

Then you start writing. You choose and edit your final quotes at the same time as you write the script. Here are some things Ira thinks about when writing for radio.

And when Kenny Whorton and his wife Jackie talk about what it was like in Canalou when they were kids, a dream, a town in an old black and

tape -- :10 This was the place the last four seconds of this]

tape -- :16 The old men ... giv

When I pulled into Canalou, a 4-yr old who lives next door to the Whortons was playing in a drainage ditch. These ditches line both sides of every street in town, because there's no sewage system here. Most people live in trailers, not regular houses. And some people empty their septic tanks straight into these ditches, where kids play. The day I arrived it had rained and the ground was soft and muddy everywhere. An adult who'd let this four-year old touch her a few weeks back had gotten a rash on her face that even the doctors up in St Louis couldn't identify or cure.

This is the town Kenny and Jackie couldn't wait to get back to ...

He will write the way he talks. If there's any phrase in your script that he wouldn't actually say to a person in a real conversation at dinner, he will rewrite. These dot-dot-dot sentence constructions are normal in radio scripts, but would never cut it in a newspaper.

back some of the spirit they remembered growing up here in the 50's & 60's ... maybe start a little league ... park with swings and trees ... put up a gym where the ball ... the kinds of straightforward, innocent hard to imagine anyone opposing anywhere ...

This is the story of why they failed ... of why people did turn their backs on the Whortons ... why three years of using every skill they had - devoting energy and hope - only proved to them that Canalou did not want to be improved ... and that something had changed in this small town that would take a lot more than two do-gooders to reverse.

Hopefully people hear this and want to know what happened. Moments like this create suspense. Suspense, after all, is simply an unanswered question.

The key is to keep moving between different kinds of moments: funny scenes, emotional scenes, raising questions. After several minutes of people talking about how terrible Canalou is...



Julie and I felt strongly that we needed a moment explaining what's good about the town. After all, some people like it there.

So we put in a scene where we heard people goofing around at home: a kid does his Forrest Gump and Sling Blade imitations; a woman talks wistfully about how great it'll be to grow old in Canalou.



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He will notice how he tells the story when he tells his friends. He notices the things he says, and the order he says them. This paragraph is in the story because whenever Julie told anyone about Canalou, one of the first things she found herself talking about was this kid.

to come back and build a home here.

a supervisor at McDonnell Douglas - the in the suburbs ... raised two kids ... associations and the board of ed ... And ved back to Canalou, they'd try to bring

In a narrative, you have to keep raising a series of broader questions, woven into the storytelling.

surrounding

Once you have a first draft, you run the whole thing by someone else. You read them the script and play the quotes. They critique. On our show, I edit the producers' stories, and they edit mine.

That transition to the last scene makes no sense. The tape's pretty but I have no idea why I'm hearing it.



I know, I know.

You know what the point of this scene is? In order to do good of any kind, you have to have a vision of the way you want things...There's a ruthlessness to changing anything...



Hold it-let me type this into the script...

...to imposing your will on what the world is...And the danger of having a vision is that your vision can cloud your eyes about what is...



TAPING AN INTERVIEW

Radio reporters need to follow certain rules to record broadcast-quality tape.



1) A decent microphone, a digital recorder, and a set of headphones are essential. But you have lots of options. You can make a broadcast-quality recording on your iPhone. The key is having a decent microphone. Built-in mics won't cut it. (And yes, they make good cheap mics to use with an iPhone.) Up-to-date, specific recommendations can be found on Transom.org.

2) Location location location. You need quiet. No noisy fans, no music or TV playing in the background, no street noise, nothing that'll make it hard to edit later. Avoid echoey rooms. A carpeted living room is ideal. And wear headphones so you can be sure the recording's OK.



3) Get in close. The single biggest factor in making a good recording is proper mic placement. You can make cheap equipment sound good if you do this right. Hold the mic 3-4 inches below the interviewee's mouth, just below the chin. Yes, you'll feel weird getting this close to a stranger's face. But you must. Be brave! Now Ira will demonstrate the cartooning skills that inspired him to hire Jessica for this job:

Ira © 1999



Keep the mic below the mouth: if it's 4" away, but directly in front of the mouth, the air coming out of the interviewee's mouth will make annoying "p-pops."

Why is it so important to get close? Make a recording with the mic 4", 8", and 12" from your mouth. Listen. When the mic's closer, your recordings sound richer, with more frequencies present, with less of the hum of the room.



4) More mic placement. When you ask a question, point the mic back at yourself. Otherwise, the question won't be loud enough on tape. At the end of the interview, record a half minute of room sound, without anyone talking; you'll need this for editing.

EDITING: THE INVISIBLE ART

If you're trying to make something that sounds like the interviews or documentary stories on *This American Life*, you have to edit the sound. It's not as hard as you might think. In fact, editing is one of the great pleasures of working in radio. It's easy to go into a kind of trance.



Young Ira cutting tape at NPR.

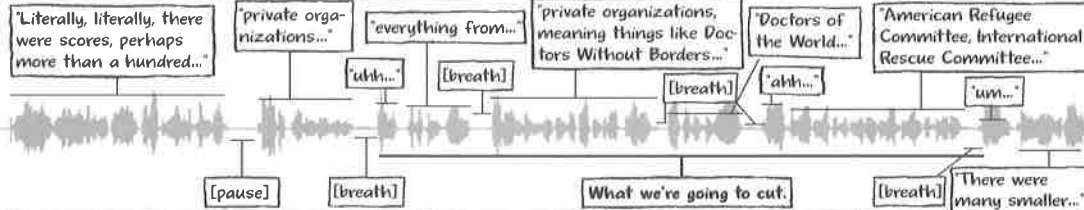
You can edit sound on reel-to-reel tape, using a razor blade to literally cut sentences out of your story.

And there's lots of good software that lets you edit on your laptop or desktop. Some is cheap or free. Some comes with your computer, like GarageBand on Macs.



But whichever system you use, when you're editing people talking, there are certain basic rules. First, you have to preserve the rhythm of normal speech. When we speak, we normally say a sentence, and then we breathe, and then we say another sentence. Then we breathe again.

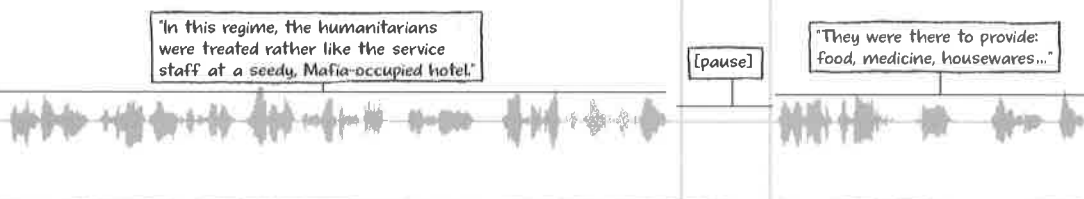
This is a section of Philip Gourevitch's interview, loaded into the editing software used at *This American Life*. On the computer, sounds and words are graphically represented as waveforms, and edits are also visible, as vertical lines. Pauses are flat sections of line, and breaths are small waveforms. Notice where the breaths fall: often at the ends of sentences, but sometimes in the middle.



If you remove a phrase or a sentence, you have to keep the rhythm natural. Usually that means keeping a breath after each sentence, at the edit points. Sometimes you have to try different breaths, to see which one sounds more natural. Your edit points are almost always at the very beginning of a word (after a pause or breath) or at the very end of a word (before a pause or breath).



Second, there's a difference between a pause and a breath. Sometimes an interviewee will finish an important point, take a quick breath, but then rush on to the next idea. If you insert a pause—just the sound of the room—before the breath—or replace the breath with a pause, then their big idea will register more clearly with the listener. Here we inserted a pause to emphasize a particularly apt and chilling analogy.



Philip Gourevitch is one of the best interviewees possible. He has surprising and moving stories to tell, and many urgent and thoughtful things to say about those anecdotes. It took Nancy and Jorge two full days to choose among the many stories and ideas, and to shorten anecdotes here and there.

One of the most striking things about watching the producers at *This American Life* work is just this, the editing process—the sound of the interviewee's voice, saying bits and pieces of the same thing, over and over, for days on end...



Literally, literally, there were scores, perhaps more than a hundred private organizations, ah, there were many...
There's just something about the timing of this that seems wrong. Yeah, it's a, it's a tough... I...
...as the producers hone and polish the interview, bringing out the essentials while jettisoning anything redundant or off the point.

Aside from anything else, they are capable of discussing the organization of ten or twelve selections of tape out of an hour-plus-long interview without referring to their notes, quoting back long sections of dialogue in order to make a point, and of listening to the same minute-long snippet more times than I think you want to know about.



It's just that the "ah" was at a different pitch...



OK.
It's just I think the "ahm" works better.
...a hundred private organizations, ahm, there were many smaller Christian organizations and church-based organizations, you had Caritas from six or seven different countries, you had World Vision and the International Red Cross, the United Nations agencies, it was really...

3:05 Tuesday 4/6. Three days, four hours to air. The fierceness of the attention they pay to the minutest details of the tape is truly amazing to witness. While I watched, Nancy fixed an "um" of the wrong pitch that made the edited list of aid organizations sound, well, edited.



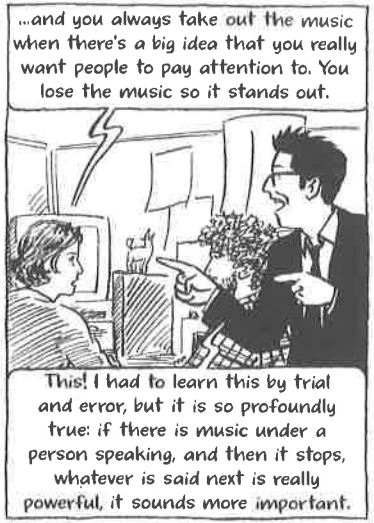
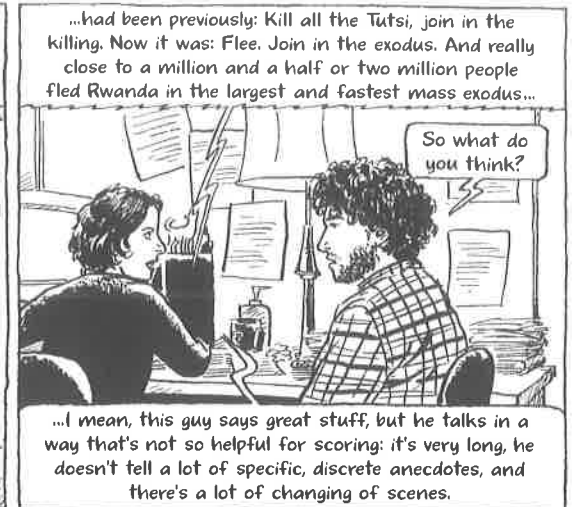
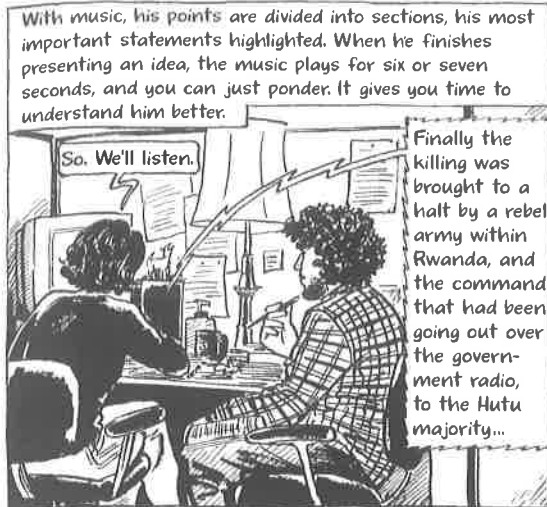
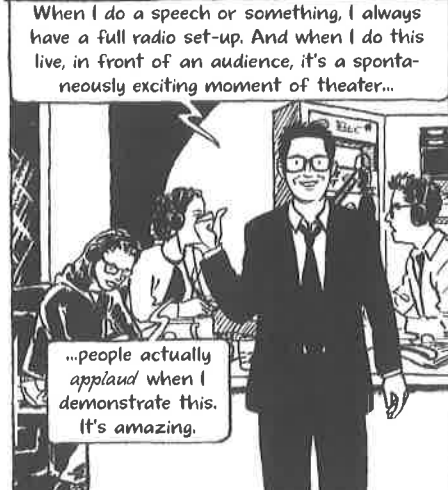
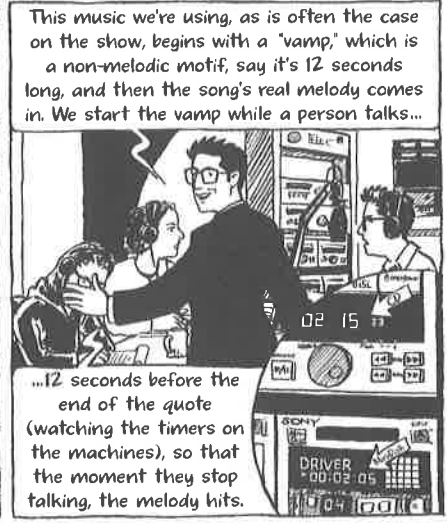
As an observer, it's hard to understand how they can remain enthusiastic about a story after having listened to it continuously for four ten-hour days in a row, but they do, which either says something about the type of person who's cut out to be a radio producer, or, possibly, the Zen-like trance Ira claims editing can cause one to go into.



That one...
Again, this is just a small...it just, like, happens so quickly...
No, that's cool, this...
...World Vision and the International Re...
It gave me a hell of a lot of trouble.

PUTTING MUSIC TO WORDS

6:32 Friday 4/9. 28 minutes to air.



FROM THE TOP, TAKE 2

6:22 Friday 4/9. 38 minutes to air



We have half an hour until air, and the top isn't recorded, and the biggest piece isn't rolled off.

What is "rolling off"? You can't play it off the computer?



Ah, the computer is prone to crashing.

So it's rolling onto a DAT*, so you can...

That's not really great; that's not great.



No, it's not...

Because it's a 33-minute piece, and if they don't start rolling off...they have like five minutes to roll off.



...and then if something happens...

...it makes me feel sick.



...(sigh)...OK, so starting with six...Do you see a pen? An actual pen?...here...



And then this is a ten second...uh, this is ten seconds to the post?

I dunno.

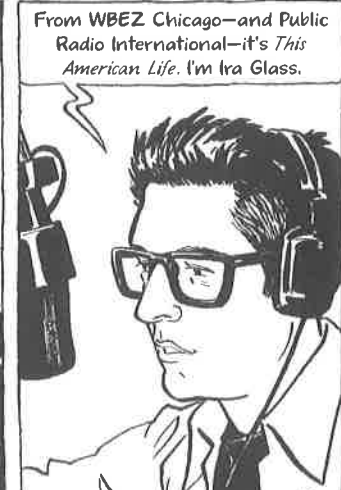


Nine...

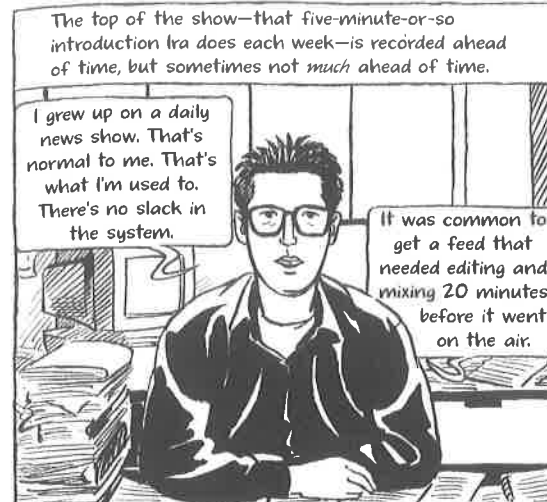
OK. All right!

Start from the top?

Start from the top?



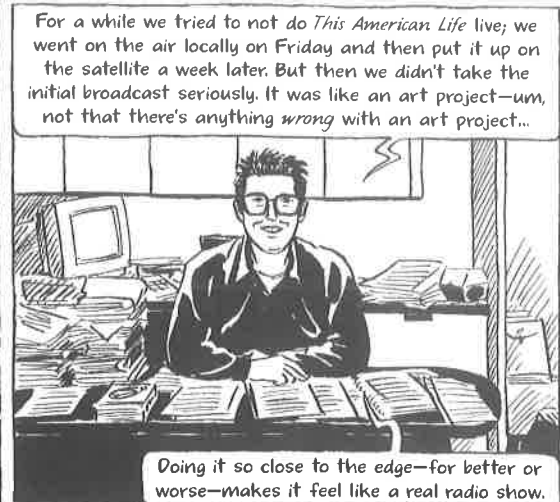
From WBEZ Chicago—and Public Radio International—it's *This American Life*. I'm Ira Glass.



The top of the show—that five-minute-or-so introduction Ira does each week—is recorded ahead of time, but sometimes not *much* ahead of time.

I grew up on a daily news show. That's normal to me. That's what I'm used to. There's no slack in the system.

It was common to get a feed that needed editing and mixing 20 minutes before it went on the air.



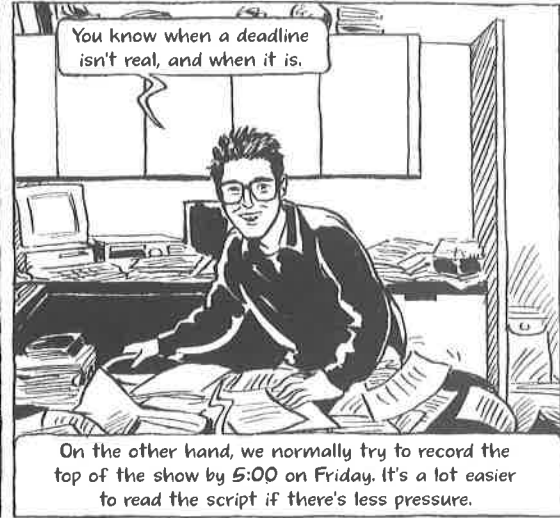
For a while we tried to not do *This American Life* live; we went on the air locally on Friday and then put it up on the satellite a week later. But then we didn't take the initial broadcast seriously. It was like an art project—um, not that there's anything *wrong* with an art project...

Doing it so close to the edge—for better or worse—makes it feel like a real radio show.



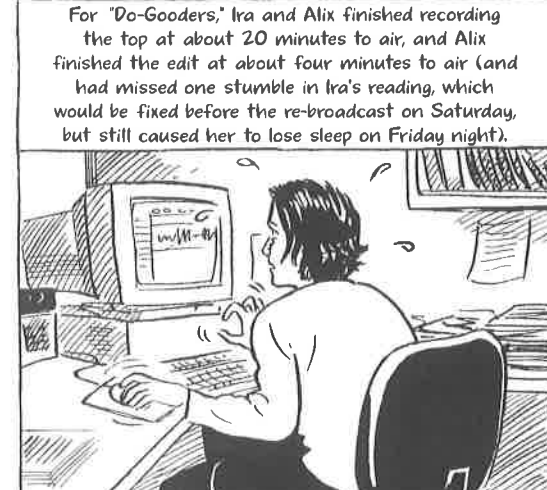
Now it's like, when we broadcast the show, at that exact moment—

—our voices are going into **SPACE!!**

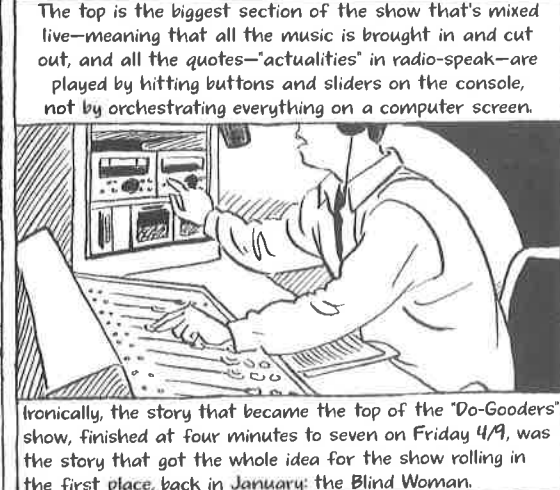


You know when a deadline isn't real, and when it is.

On the other hand, we normally try to record the top of the show by 5:00 on Friday. It's a lot easier to read the script if there's less pressure.



For "Do-Gooders," Ira and Alix finished recording the top at about 20 minutes to air, and Alix finished the edit at about four minutes to air (and had missed one stumble in Ira's reading, which would be fixed before the re-broadcast on Saturday, but still caused her to lose sleep on Friday night).

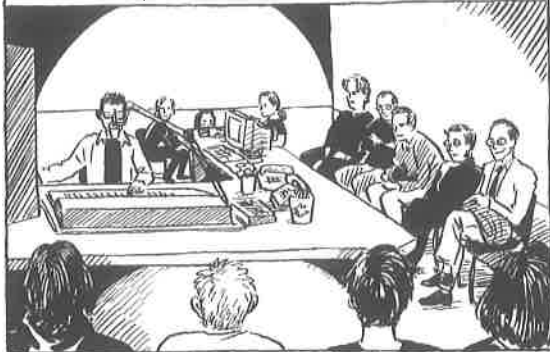


The top is the biggest section of the show that's mixed live—meaning that all the music is brought in and cut out, and all the quotes—"actualities" in radio-speak—are played by hitting buttons and sliders on the console, not by orchestrating everything on a computer screen.

Ironically, the story that became the top of the "Do-Gooders" show, finished at four minutes to seven on Friday 4/9, was the story that got the whole idea for the show rolling in the first place, back in January: the *Blind Woman*.

FROM THE TOP, TAKE 3

Finally, on Friday at 6:58 exactly, the public radio satellite is put at the disposal of *This American Life*.



At that moment, the studio is often full of visitors, watching, hoping they don't have an irresistible urge to cough at the wrong moment, excited to see how the whole thing works. And here is how it works:

Thirty-three minutes later, Jackie and Kenny's story ends. Ira plays the song that he and Sarah have just chosen. Next, he reads the script that goes into the ID break, pauses a second, plays 59 seconds of ID-break music for local announcements, pauses for a second, and reads the next intro (to the Gourevitch story, in this case) live.



Coming up, do-gooders with a million dollars a day in their pockets and plane tickets overseas. That's in a minute, from Public Radio International, when our program continues.

The key to the whole thing isn't structure. In fact, the simpler the structure, the more space you have to follow your curiosity, to work in the moments and quotes that give you pleasure, or evoke some feeling in you, or amuse you.

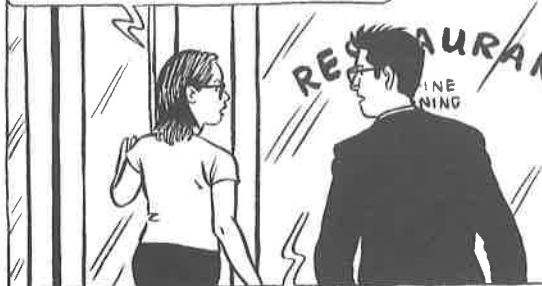


Wait, so, we just spent 30 pages giving away all the secrets to the show and now you tell me that you're still basically on your own and have to follow your own instincts to make radio?

First, Ira plays a tone for a minute and 50 seconds. This lets stations that are recording set the proper level on their tape machines. At 7:00 exactly, he plays the DAT of the show's opening (the "top"), then the DAT of the first story—about Kenny and Jackie. As the story plays, he and Sarah Vowell discuss what song to put on when it ends.



You know, when you spell out how the show is made, it sounds almost formulaic—an anecdote, some bigger idea, another anecdote, a few seconds of music—but on the air, it doesn't feel like a formula.



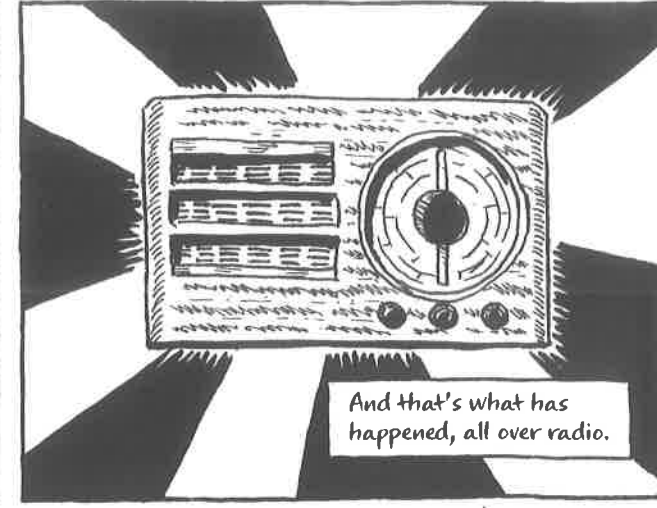
Well, that structure—and all the rules here—they're just the bare frame of a stage on which the people and ideas of a show can take place. We stretch and break these rules all the time. But they give us a framework to think about what we're doing.

Well, yeah! A group of people with different personalities than ours could take the same ideas about structure and writing and editing, and make a show that's way sassier than ours, or way more emotional, or way more reverent.



The key is to express your own personality. Radio is boring when the people on the air just want to sound like everyone else. The people who are the most fun to listen to—from Paul Harvey to Terry Gross—they sound only like themselves. Everyone should try it.

BACK IN THE PRESENT DAY



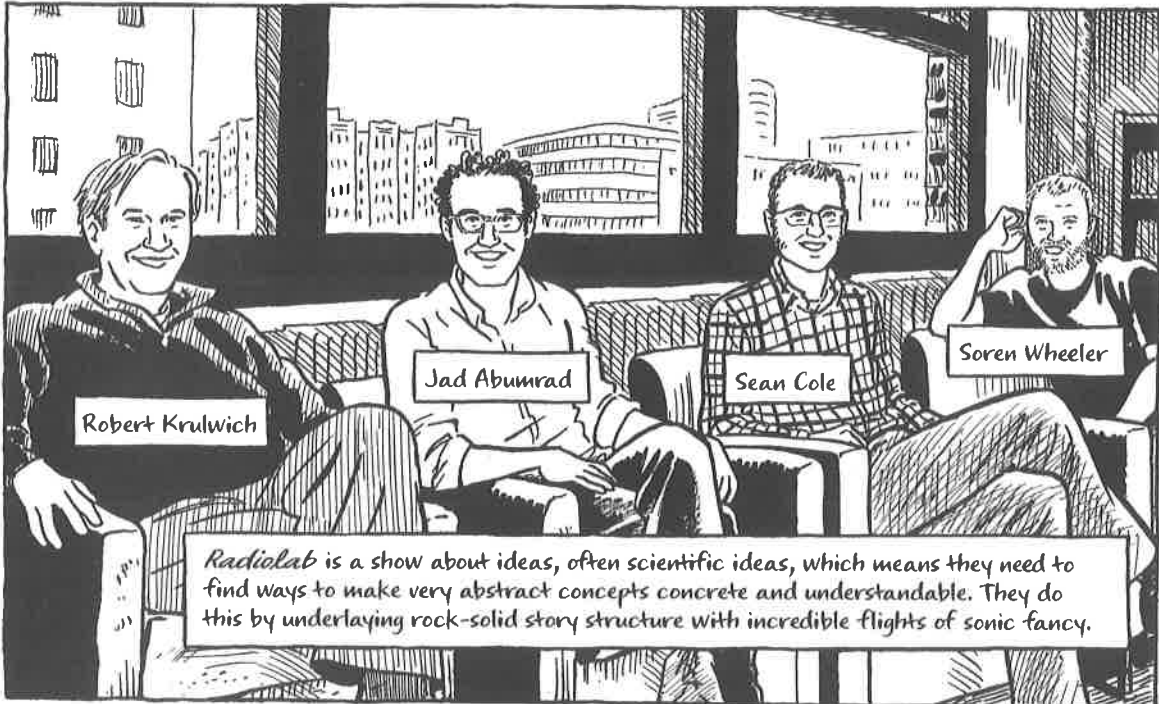
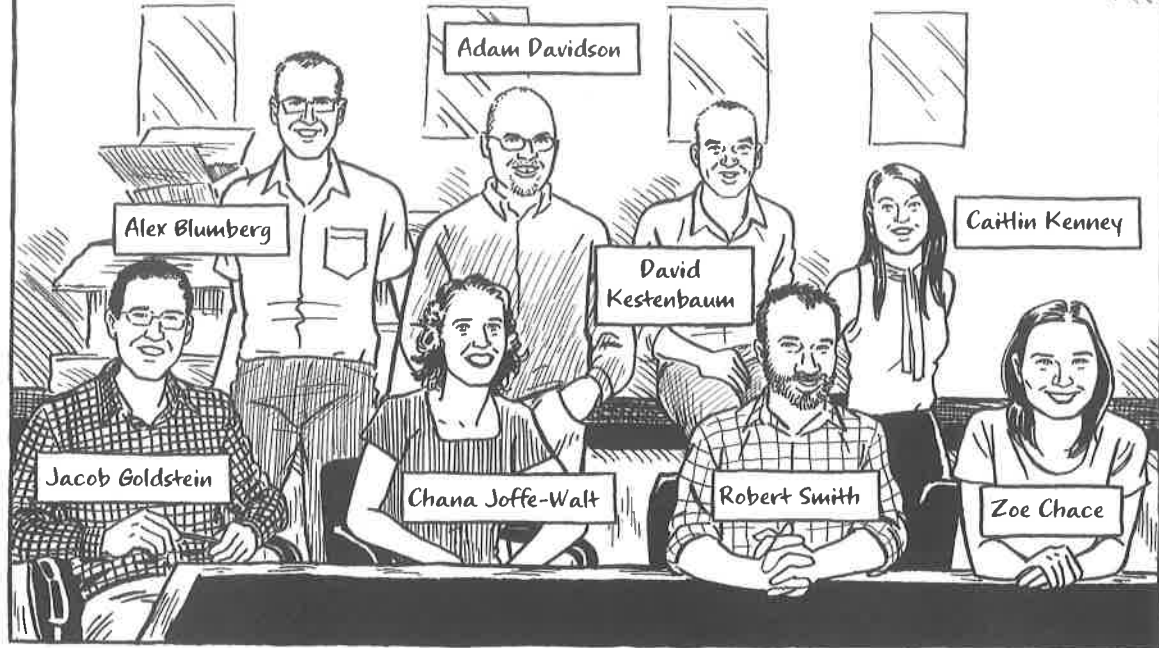
And that's what has happened, all over radio.



For example, *Snap Judgment* is a show that tells propulsive and revealing first-person tales. These can take the form of anything from intimate memoir to thrilling adventure, to even a bit of fiction. Then they soundtrack everything intensively with music and sound effects.

The people pictured in the following pages are those that I've interviewed or mentioned by name in this book. They are not by any means all who are involved in producing these shows. They're also not all still at the same shows since I interviewed them.

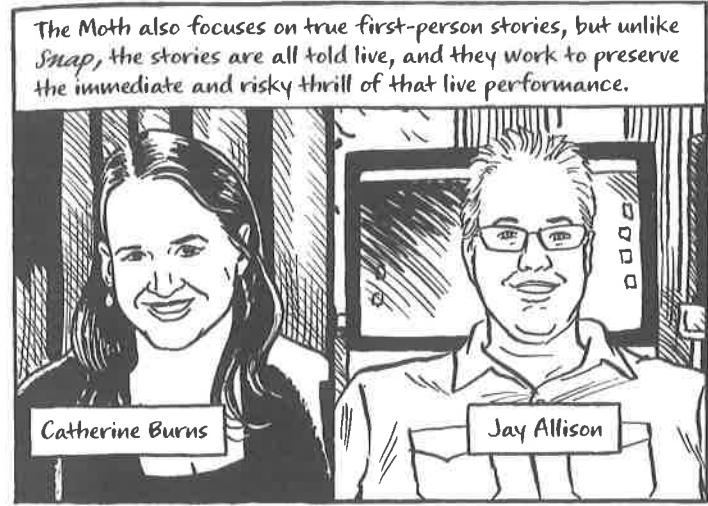
Planet Money reveals the workings of the economy to those of us not equipped with graduate degrees in the dismal science. They manage somehow to make the inner workings of the most complex transactions not only clear, but fascinating.



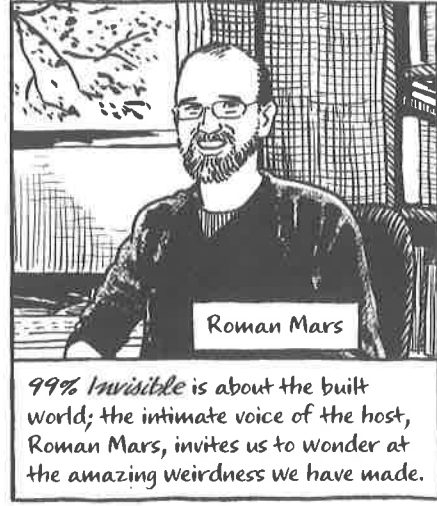
Radiolab is a show about ideas, often scientific ideas, which means they need to find ways to make very abstract concepts concrete and understandable. They do this by underlaying rock-solid story structure with incredible flights of sonic fancy.



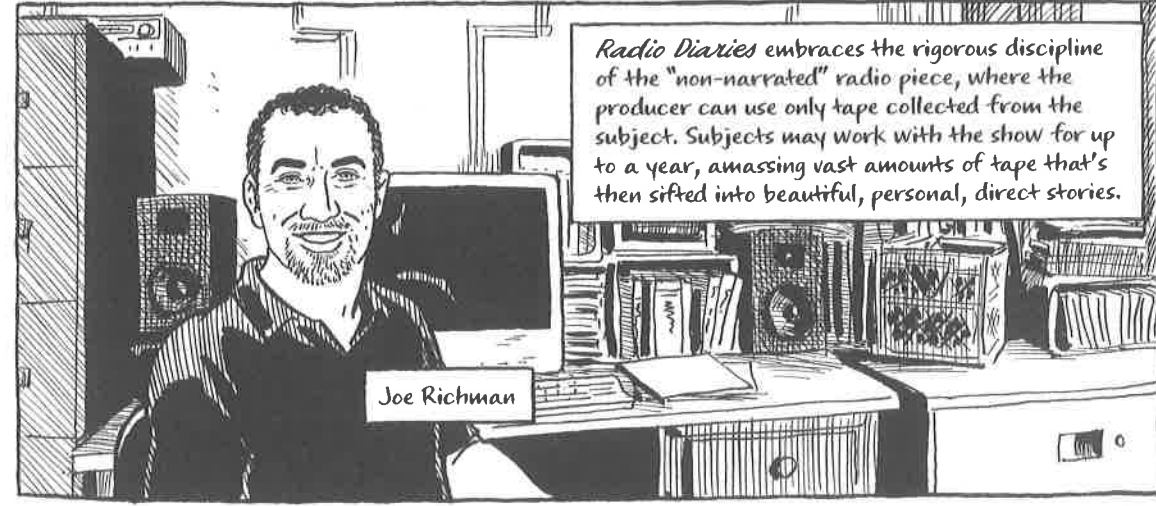
The *Transom Story Workshop* is an eight-week intensive training session where future producers learn their craft from the very best in radio.



The *Moth* also focuses on true first-person stories, but unlike *Snap*, the stories are all told live, and they work to preserve the immediate and risky thrill of that live performance.



99% *Invisible* is about the built world; the intimate voice of the host, Roman Mars, invites us to wonder at the amazing weirdness we have made.



Radio Diaries embraces the rigorous discipline of the "non-narrated" radio piece, where the producer can use only tape collected from the subject. Subjects may work with the show for up to a year, amassing vast amounts of tape that's then sifted into beautiful, personal, direct stories.



It's just obvious at this point: there are multiple ways to tell all kinds of stories.

And so I've been talking to all these radio producers, trying to learn what they know.

These shows differ. They reflect the truth of what they are: the work of individuals, each following his or her own curiosity.

But they have certain elements in common that just jump out.



Stories that ask big questions.



Surprising, engaging characters.



Authentic voices.



Robust narrative structure.



In many cases, intricate uses of sound as part of storytelling.



And the people making these stories get there in a characteristic way: through intense collaboration where everyone gives and receives honest feedback.



These shows have something universal to say about narrative.

You can use these ideas to tell stories effectively, in comics, in film, in journalism...

These things work.



When people craft stories with these elements, the voices we hear are powerful. When they say, "Listen, let me tell you a story..." you can't help but listen.



So listen. Let me tell you a story.