

Language, Please

Style Guidance for
Audio Storytellers

Most **Language, Please** guidance can apply across all formats, but when it comes to covering culture and identity, sometimes, your storytelling medium makes a difference.

In this editorial tool, we offer key questions and tips for producing thoughtful audio stories that inform and move audiences.





Pro · nun · ci · a · tion:

/ pruh-nuhn-see-ey-shuhn /

- When there are various ways to pronounce a word or phrase, how do you choose?

The way a word or phrase is pronounced can reveal a lot about the speaker's societal positions, preconceptions, and points of view.

So when you decide how to pronounce a contested term in a script, you are making a significant editorial choice.

(See writing from the Maynard Institute for more.) Sometimes, a host will mirror a source's pronunciation, as in *The Line* podcast, where the host says "Iraq" the same way as the US military personnel he interviews: eye-RACK. Or consider *Hell or High Water*, where the host matches an Indigenous tribe's pronunciation of "Isle de Jean Charles" (eye-ul duh jeen charles). Sometimes, the host and community members might use different pronunciations.

To decide, **it's helpful to talk with your team about what your pronunciation choice signals to listeners** and to the communities you cover, and to check out examples in comparable coverage that you respect (see Language, Please guidance on “Vodou” as an example). **If variation in pronunciation opens a window into the cultural dynamics you're exploring, you might opt to write your thought process into the script, as a way to be transparent about choices and trade-offs.** Other times, this kind of aside can steal precious time from the core narrative. Usually, knowing the focus of your story will help you decide whether it's relevant to acknowledge pronunciation discrepancies.

- > **Overall, a few gut checks are instructive:** With my pronunciation, am I unwittingly reinforcing biases (my own and/or society's), or taking a side in a debate or divide? Could I come off as if I'm implicitly “correcting” sources? How do the communities I'm covering deal with variation in pronunciation, and how do they suggest that others make these choices?

2. Keeping It Conversational:

When guidance suggests wordier phrases, what's an audio producer to do?


One of the first things many audio reporters learn is to speak in short, relatively simple sentences.

Your editor might balk at language guidance that replaces a single word (e.g., “poor” or “dropout”) with a phrase (e.g., “people living in poverty” or “a teenager who didn’t finish high school due to...”)

Sometimes phrases like these can also introduce a gap between the way the characters in your story speak to one another and the language that you use.

2. Keeping It Conversational

That said, **it's still possible to align with best practices around language guidance**, even when concision and conversationality are key. **If using person-first language is important to the community you're covering, you can make that a priority and find other places to tighten the script.** To enhance listeners' understanding of the experience you're reporting on, you might even draw attention to a distinction between your language and what listeners will hear characters saying, as in *The 13th Step*, where the host explains why her interviewees call themselves "addicts" but she does not.



3. Finding the Voices in the Story:

How do you balance helping another person hone their voice and letting them sound authentically like themselves?

Inside the studio or out in the field, an audio producer is in a position to shape how another person sounds. Needless to say, this can be very fraught business.

Even for audio veterans, it can feel vulnerable to track a script or appear as a guest. Acknowledging that the situation can be nerve-racking goes a long way. Letting the person know that multiple takes are expected will reassure them they're not failing when they're asked to read the same thing several times or to try a different way of answering a question. Talking through the vibe of the show will help them understand the nature of the conversation they're joining, and sometimes asking them to redo a line or retell a story is necessary. But **at some point, tinkering with a person's natural mode of expression can introduce bias** and amount to a kind of **identity erasure**.

Editing out every “like” or “um” can make a person sound unnatural. Booking someone who speaks in a way you deem “entertaining,” but then only using their tape for embellishment versus analysis, limits the rigor of your reporting.

3. Finding the Voices in the Story

With respect to accents, there can be a tendency to make assumptions about what listeners can and can't understand, and when these assumptions go unexamined, the scope of journalistic coverage suffers. Consider how your reporting can get audiences used to voices they might be less familiar with, by providing enough context that even if every listener doesn't catch every word, the meaning still comes across and resonates.

Giving clear notes – for example, asking for a more conclusive sounding read of a key point, or encouraging someone to slow down – can bring out the best in the person you're recording. But no matter what, **the way someone sounds is deeply personal**. Broadly speaking, part of what makes audio memorable, distinctive, and accurate is when it represents an expansive range of voices speaking in authentic ways.



4.


Troubling Moments:

How do I decide when and how to use my most explosive tape?


A live recording of a mass shooting. A character spewing a racist rant. A teenager describing a suicide attempt. Every journalist makes judgment calls about handling intense moments, but audio producers need to be especially mindful. **Hearing events** like these play out **can deeply affect listeners and the people directly involved** (not to mention the journalists themselves, who can experience secondary

trauma). Just because you can play a moment doesn't mean you should – and that decision is among the most consequential you make when shaping a story.

To handle incendiary material ethically, consider: How did you come to the tape – were the people involved in a position to consent to its use, and did you explain the potential implications? What do you need to do to prepare listeners for what's coming and for them to make sense of the moment after they hear it?



What degree of proximity to the pain, violence, or hate of the moment is needed for your story to have the impact you seek?



4. Troubling Moments

In *Buffalo Extreme*, for example, a podcast about the 2022 racist mass shooting at the Tops grocery store, listeners never hear recordings from the shooting or even newsreel coverage of it. Instead, they hear commentary from a woman who shopped at Tops, watching the shooter's court appearance on live TV. The scene creates distance and offers firsthand analysis, without diminishing the impact of the violence.

When a recording is troubling because it features a person sharing harmful disinformation, **you might decide it's important to present that audio**, so listeners understand exactly how a person is framing their claim – including the emotion, or lack thereof, in their voice. If so, keep in mind that countering disinformation requires that false claims are debunked right away, with evidence and a clear statement of the truth.

5.

Beyond Words:

How can I use scoring to enrich the listener experience while upholding journalistic values?

The soundscape of an audio piece can feel like its own character in the story – it’s that powerful. Listeners respond in ways they aren’t even aware of to the atmosphere, emotion, and cultural references captured by the score. In this sense, musical choices are not just creative opportunities; they’re editorial judgments.

Music is also labor, which means it’s an opportunity to recognize – and compensate – artists from within the community you’re covering.



That said, the instinct to “match” score to content (e.g., rainsticks for a story set on the Big Island of Hawaii) can reinforce stereotypes and betray a lack of understanding of distinctions that matter to local people.

Often, going for **music that's too “on the nose” can reduce a complex community to just one aspect** of what's perceived about them by outsiders.



Effective scoring orchestrates a sense of place, cues a mood, reinforces a story's thesis, and enhances the specific moment when the music comes in; it can also introduce its own layers of narrative tension. What it doesn't do is sensationalize or manipulate a listener to feel a certain way that is not supported by the reporting. Including the sound engineer in editorial conversations is vital to ensuring that they have sufficient understanding of the story's nuances to make musical choices that elevate the whole.

LLP

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