

"Highly recommended!"
Joanna Penn

WRITING FOR AUDIOBOOKS



JULES HORNE

Interested in publishing an audiobook? This primer on radio writing techniques will transform your writing and editing for the voice-first market.

For more on voice-first writing, visit
www.method-writing.com



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Introduction

Audiobooks are enjoying an exciting boom, and it's set to continue and grow.

More and more people are listening to audiobooks in preference to reading. Major publishers are reporting 20-30% increases in audiobook sales. And some are commissioning straight-to-audio fiction.

So if you're a writer, this is a big deal. The book market is shifting towards audio, and you need to be part of it.

However, not every book is great for audio. Not every writer knows about audio writing techniques. Those that do will find their books make an easy transition. The writing will be more fun for narrators to read, and clearer and more compelling for listeners to hear.

Writing for the ear calls for specific skills. Skills that are well known in the worlds of radio, performance, and spoken word. But far less familiar in the world of traditional books.

Since audiobooks are on the rise, it makes sense for writers to learn those skills, and soon.

I'm particularly excited because I'm a fiction writer with a professional background in radio. I've written for stage, and performed spoken word in English and Scots. The rhythms and music of spoken word are in my writing DNA anyway.

And suddenly, the extra techniques I've learned from radio and stage writing have turned out to be very useful indeed.

They're easy to learn, and they'll transform your impact as an audiobook author.

You may even decide to join the many authors now writing with audio-first in mind.

This is a handbook for anyone interested in audio writing – writing for the ear, writing for performance.

If you're traditionally published, you'll learn audio writing strategies and be well prepared for this growing and lucrative market.

If you're an indie author, you'll learn how to prepare your books for audio recording and what to consider when working with a narrator or narrating your own book.

I'll be covering, among other things:

- * How do you write for the audio platform?
- * What's different about writing for the ear, rather than the eye?
- * How do you deal with visual elements such as URLs, images, graphs, tables, headers?
- * Can audio-first writing improve your book for listeners?

The answer is “yes”. Of course!

The written and spoken word are very different media, as you'll discover. And audio is tremendous fun!

So, Who's This Book For?

Anyone who wants to up their writing game, and polish their books for better audio impact.

Fiction authors – both traditionally published and indie – who are interested in this booming market for storytellers.

Non-fiction authors wondering how to adapt their books for audio.

Teachers of professional writing who want an overview of audio-specific writing skills.

Early adopters excited by audiobooks. Hopefully, that's you!

But first, a story.

I was a young, newly published fiction writer. I'd even won a prize and was feeling pretty pleased with myself. And I'd just written my first playscript, and was in my first rehearsal, waiting for my beautiful words to be beautifully read by actors.

So I was shocked by what happened next.

The actors – very experienced and one even rather famous – were running out of breath. My lines were too long. Full of qualifying clauses. Piled-on adjectives. Some bits weren't even quite logical.

Now, I'd worked very hard on that script. It was well written, and well edited. But as a script for performance, it didn't work.

Wow - did I sharpen up after that! Every word had to be weighed and counted.

An audiobook is a script. Your narrator makes it a performance. And that alone calls for different writing skills.

So, some of what follows comes from the world of performance. Some of it comes from my BBC training in radio news. Some of it comes from teaching many aspiring and inspiring writers as a tutor for the Open University.

Most of the techniques are straightforward, and you can put them into practice right away. I've gathered some of the main ones in a download on my website – see the link at the end of this book.

Others go deeper into what's different about ears, linear thinking and audio flow – including hooks and arcs that keep things moving forward.

Rest assured: you don't need to change your writing voice – simply get some extra editing and structuring skills to help listeners who'll hear your story only once. Skills that are great, as it happens, for your editing in general.

Audio offers an amazing sense of connection. The intimacy of voices in your ear, the music, rhythm and humanity of different and distinctive ways of telling stories.

You may find that the spoken word is more natural for you, and your writing can flourish in audio form.

If you already write spoken word, performance poetry, dialect or scripts, maybe audiobooks are your natural home!

Audio is different.

Publishers, readers and writers are just beginning to discover its full potential.

It's a fascinating time, and exciting to be part of it.

How to Use This Book

Are you reading, or listening?

If you're reading, you might prefer to scan-read first, then return to the sections you need. If you're listening, you're possibly doing something else at the same time. So you may want to listen twice.

I've included notes on flow and language strategies. For these, it's probably best to download the PDF from my website, method-writing.com, which has useful words and phrases, as a reference for editing.

Firstly, there's some background on the audio medium, and what's different about it. Then a brief overview of technology, the listening experience, and listeners.

Followed by language techniques that are particularly helpful for audio. This includes words, phrases and structures to use in your writing, whether fiction or non-fiction.

Then, onto narration, and practical ways to help your narrator or voice artist. And finally, some writing and recording tips for if you're narrating your own book.

You can go deep into audio territory, or jump ahead to the section you need most. It's up to you.

A Bit About Me

I'm from Scotland, and I live in a cottage in the Borderlands with my partner. I trained as a journalist with the BBC and Swiss Radio International, and I've done a mix of writing, producing and presenting.

Live radio is pretty hair-raising. Writing to news deadlines certainly sharpens your writing! As does working with tough newsroom editors.

I really enjoyed sound editing, and the ebb and flow of voices – though it was a relief to drop razor blades and move on to digital editing! Much safer for your fingers.

And it was interesting to discover the little tricks that politicians use to grab more air time. They're useful for writers, too!

But my heart was always in storytelling, and now I write fiction as well as plays for stage and radio. And I've learned a fantastic amount from working with directors and actors, about flow, tension, pictures, characters and economy. It's all relevant to audio.

Notes

CHAPTER 1

What's Different About Audio?

Here's a general overview, for orientation. I'll cover each area in detail further on.

New to Audio? Five Key Concepts

Firstly: eyes versus ears

Ears and eyes are very different interfaces with the world. It's useful to know about the physical realities, decoding, focus and other factors that affect how we receive each medium.

Two: listening is linear

Audio moves inexorably forward, like a train on a track. How do you make sure the reader is following the story? Because they can't travel backwards and fill in gaps.

Three: visuals and layout

Non-fiction uses lots of visual elements that help to organise the book or convey complex information. Bullet points, lists. Headers, bold, italics. Images, graphs and tables.

How do you deal with those? You need alternative strategies.

Four: writing flow and structure

How can you use signposts to help orientate your readers?

How do you help readers to get attuned?

How do you create flow to move listeners forward?

How do you make sure they don't get lost when they're hearing something only once?

Finally, the power of performance

How can you help your narrator by writing a performance-friendly script?

If that narrator is you, how can you speed up the recording process?

How can you exploit audio-friendly writing effects such as rhythm?

What techniques can you learn from people who perform for a living?

From this you'll gather that yes, audio writing is different.

Frequently Asked Questions

If you're a writer new to audio-first thinking, and wondering whether to dive in, the next section is for you.

Is audio-first writing complicated?

No. It's just a mindset shift.

Once you've understood the basics, you'll be armed with powerful writing and editing tools for all your books to come.

Can I leave it up to my narrator?

Good narrators will make the best of your book and disguise shortcomings where they can.

But they can't improve the writing and make it audio-friendly.

Get your book audio-ready, make it really fun to perform, and you'll see a big leap in the impact. Your narrators will be able to perform on full power, and your book will be easier to engage with and enjoy.

Do I need this? I'm a literary writer

If your writing is experimental or visual, or reliant on the print medium for its effects, then that's your creative choice.

But if you're interested in the future of books and the potential of multimedia, you may find audio highly inspiring to your creativity.

What's new? I'm a natural born storyteller

Then you're so lucky. Audiobooks have hardly got started, sales are booming, and straight-to-audio fiction is on the rise. If your style is already influenced by oral tradition or you're into spoken word, performance poetry or dialect writing, this is a gamechanger. Get on board!

Is audio-first useful for fiction?

Yes, even if you already write with rhythm and spoken word style foremost. It'll help with clarity, impact and keeping listeners on board. Tactics for flow and order of information will be particularly useful.

Is this useful for non-fiction?

Yes, especially useful. Because print books use visual layout which doesn't easily translate into audio.

Using flow words and phrases and understanding the basic audio concepts will make a big difference.

What do you suggest for writers in a hurry?

Join my mailing list (see p.87) on my website, *method-writing.com* and get the printable tipsheets.

They include a list of transition words, connectives and flow phrases which you can use right away.

Writing an audio-friendly script also cuts costly time in the studio, and will give you a better result.

Will this help with narrating my own book?

Yes. Although the focus here is on audio-first writing, rather than technical stuff such as home studios and recording, I've included tips from my own recording experience, to help you get started and avoid some pitfalls.

Audio-First Writers

Plenty of people in different worlds already write for the ear first and foremost.

After all, it's an old, old skill. You could see audio-first as campfire storytelling by another name.

In a way, we're back full circle to the oral tradition, when people carried and transmitted stories directly from mouth to ear.

Then came along print, which made our stories portable, and allowed us to preserve them externally.

Then came audiobooks on CDs and cassettes – portability and preservation of sound. But still limited distribution.

Now, we have fast digital distribution, tiny portable devices, and people recording studio-quality audio at home.

It's breath-taking. Hours of spoken word can be carried around in your pocket.

So it's worth revisiting those early storytellers, for a sense of how things worked before print came along.

Early Storytelling

Imagine that dusk is falling, and your tribe are gathering round the fire. The storyteller or shaman or bard is waiting patiently. They're an important figure and they're sat prominently, all eyes upon them.

Someone throws more logs on the fire, and sparks fly, illuminating everyone's faces in a red glow. Your family, friends, visitors from a neighbouring tribe – everyone's here for this special night. The storyteller waits till everyone gets settled. A hush descends. And the storyteller begins.

Well, in some key respects, audiobooks are just like that. And in others, clearly not.

Here's what the oral tradition and audiobooks have in common.

Firstly, the experience is linear. It unfolds in time, and is on a track you can't divert. If you miss what was just said, it's too late – it's flown past!

So spoken word needs exceptional clarity. Anything muddy, or in the wrong order, will confuse the audience and have them doing mental backflips.

Oral storytellers use repetition a lot to make things clear. And in oral storytelling cultures, people were often familiar with the stories anyway.

With audiobooks, this is rarely true. So clarity is even more important.

Then, there's the issue of who's in charge.

In the oral tradition, it's the storyteller – the shaman or bard or comedian. It's a skilled performance, carefully planned, and they hold you on track with techniques such as hooks, questions, tension, arcs and rhythms.

Whereas with written books, the reader is in charge. Readers can stop and start, skip around – even right to the end – and wander off at tangents.

And finally, oral storytelling goes directly into your brain. You can drift and dream, but you're still taking it in with your senses.

Whereas with reading, there's a layer of active decoding. It's more active and focused, less direct. The reader is doing far more of the work.

And there's another key area where the oral tradition and audiobooks are very different.

Oral storytelling is usually a group experience, focused on the story and the teller.

Whereas audiobooks are intimate. You usually listen on your own, and do something else at the same time, so focus is split.

Each of these factors has a bearing on writing technique.

Modern Storytellers

Today, there are still modern equivalents to the traditional oral storytellers, and they still use similar techniques:

Performing artists

People who perform in front of live audiences know so much about rhythm, pace and engagement. They include children's and indigenous storytellers, actors, performance poets, spoken word artists and comedians.

Broadcast journalists

They write news stories and features for reading on air, and often present them, too. They learn a lot about transitions, segues, and creating vivid radio pictures.

Scriptwriters for radio, stage or screen

They write for performance by other people, which calls for extraordinary empathy, clarity and economy.

Preachers, orators, politicians

They need to transmit the spoken word clearly at a distance, and harness the power and rhythms of rhetoric.

Audiobook Research

If audiobooks are your target market, you need to research them, just as you'd do with print and ebooks.

On Audible, you can listen to short audiobook samples online – like the Look Inside function in print and ebooks. This will give you a flavour of different voices and styles.

If you aren't already signed up for Audible, do this now, start listening, and take advantage of the free trial.

Listen to books in the genre you write in, to get a flavour of how audiobooks sound in a book style you're familiar with. Fiction and non-fiction use different strategies. Listen out for voices, viewpoint and how sections and transitions are handled.

Take notes on what you discover. If you use Kindle, try out Whispersync and the transition between audio and ebook. Try listening at different speeds, and on different devices, with and without headphones.

Once you've got a good sense of audiobooks in your genre, it's time to move on to the features of the medium itself.

Notes

CHAPTER 2

Audio and Listening

With audiobooks, it's useful to break it down into factors that you, as a writer, can and can't control.

You can't control what your listener is doing, or the technology.

You have some control of things like getting the best from your narrator.

And you can 100% control the writing.

Let's start with the things you can't control.

The Audio Medium

Audio flows forward in a linear way. It's like a train track.

As a listener, if you miss something, you can't easily go back. But you can leave the train. In other words, switch off.

So people in linear platforms such as broadcast have to be particularly skilled at finding good ways to keep the audience involved.

Live broadcast is especially demanding, as your audience can easily switch channels.

The good news with audiobooks is that listeners can at least pause and rewind.

Print and ebooks, meanwhile, are relatively forgiving. If you miss something, you can go back and reread – even years later!

So with books, wandering off is fine. But our eyes even wander during reading itself.

When we read, our eyes make jerky movements called saccades – short stops or fixations, followed by tiny jumps in the text.

Eye trackers have shown that we read in little clusters of words, with an expanded field of vision. So we're often taking in words and impressions round the edges, even if we don't realise it. We're picking up context and genre signals and filling in gaps as we go along.

So if you forget the name of the heroine, or who a pronoun is referring to, you may well scan the page, refresh your memory and return to the sentence without even blinking.

Imagine a terrier on a path, stopping to snuffle, then jumping ahead. There's comparative freedom and choice.

Whereas an audiobook is like that train track.

What are the implications?

Firstly, clarity is paramount. If a listener is confused, they may switch off.

Secondly, forward momentum and drive really help. That's where hooks, arcs, foreshadowing and transition words come in.

Finally, the listening experience needs audio ebb and flow to create interest. The narrator's performance is one factor, but it also needs structuring techniques built into the writing, including an awareness of rhythm, pace, emphasis and intensity.

Technology

Technology is another factor beyond your control.

Audiobooks aren't in high quality audio. They're digital files compressed small enough to be streamed or downloaded. So they don't have the sparkling detail of a live performance, or even a CD.

Further along the chain, you don't have control of your reader's listening device, either.

With voice activation on the rise and new cars being equipped with the internet, audio delivery platforms are still evolving fast.

The good news is that ears are pretty forgiving and can tune in to what's offered. They can focus, a bit like camera lenses.