



TEEN REPORTER HANDBOOK

How To Make Your Own Radio Diary



The Teen Reporter Handbook
is written by Joe Richman
Radio Diaries Inc.
Producer of
the Teenage Diaries Series on



Funding is provided by



ABOUT TEENAGE DIARIES

Since 1996, the Teenage Diaries series has been providing tape recorders to young people around the country so they can report on their lives for National Public Radio. The teen diarists conduct interviews, keep an audio journal and record the sounds of daily life – usually recording more than 30 hours of raw tape over the course of a year. All of the material is then edited into the 15-30 minute documentaries that air on NPR's All Things Considered.

"Instead of the usual, dull interviews with celebrities, the work of interviewing ordinary people - those who live in your neighborhood, older members of your family - is terribly exciting and rewarding. With a tape recorder and microphone, young interviewers are able to capture the unofficial, unrecorded history of our daily lives. This Teen Reporter Handbook is a wonderful guide to doing that work."

—Studs Terkel, Writer and Oral Historian

"A microphone is a magic wand, waved against silence. A recorder preserves the stories that microphones catch. And radio casts the stories to a broad audience -- bringing us together in special ways. We need more young voices, young stories in our lives. Make your microphone magical. Break our silence."

—Susan Stamberg, National Public Radio

If you need additional copies of the Teen Reporter Handbook, would like to find out more about the Teenage Diaries series, or want to hear all the stories in Real Audio, c

www.radiodiaries.org

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TEEN REPORTER HANDBOOK

Introduction

Back in 1996, I had been working as a public radio reporter for several years, when I met a teenager named Josh Cutler. Josh has Tourette's Syndrome, a rare brain disorder. Because of Tourette's, Josh has occasional physical tics and he sometimes says – or yells – things that he can't control. Josh was just starting his sophomore year in high school when he agreed to work with me on a story about his disease. I gave Josh a tape recorder so he could keep a record of his daily life. This took a lot of guts for Josh. But there was one thing he couldn't bring himself to do: record at school. Josh and I agreed that an important chapter of his story would involve talking to kids at school about Tourette's Syndrome. But Josh just couldn't do it. He was afraid the microphone would make him look stupid, and no one would want to be interviewed. On one occasion, Josh brought the equipment to school, intent on recording, but he kept the microphone hidden inside his backpack the whole time, with the tape rolling. (See the Technical Tips section to learn why this is not the best method.) Then one day, after months of excuses, Josh got brave. During lunch he pulled out the microphone. What happened next was a total surprise. Josh tells it best: "Everyone jumped at the chance. I had to ward people off. Everyone started asking me questions about Tourette's. It was weird because, before that, I had never really talked about it to anyone – except my mom and dad."

Recently, Josh told me that was one of the most important days of his life. The tape recorder allowed Josh to explore his disease – and himself – in a way he had never done before. Now Josh says he wants to keep doing radio diaries until he's eighty years old.

Since Josh's story aired, I've worked with many other teenagers – and non-teenagers – to help them document their own lives for National Public Radio. Many of these stories, like Josh's, could never be told by a professional journalist in the same way that Josh tells it himself. Still, I always urge teenage diarists to think of themselves as reporters.

Teenage diarist Josh



Being a reporter is like having a passport. It's a license to ask questions, be curious and explore new worlds – and radio is the perfect way to do all of this. Here's why:

- ☒ The equipment is relatively inexpensive and easy to use.
- ☒ A microphone is less intrusive than a video camera. People can be more natural – more themselves.
- ☒ Radio is intimate. When you hear someone's voice on the radio, it feels as if they're talking directly to you. It's like getting a phone call from a friend.
- ☒ The limitation of radio is actually its greatest strength: there are no pictures. Radio forces you to be creative and pay attention to words, sound and language. Radio requires you to be not just a journalist, but a poet and a good storyteller.
- ☒ Remember that many people listen to the radio in their cars. That's why radio should never be boring, or people will fall asleep. Good radio saves lives.

This Teen Reporter Handbook represents the collective knowledge of a long history of radio reporters, producers and storytellers. Special thanks to Jay Allison (and his "Tips for Citizen Storytellers"), David Isay and Ira Glass for all they have taught me. Check out the web resources section for more guides, how-to's, and radio inspiration.

The Teenage Diaries series was founded on the principle that everybody has a story to tell. We hope this Teen Reporter Handbook will help you make your own radio diary.

Joe Richman
Producer of Teenage Diaries on National Public Radio

"Everything in the world has been said before... but not everybody has said it."

—anonymous

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Radio can be a lot of things: Radio can be a news report. Radio can be a commentary. Radio can be a conversation. Radio can be an audio postcard. Your story can be a combination of all this and more. Here are some ways to get started.

Keep an audio journal

Use the tape recorder as an electronic diary. Relax and try to forget about the microphone. Speak the way you do normally. Imagine that you're just talking to a friend. Being natural takes practice.

Do interviews

Talk to your family, your friends, your bus driver, the fireman down the street. Get people to tell you their stories.

Be curious

Think like a reporter. The best thing about carrying around a tape recorder is that it gives you permission to ask people about themselves. Sometimes you find yourself talking to people – even friends and family – about things you would never talk about without a microphone. Being a reporter is a license to be curious.

Paint a picture with your voice

Be a play-by-play announcer. Tell us where you are, who you're talking to, the date, the time, what's happening. Be the listeners' eyes and ears.

Show, don't tell

Good tour guides do more than just talk, they show. There are tricks for “showing” things on the radio. You can actually point to objects, for example: “Over there on the sidewalk is a big blue dog.” Even though the listener can't see the dog, a space is created in our imagination for where the blue dog should be. You can often use the microphone the same way you would a movie camera: panning, cutting, zooming in for a close-up. All of these things help create a picture inside our heads. It may sound funny, but radio is a very visual medium. You have to give listeners something to “look” at... with their imagination instead of their eyes.



Use the small details to tell the big stories

Look for the little things that surprise you. Here's an example: Mrs. Jones is forty-five years old, a doctor, has a family and a dog. But even more interesting – and revealing – is the fact that Mrs. Jones sets every single clock in her house five minutes fast, and that she collects bus transfers from her commute to work and keeps them all in a shoe box in the closet. You can learn a lot about people from a few unexpected details.

Be there

Let things happen in front of your tape recorder. Record in the moment, instead of telling us about it later. The best documentaries are the ones that let the audience participate and experience things as they happen. There are two types of tape: verb tape (action) and adjective tape (description). Adjective tape is good, but verb tape is more powerful because it pulls the listener inside your story. More verbs. Less adjectives.

Be prepared, don't leave home without it

If you want things to “happen” in your story, you have to carry your tape recorder with you as much as possible. You should be prepared to be in the right place at the right time. (At news events you can always tell the lazy reporters from the good ones: Hack reporters just come for the sound bites; good reporters get there early and stay until the last person leaves.) You never know when you will stumble onto something that will be the best part of your story. Being lucky requires a lot of work.

Keep it rolling

The golden rule of radio is that the best moments always happen right when you've stopped recording. There's a reason for that: As soon as you push “stop,” people relax and are more themselves. Natural, truthful moments are priceless. Tape is cheap. Keep it rolling.



Juan, an illegal immigrant from Mexico, documents his new life on the American side of the Rio Grande.

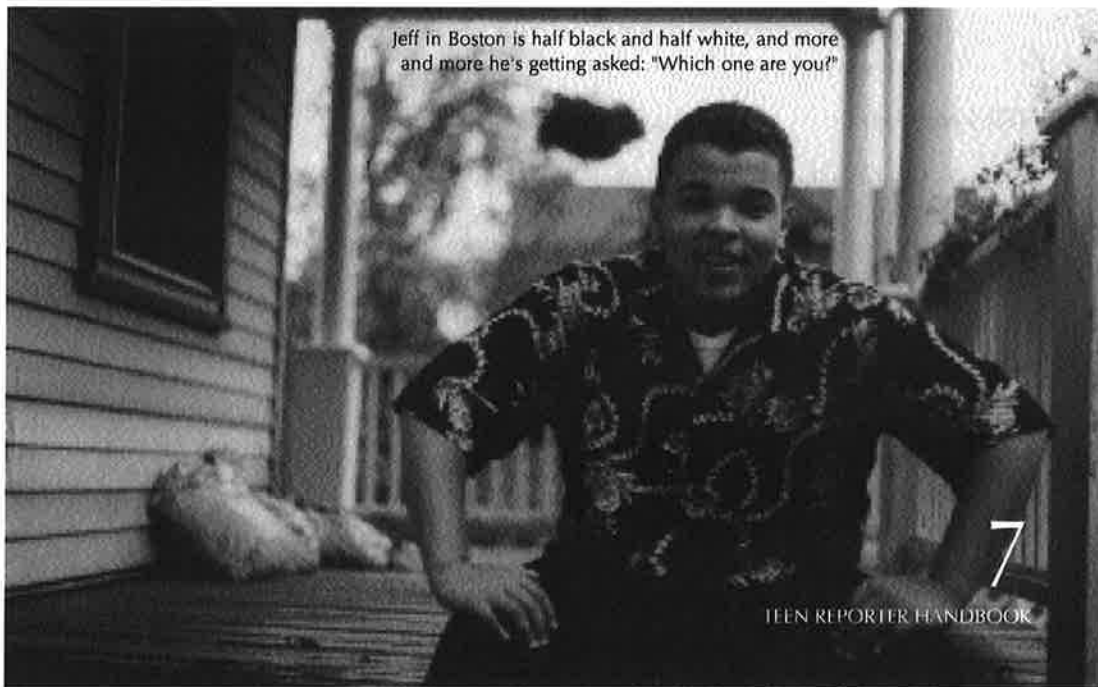


Always strive for one “memorable moment”

Every story should have at least one little part that you just completely love: a great clip of tape, a good scene, a funny anecdote, an unexpected detail. It's the thing you run back and tell your friends about. Often the “memorable moment” is something that catches you by surprise. Ira Glass, host of the radio show, *This American Life*, says that the point when he knows he has a good story is usually the moment when he realizes that it's not the story he thought it was going to be.

Ordinary experience has in it all the elements of great drama – if you happen to be lucky enough to be around when it's happening and recognize it for what it is.

—Frederick Wiseman, Filmmaker



TECHNICAL TIPS

When you do a radio story, you actually have three jobs. You have to be a journalist, a producer and an audio engineer, all at the same time. Here are some things to keep in mind.

Get comfortable with the equipment

Play around with the tape recorder on your own until you are very familiar with all the buttons and knobs. It's important to do this before you begin; if you're relaxed with the recorder and the microphone, the people you're interviewing will be too.

Get organized

Always make sure you have enough cassettes and an extra set of batteries. Don't leave long cables hanging out, or you'll have to spend time untangling everything. Get a shoulder bag to hold the recorder, the cassettes and batteries. The more prepared you are, the more you can concentrate on the important things.

Do a test

Always do a test before you begin. Record a few seconds, then play it back to make sure the sound is good.

Label your tapes

Always label the tapes before you start. When you're in the field it's easy to forget and tape over something you've just recorded. (It happens.) And after you're done recording, pop out the safety tabs to make sure you don't erase over anything. The tabs are the little plastic squares on the top of the cassette. Just push them in with a pen.

Always wear your headphones

Recording without headphones is like a photographer taking pictures without looking through the viewfinder. Headphones help you focus on exactly what you're recording. If something sounds weird, stop and check it out.



Beware of the pause button

When recording, make sure the tape is rolling and that you're not in pause mode. Don't use the pause button. It's a very tricky little button – it can make you think you are recording when you're not.

Keep the microphone close

The most important thing of all: keep the microphone close to the sound source (your mouth or the mouth of the person you're interviewing). About 5-6 inches is good, the length of your outstretched hand. If it's any farther away you will still be able to hear what people say, but the recording will lose its power and intimacy. It's also best to keep the microphone a little bit below the mouth to avoid the "popping P" sound.

Collect good sounds

Every time you record, collect all the specific sounds you can think of: dogs barking, doors slamming, the radio being turned on, the sound of your blender, or even your mom snoring. Be creative. You will use these sounds later when you produce the story.

Record everything

Long pauses are okay. Umms are okay. Saying stupid and embarrassing things is okay. Often the stuff you think is weird, worthless, or that you initially want to edit out, will end up being the best and most surprising parts of the story.

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials or odors, plates of food.

—James Agee, Author of "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"



Randy from Tchula, Mississippi searches for clues about the life of his great-grandfather – civil rights leader Ozell Mitchell.



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Let people talk in full sentences

Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. Instead of, "Are you a doctor?" ask, "Tell me how you became a doctor." Remember that you want people to tell you stories.

Get people to 'do' things

In addition to the sit-down interview, have people show you around; record a tour of their house, their photo album or their car engine. It's more fun to get people moving around and talking about what they're doing, rather than just sitting in a chair. It helps to relax people before and during an interview. It's also a way to get good tape.

Listening is the key

A good interview is like a conversation. Prepare questions, but don't just follow a list. The most important thing is to listen and have your questions come naturally. If your questions are rehearsed and hollow, the answers will be too. If you are curious and your questions are spontaneous and honest, you will get a good interview.

Interviewing is a two-way street

Conducting a good interview depends, in part, on asking the right questions. But it is also important to establish a relationship with the person you are interviewing. Sometimes it is appropriate to share some information about yourself in an interview. Remember that it's a conversation. What's more, for it to be an honest conversation, people must feel that you care about what they say, and will honor and respect their words and stories.

The foolproof question

Here is one simple question that always works: "How do you see things differently since (blank) happened?" If you're talking to your mailman about the time he was chased for 2 blocks by a neighborhood dog, ask how he feels every time he goes by that house.



Take notes

Remember specific details. Take notes immediately after the interview, while it's still fresh in your mind. You can also use the tape recorder like a dictating machine.

Relax and forget about the microphone

One thing that's always amazing: In the beginning of an interview people are usually stiff and self-conscious, but after a while, they forget all about the tape recorder and start to be themselves.

The last secret to a great interview

There is one simple rule for getting people to talk openly and honestly: You have to be genuinely curious about the world around you.

I learned, from 25 years of writing down their words in notebooks, how real people really talk. I learned that syntax and rhythm were almost as individual as a fingerprint, and that one sentence, precisely transcribed, could effortlessly delineate a character in a way that five pages of exposition never could.

— Anna Quindlen, Writer



Emily from Maplewood, Minnesota gives an inside look at "sportos," "krusties," "krinkles" and the hierarchy of high school

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