

# Pack 110, Item 11

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**BH2: How to produce a tape talk for your program**

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***What is a tape talk?***

A **tape talk** is a radio storytelling format that is part live interview and part recorded voice and sound. The host interviews a reporter and, as part of his or her answers to the host’s questions, the reporter uses audio clips to help tell the story.

***How can tape talks help me serve my listeners better?***

* **Tape talks** are conversations between the host of your program and a reporter. Listeners often find them easier to listen to than reports or documentaries. They are less formal and use conversational language, but they do follow all journalistic rules of accuracy, fairness, and balance. (See [F.A.I.R. journalism standards for farmer programs](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/104-post-harvest-cow-pea/f-r-journalism-standards-farmer-programs/).)
* Because **tape talks** can be produced quickly, listeners can receive information sooner.
* Because **tape talks** are conversations, the host can ask the reporter to repeat or clarify complicated information, making it easier for listeners to understand.
* The **tape talk** format allows a reporter to be more descriptive. In a report, the reporter might describe a field as dry and dusty. In a **tape talk**, the reporter has the time to talk about the feel of the dust in her mouth, the grit in her eye, the sound of dead leaves when she walks. Describing how the field looks, sounds, and feels can give the listener a better sense of the scene. That helps listeners understand the story better.
* Listeners get to know reporters better by hearing them tell their story in conversation with the host rather than through more formal reporting.
* In **tape talks**, listeners hear longer clips of recorded audio that may not be finely edited. Hearing people struggle for words or hearing the reporter interact with the interviewee gives the listeners a stronger sense of reality—that what is happening is *real*. Listeners get to know the interviewee better and understand more about their emotional state—anger, frustration, happiness, or joy. Audio clips that might, for example, just be sounds from a field help to paint a picture for the listener.

***How can tape talks help me produce better programs?***

* A **tape talk** allows reporters and producers the freedom to present complicated stories clearly, stories with multiple points of view, stories that unfold over a period of time, and stories that require a lot of background information.
* A **tape talk** can be produced more quickly than a documentary or a report and provide a different sound, or texture\*, than a plain interview.
* **Tape talks** are flexible. They can be produced in a variety of ways and lengths. This helps give a program better pacing and a variety of production styles.
* This flexibility allows more creativity in story structure, writing, and using recorded material. **Tape talks** can incorporate pre-recorded scenes, raw unedited audio clips, sounds, and even music.
* **Tape talks** have a “live” sound even when they are recorded.
* **Tape talks** allow reporters to develop their on-air personalities and create a following among listeners.

***How do I get started?*** (Learn more about these and other points in the *Details* section below.)

1. Choose a story or issue that requires interview(s) and/or sound recording.
2. Do your research.
3. Record the interview(s) and sound.
4. Write your focus.
5. Select the best audio clips (voice and/or sound) that fit the focus.
6. Write the host’s questions as a guide to help you structure the story.
7. Answer the questions verbally, making notes of what you say.
8. Write out your answers fully, or in point form, and write out how you intend to introduce recorded audio clips.
9. Adjust the host’s questions for clarity and pacing.
10. Rehearse with the host if possible, and certainly by yourself if the host is unavailable. Rehearse out loud.

***Details***

1. **Choose a story or issue that requires interview(s) and/or sound recording.**

Not every story makes a good **tape talk**. Some stories are best with just an interview (for example, a personal story or a politician making an announcement), and some as a documentary. But there are many kinds of stories that work well in the **tape talk** format. Here are some examples of stories that are well suited to **tape talks**:

-complex issues that require substantial research and interviews—new government policies, for example, gender equality

-complex technical issues where an interview with a scientist is not enough

-issues that have conflicting perspectives (such as using traditional farming methods vs. contemporary ones)

-issues that are best explained through the story of an individual

These kinds of stories all need more than an interview to tell them properly. As the reporter/storyteller, you will have to give background and context, you may have to explain complicated developments, and you will have to become the expert.

1. **Do your research.**

In a **tape talk** you, the reporter, are the expert in the same way a crop specialist interviewed about new varieties of cassava or maize is an expert or a climate change scientist is an expert. Because you’ve done your research and conducted your interviews, you know all the facts and the details of the story you are going to present. But your skills as a journalist help you simplify and explain the topic in ways that the crop specialist or the climate scientist cannot. The more research you do, the more complete the story will be.

1. **Record the interview(s) and sound.**

Interviews for a **tape talk** generally include two parts. The first part seeks facts and details. You will likely not include clips of this part of the interview in a **tape talk**. The second part of the interview looks for anecdotes, emotion, and opinion. These are the audio clips you will more likely use. They are things you can’t say as well as your guest can. For instance, a woman who grows yams will tell you that she plants half her field with a new variety and the other half with the same variety her mother planted. She tells you the dates she plants, where she gets her seed, and how often she has to bring water to the field. These are all facts that the reporter can tell the host in the **tape talk**. But when the woman explains how frustrated she is that as a woman she earns less than a male farmer—that is a clip that will work well in a **tape talk**. You can’t provide the emotion that she can.

1. **Write your focus.**

**Tape talks**,like all stories you present in your programs, need a focus. A focus statement says: “Someone is doing something for a reason.” It answers the questions: who? what? and why? It is easier to tell a focused story, and it’s easier to listen to a focused story.

1. **Select the best audio clips (voice and/or sound) that fit the focus.**

Think of the audio clips in a **tape talk** as photographs you would show a friend while telling a story. The photos provide something that your words cannot. That is what the audio clips do in a tape talk. The best clips will have emotion, they could have opinion, they might be anecdotes, or they might be very descriptive. What makes them the right clips for a **tape talk** is that they say things that cannot be said as well by the reporter. You can give facts and context, and you can explain complicated or technical things. But you cannot speak with the emotion of the characters in your story. That is theirs.

There is no “correct” length for an audio clip in a **tape talk**. Clips can be one second long (think, for instance, of someone saying “yes!”, or a dog’s bark). Or they can be a minute, or two or three. They might be segments of an interview. They might just be sounds.

1. **Write the host’s questions as a guide to help you structure the story.**

With your focus statement and the audio clips selected (you will probably have selected more than you will use), you can write a rough draft of the questions the host will ask you. You don’t need to write out your answers, but do think about them as you write the questions.

While every story will be different and have different questions, a basic structure might be as follows: What happened? Who was affected? What did they do? How did that work out? What happened next?

The host’s questions will generally follow that order.

Here is an example. Let’s say that a woman in Malawi named Ruth has volunteered to try planting drought-tolerant maize because she can only grow enough maize for five months in dry years, not enough to feed her and her three children.

A first draft of the host’s questions might look like this:

*1. It was a dry growing season in parts of Malawi. How was the harvest?*

*2. You were in one of the dry areas and met some famers. Who did you meet?*

*3. How successful was Ruth’s harvest?*

*4. Why was it so good?*

*5. What does this mean to Ruth and her family?*

*6. Will she plant more of the drought-tolerant maize next year?*

There may be more questions, but this is a good start. When you have these questions, you can create your part of the **tape talk** and decide where to introduce the audio clips.

1. **Answer the questions verbally, making notes of what you say.**

As you write a question for the host, you will of course be thinking of the answer. Because **tape talks** rely so much on the reporter’s answers, it is worthwhile to not just think about the answers, but say the answers out loud. This helps you figure out what you want to say and gets you used to telling the story, not reading it. It’s useful to make notes of what you say. It will help in the next step.

1. **Write out your answers fully, or in point form, and write out how you intend to introduce recorded audio clips.**

There is a debate about the best way to create your (the reporter’s) part of the script. Some people like to write it out word for word, and then stick to the written words in the studio. Others make point form notes, and rely on their storytelling abilities to tie the points together.

There are plusses and minuses to each approach.

A fully written script means you won’t get lost, you won’t forget to include points, and you can time the length of the **tape talk** in advance, an important consideration in making a program. But a written script may not sound natural. It may sound like you are reading. If the host has an extra question she wants to ask and you don’t have a written answer, it may be difficult to quickly come up with an answer.

When you work from point form notes, you aren’t reading a script, so you will sound more natural. You will remember to include the important information because of the points you have jotted down. But without the safety net of a written script, it is possible to make mistakes. Also, the host—who will have a copy of your answers with her questions—will not always know when you have finished your answer.

Here are examples of what a fully written script and a point form script look like.

First, the fully written script:

*HOST QUESTION: It was a dry growing season in parts of Malawi. How was the harvest?*

*REPORTER: You’re right, it was a dry season. Particularly in the southeast. People there say they got less than half the normal rainfall. And the harvest, as you can imagine, was not very good at all. Government crop specialists say that germination was 80% of normal, and what did grow, almost half of that withered in the field if there was no irrigation.*

*HOST QUESTION: You were in one of the dry areas and met some farmers. Who did you meet?*

*REPORTER: I was south of Blantyre and traveled through the countryside. I got to stop in on five different farms. The person I want to introduce to you is a woman named Ruth. Now Ruth is a farmer ... she grows maize. She has three children. They are too young yet to help with the farm so Ruth has to do almost all the work by herself. I asked her to describe her farm and what it means to her. Listen to what she says.*

*(PLAY AUDIO CLIP OF RUTH DESCRIBING WITH EMOTION WHY THIS FARM IS SO IMPORTANT)*

And here’s the point form version.

*HOST QUESTION: It was a dry growing season in parts of Malawi. How was the harvest?*

*REPORTER:*

* *southeast was driest – less than half rainfall*
* *poor germination*
* *what did grow - half burned off*

*HOST QUESTION: You were in one of the dry areas and met some famers. Who did you meet?*

*REPORTER:*

* *south of Blantyre*
* *Ruth - a farmer - grows maize - three children*
* *Ruth has to do almost all of it by herself*
* *I asked her to describe her farm and what it means to her. Take a listen.*

*(PLAY AUDIO CLIP OF RUTH DESCRIBING WITH EMOTION WHY THIS FARM IS SO IMPORTANT)*

If you know your story well and have practiced it out loud, you will be able to fill in the more descriptive parts as you talk with the host.

You’ll note that when the reporter introduces the audio clip, he makes it obvious that we are going to hear from Ruth, and obvious that it is going to be her describing her farm and what it means to her. By being so obvious, you prepare the listener for a change—you let them know what’s coming.

1. **Adjust the host’s questions for clarity and pacing.**

It’s time to refine what you’ve done. You might find that it would make the conversation more natural if the host added another question, or interjected a comment the way we all do during conversation.

Here is what that might look like. The additional questions or comments are in **bold.**

*HOST QUESTION: It was a dry growing season in parts of Malawi. How was the harvest?*

*REPORTER: You’re right; it was a dry season. Particularly in the southeast. People there say they got less than half the normal rainfall.*

***HOST QUESTION: Really? Just half?***

*REPORTER: Yes. Half. And the harvest, as you can imagine, was not very good at all. Government crop specialists say that germination was 80% of normal, and what did grow, almost half of that withered in the field if there was no irrigation.*

*HOST QUESTION: You were in one of the dry areas and met some famers. Who did you meet?*

*REPORTER: I was south of Blantyre and traveled through the countryside. I got to stop in on five different farms. The person I want to introduce to you is a woman named Ruth.*

***HOST QUESTION: Tell me about her.***

*REPORTER: Sure. Ruth is a farmer. She grows maize. She has three children. They are too young yet to help with the farm so Ruth has to do almost all the work by herself. I asked her to describe her farm and what it means to her. Take a listen.*

*(PLAY AUDIO CLIP OF RUTH DESCRIBING WITH EMOTION WHY THIS FARM IS SO IMPORTANT)*

***HOST QUESTION: You can hear in her voice how important her land is to her, can’t you?***

*REPORTER: Absolutely. It has been in her family for generations.*

1. **Rehearse with the host if possible, and certainly by yourself if the host is unavailable. Rehearse out loud.**

Regardless of whether your script is fully written out or is point form, you need to practice to sound natural. You have spent a lot of time preparing this **tape talk**. But what you say and how you say it is all the audience hears. If you don’t do it well, then your listeners are the ones who lose out. So practice, practice, practice!

***Other points about tape talks***

When you’re in the field, take time to record the natural sounds of the world around you. These will help you tell the story. If there is a drought, record footsteps on the crackling dead grass. If the rains have come, record the raindrops against a window or in a puddle. You can use these sounds to describe the setting of the story—they are sometimes better than words. They give the audience a visual image to help them understand the story.

Here is how that might appear in a **tape talk** script.

*HOST: I understand that you were in the worst of the drought area. What was that like?*

*REPORTER: I could tell you, but I think this will give you a better understanding. Take a listen to this recording I made yesterday.*

*(Sound of footsteps walking through a field of withered plants)*

*REPORTER: That’s the maize plants you’re hearing, or what’s left of them.*

*HOST: I can hear the crackle. I can almost feel the dust. How widespread is this?*

***Definitions***

*Program texture*: Texture is what a program sounds like. If information is presented by just one voice, the program will sound flat and can be uninteresting to the listener’s ear. Using different production styles such as interviews, reports, and **tape talks** provides a variety of sounds that make listening more enjoyable.

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Contributed by: Dick Miller, freelance radio producer and trainer, former CBC Radio documentary producer.