Is probably the most common (Ironically!).
- Remember you are talking to an audience, most of whom (hopefully!) won’t know you. Treat them with respect. Welcome them to the show, and thank them for listening at the end. At the start tell them what they can expect to hear during your programme, any features or highlights which may interest them. You don’t need to list these in order, but give them a rough idea of what’s happening when. During the show give out periodic ‘plugs’ for later items, but don’t overdo it! Try to imagine you are the listener, what would **YOU** expect the programme to sound like? Make sure they are included in **EVERYTHING**. For example, don’t mention anyone’s name without telling the audience who they are or what your link to them is. **NEVER** say ‘I met Dave down the pub last night....’ Who’s ‘Dave?’. Don’t patronise your audience, either, they really are very clever little listeners....
- Be yourself! The audience will soon spot if you are trying to be something you’re not! Especially avoid copying professional presenters. Let your own personality dictate the direction the show takes.
- **ALWAYS** think before you speak! This is harder than it sounds! **NEVER** open the mic without at least a vague idea of what you are about to say, and what you need to press next to make something work when you stop talking! Always talk in a cheerful, friendly and approachable way....regardless of what may be going on ‘behind the scenes’. If you are really in a bad mood try talking while smiling (!) this really does work!
- Make sure you understand any rules the Programme Controller has for dealing with incidents of national importance, such as major accidents or deaths e.g. Royal Family members (‘obit procedures’) which may occur while you are on-air, and may mean you should stop broadcasting immediately to hand over to a news feed for example. Every radio station should have guidelines on how to avoid embarrassment and behave professionally during any such events.

Talk based programmes

- Be welcoming to any studio guests/interviewees. Arrange for tea or coffee to be on hand, but politely remind them not to eat, drink or smoke in the studio! Try to get someone else to be on hand to sort out refreshments, to allow you to concentrate on the programme.
- Introduce any pre-recorded items, but...
- ...Don't over emphasise the 'back-announcing'! They know! They heard it too!
- Plug 'phone-ins' well in advance if you are not confident of getting an instant response.

TRICK: *Get friends to ring in and pretend to be genuine listeners. Use studio personnel if all else fails!! Even professional stations do this! **NEVER** say that you've had no response, just that 'it's a bit slow' or 'No-one's got the answer right yet...'*

- Remember your microphone technique, vary your voice, and don't ramble on...and on...
- Write studio interviewees names down, across a piece of paper *in the order in which they are sitting in front of you. (as in the 'interviews' section).*
- Make sure there's enough microphones for everyone.
- **EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED.** How will you react if a guest swears on air, if the lights all go out, or the fire alarm goes off? Deal with any problems quickly. Have backup music standing by in a CD player, or a pre-recorded piece to fall back on. NEVER panic with the mic on. If a disaster happens while you are talking, and you can't react to it sensibly, use your backup. Have a few phrases ready to get you out of certain situations, like messing up reading something out. If possible avoid 'I really must put my teeth in...' as this is so over used! I prefer 'that's easy for me to say...' or similar.

Music based programmes

- Always be positive about any music you play, don't criticise it or admit you don't think much of it, even if you don't! It may be a request from the boss!
- 'Plug' features, but don't overdo it, plug a feature the track before you are going to do it.

TRICK: *There's an old radio phrase 'The three T's...Tell 'em your gonna tell em, Tell 'em, Tell 'em you told 'em', in other words... 'Don't forget the quiz in the next hour...' 'It's time for the quiz! we'll do it after this record...' '...And we'll have another round of the quiz tomorrow at the same time...'. Be sensible about this of course!*

- Don't overdo 'jingles' (or 'station idents' to give them their proper name), especially if you've only got two or three! One every 15 minutes is enough. Keep them at regular intervals.
- Unless you are doing a fast moving breakfast show with a high turn over of listeners, don't

overdo ‘timechecks’. One every 20 minutes is plenty for most daytime or evening programmes.

- Have something to say about the music you are playing. Even just saying that you enjoyed the track makes it sound like you are a part of the show! Year of release, interesting band members, **SHORT** anecdotes etc can make you sound much more in control instantly. This is especially true if you are doing a specialist show. At all costs **AVOID** ‘That was....this is’ ‘That was...next up...’ ‘That was...now we’ve got...’ type links.
- Only introduce one idea per ‘link’. Your listener will be lost if you give them the station frequency, phone number, all the features you are doing, the names of your guests, and what songs they can expect to hear, all in one go! Spreading information out also gives you something to fill the gaps with!
- Often with music based shows it’s good to create an atmosphere. Remember that the listeners can’t see you! Pretend you’ve got a huge production team working feverishly behind the scenes, even if you are on your own (this is a good get out if things go wrong!), or make believe that the band you’ve got coming in later are currently practising in studio 9. The next presenter may be arriving by train, but kid the audience they’ve just turned up in their private jet. Anything to make it sound like the station is an exciting place to be. This even works if the audience *knows* that you are broadcasting from your front room.
- As with live talk based programmes, **EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED**. Remember the old advice and ‘DON’T PANIC’ if things go wrong. If your music stops unexpectedly or the CD player breaks down, **KEEP TALKING! DO NOT** allow ‘Dead Air’ to occur! 10 seconds of silence can sound like an age in a music programme! Have a spare cued up somewhere in case of emergencies. Blame the equipment **ONLY** if you can make it witty and without putting the station down. **DON’T** lose your cool on-air.

TRICK: *If you play the wrong track, consider leaving it playing rather than stopping it after 10 seconds and drawing attention to it. The audience won’t know you’ve made a mistake, what they don’t know they can’t miss! Even if you have introduced a track and then play something else by mistake, you can always say ‘Ah, there’s nothing like a bit of....and that was nothing like a bit of...., it was actually....’ or similar.*

Often even if you are convinced that you are having a nightmare, and that the show sounds awful, the audience won’t notice, so **DON’T WORRY!**...It’s probably fine...

And that’s all there is to it!

So, there you have it! You know what a radio studio looks like, how it works, and how to be ready for when it doesn’t! You understand how to prepare and present a programme in whatever style you prefer, and some of the basic rules and regulations you should be aware of. Interviewing is no longer too daunting, you can even edit your own work so that it sounds just like you want it to! The decision is yours whether to ‘go live’ or pre-record something for others to use. Practice the techniques to hone your skills and you’ll soon be delighting yourself, your friends, and a whole load of people you’ll probably never meet!