



The Transom Review

Volume 11/Issue 1

[Chana Joffe-Walt](#)
January 2011

(Edited by Sydney Lewis)

Intro from Jay Allison

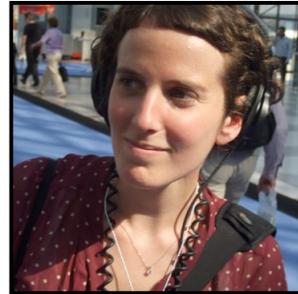
By now, you know about Planet Money: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/>
You know their reputation for breaking down the big stuff into digestible bites, for taking abstract concepts and making them concrete, for taking non-stories and making them stories.

Planet Money's Chana Joffe-Walt runs down some of their tricks for us on Transom. If you've heard Chana's stories, you know she has a breezy, curious way of tackling the most obscure stuff, so that you actually *want* to understand it, and then you actually *do*. This is partly due to the innate talent of Chana and her editors, but there are tricks you can learn and Chana's Transom Manifesto details five of them: Sign-Post, Find Characters, Think Small(er), Go on a Quest, Organize. All are illustrated with scripts or audio. You'll find this useful, we promise, because these tricks can, in modified form, help *any* radio story, complicated or not.

About Chana Joffe-Walt

Chana Joffe-Walt a reporter for NPR’s global economics team [Planet Money](#). She has done stories about FDIC bank takeovers, global piracy (the kind with boats), toxic assets and post earthquake Haiti. She recently won the Daniel Schorr Journalism prize for her investigative [segment on AIG](#) and the roots of the 2008 financial meltdown.

Prior to Planet Money, Joffe-Walt covered education in Seattle for member station KPLU. She has a B.A. from Oberlin College.



Chana Joffe-Walt

The Tricks of Planet Money

I want to write about producing a particular type of story that I’ve been calling the Idea Story. An Idea Story is often known by other names such as: complicated, confusing or boring. That’s because Idea Stories tend to be an investigation of a question (“...that got our reporters wondering, [why is gold worth anything?](#)”).

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2010/11/18/131430755/a-chemist-explains-why-gold-beat-out-lithium-osmium-einsteinium>

An Idea Story can also be an explanation of something. (“...and to find out what exactly IS [quantitative easing](#)”) we turn to...”).

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2010/10/07/130408926/quantitative-easing-explained>

The problem with Idea Stories is that they lack many of the elements that we know make great radio – characters, stuff happening to the characters and scenes that you can picture. You know, Story Stories. Idea Stories fail in a lot of these areas.

That said, this is the kind of piece that when done right can be hugely satisfying to listen to. When Idea Stories are good, people will thank you for explaining something they’ve heard second referenced in the news and never quite understood. There are lots of “whoa” moments in successful Idea Stories that explore a big fundamental question in a way that shifts your perspective.

Which is all to say it can be worth the work to take these character-less, narrative-less, complicated Idea Stories and make them feel like Story Stories. This involves a lot of dress up.

Here are five tricks we all use all the time:

Trick #1: Sign-Post

A complicated story should have a script that reads like a map with a very detailed route laid out for the listener. It should state the purpose of the story upfront, remind you of the destination throughout and loudly announce each and every turn before it happens.

Let's start with the opening. Idea Stories need a statement of purpose. Most Story Stories benefit from this too but Idea Stories can't live without it. You are asking listeners to follow some complicated explanation or theoretical idea *on the radio*. People zone out for 15 seconds here and there. There is no rewind.

The destination (your question or idea) is what is driving the entire piece, so you need to state it early and repeat it many times. We will often spend half of an edit on the exact words that should follow “on the show today...”



Planet Money

For example, David Kestenbaum and Jacob Goldstein began a recent Idea Story podcast with a question:

Today on the show...we want to try to answer the question ‘why gold?’ Why it’s served as money for millenia. We go through the entire periodic table of the elements. And try to answer that question.

From the beginning you know the question (red). Then they do you another service. They tell you how they’re going to go about answering it (orange). This is a sign-post. You have already been handed a map, this is the phrase that lets you know where we are going next.

Jacob and David take us through the periodic table of elements with a very charming chemist who nixes element after element explaining why each one would make lousy money. We are on this journey with David and Jacob and we are told (with a sign-post) every time we move from one group of elements to another:

Jacob Goldstein: So we pull out the periodic table of the elements. And we start on the far right.

The chemist ticks off a few:

David Kestenbaum: OK so if you are playing at home. You can cross out the rightmost column: Helium, down through Radon.

Jacob Goldstein: Big jump now. Rightmost to left mostly. Sanat swings now to the left most column of the periodic table.

In fact this piece is so good at stating the mission and sign-posting each transition, I'm just going to post the whole script here: http://transom.org/?page_id=13836

Remember, **Red** is each time they restate their purpose (why gold?). **Orange** are the sign-posts that tell us “here is where we are going to turn next.”

Trick #1A: Underlining and Foreshadowing

There are two more things sign-posts are really good at: underlining and foreshadowing.

A few weeks ago I turned in a piece about a trade war between Brazilian and US cotton farmers. It was a complicated, multi-step story with multiple twists and turns that eventually (20 minutes in) built to an outrageous agreement between the two countries. There was a good pay off at the end of the story but you had to stick with it a while to get there.

I tried to foreshadow this exciting twist with an opening that lay out everything that was about to happen:

Today's show...how to buy four bales of cotton. And this story has it all. It turns out the search for cotton lands you right in the middle of a decade old international conflict. There's an underdog named Pedro who took on the world's largest superpower. There's quiet money transfers, retaliation and a 147 million dollar bribe.

Planet Money Master Editor Alex Blumberg heard this piece once and tucked in 3 sentences throughout the script that gracefully pleads, “keep listening!”

One third of the way in sign-post #1:

The reason Dahlin is so obsessed with Brazil, brought it up 3 times without being asked...there's a backstory.

Sign-post #2, halfway through the piece:

If you're Brazil there is only one option left. Retaliation. Not everyday lashing out retaliation, but a permitted, controlled retaliation process. And if you want to understand the bizarre state of global trade, just watch what happens next.

And to set up that final outrageous US/Brazil agreement:

Days after the Retaliation Master sent his list the US sent a delegation to Brazil to negotiate. And here is where our story takes it last and final twist.

These three short phrases tell you where you are in the story and that it'll be worth your while to keep listening.

Sign-posting can also be useful in telling listeners “here is where you should pay attention” or “this is where the lesson is.” Again Alex accomplished this in the same piece by throwing in a couple more lines:

This is the crazy thing about the WTO. It has a formal process, it has high-powered lawyers and judges and 153 member countries. Countries bring major international disputes to its doors. The WTO comes out with a ruling and then...that's it. Nothing. If everyone wants to obey the ruling, that's cool. If not, that's OK too.

Imagine that graf as I originally wrote it, without that first line. I am just talking *at you* about the WTO process. I am hoping that you get that it's bizarre. Alex's line just tells people: hey this is weird.

You can do this in tape too. I interviewed an American lobbyist for the Brazil WTO story. Out of nowhere in the interview he starts thanking various officials for their work on this issue. At first I was annoyed because it sounded like (probably was) a boring prepared speech that I'd have to cut it. Then I realized the whole reason I wanted to talk to him was to hear about him lobbying politicians. Here he was lobbying American politicians in the middle of our interview! So I made sure to point out what was happening:

<http://transom.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Transom-Brazil-lobbyist.mp3>

By interrupting him I am able to underline what I want the listener learn here. If you don't think to do it in the interview you can always stop the tape and jump in with your underlining sign-post (“I want to pause here to point out...”).

To review:

- Your script should look like a map.
- It should begin with a statement of purpose and directions of how you plan to get there.
- You should announce clearly every time there is about to be a turn that there is about to be a turn. Even better tell us where it will take us.
- Use your sign-posts to keep the listeners engaged and to underline what we are learning and have learned thus far.
- Remind us throughout the piece of the original statement of purpose.

Trick #2: Find Characters

The worst part of Idea Stories is that they rarely come with obvious characters. Collateralized debt obligations lack characters, as do trade imbalances. They are important but frustratingly resistant to storytelling.

When I am beginning to research an Idea Story I try to lay out the mechanics in my mind. “OK so we buy Chinese stuff. Dollars go from here to China...then they pile up there in the banks...then they get used to buy US treasury bonds...” At some point early on I always ask who is the guy who does that? Someone has to put that money into the Chinese bank, someone at the bank manages it and sees it piling up, someone sits at a computer and buys US treasury bonds...who is that guy?

One time I decided I wanted to do a story about the economics of piracy. Somali pirates had just captured an American sea captain, piracy was on the rise and I kept thinking it must really be worthwhile to be a pirate. I could have put that question to a piracy expert at Brookings and done serviceable piece. It would not have had characters though, which we know make a story memorable. So I started to play out the step by step. Some guy comes up with a business plan. Who is that guy? Some guy provides the financing. Who’s he? Then there’s the pirates of course. They take over the ship and start demanding money. Who do they demand money from? There’s some guy that negotiates with the pirates. I tried and failed to track down a pirate and a pirate financier. Eventually though, I did find a ship owner whose ship was hijacked. He could tell the entire story from the moment the pirate first called him, through the negotiations to how he delivered the ransom:

http://transom.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/pirates_timesheets.mp3

Pirates have timesheets. Pirates have fax machines. The money gets dropped from a helicopter in the water! No one else but a guy directly involved can tell you those details and it’s those details that make the story stick. It’s worth it to try and find the guy.

Pirates are inherently exciting but getting the actual guy who does the actual thing can also be your way into an Idea Story that is technical. For instance, last year we were doing lots of stories on the economics of health care in the US. The legislation proposed barring companies from denying customers with pre-existing conditions.

I was interested in how that would change fundamental business of private insurance, a business that most people didn't really seem to understand (evil private insurers vs. socialist death panels, you'll remember). A health care economist could have explained why private insurers have to deny sick people, but you would have no reason to actually listen to that. The practice sounds so outrageous, as soon as an economist tries to tell you, it makes rational business sense you turn off the radio.

It occurred to me that someone in some office somewhere does the denying. That's their job. A job they were maybe about to lose:

<http://transom.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/preexes.mp3>

There's something so satisfying about hearing the actual human beings. You still get your moral outrage but because you're hearing from the deniers, you want to know how they justify what they do. You are paying attention as the deniers go on to explain the way an insurance pool works in the individual market. They explain that by denying high-risk people to the collective pool, they play a crucial role in keeping insurance affordable. Hearing from the actual humans means there's an opportunity for them to make their case. It doesn't mean listeners will like it, just that they'll hear it, and that's what you want.

Lastly, if your story is so technical and complex that there really aren't any characters, make them up. David and I did an entire series on an anthropomorphized [toxic asset](#):

<http://www.npr.org/series/124587240/planet-money-s-toxic-asset>.

Alex, Adam and Caitlin acted out a [bank balance sheet](#):

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/375/bad-bank>

To review:

- Walk through the mechanics of your Idea Story and how it would play out in real life. Pay attention to places where there are real people doing real day-to-day tasks.
- Kill yourself trying to track down those people and get them to talk to you.
- Use the characters bring out details and scenes that will stick with listeners.
- Use the characters as your entry point to your nerdy idea or explanation.

Trick #3: Think Small(er)

The inspiration for an Idea Story is often big and broad. I often find if I allow myself to think smaller, there is a real world example, a step-by-step narrative that gets at the big idea. Take the Brazil WTO story. I couldn't just talk to a trade economist in vague terms about WTO rules and the problematic nature of subsidies. That's not a story. When I started learning about the Brazil WTO I realized global trade wars play out all the time and they are actual drama filled narratives. I could still get at the big ideas by weaving them into the narrative of one example.

Trick #4: Go on a Quest

If you can't find a real story you need to make it feel like a story. The reporter's "quest for an answer" technique is often overused but only because it's so damn effective. You start with a compelling question and then you the reporter set out on a quest to find the answer. David and Jacob did this with the Why Gold podcast. They even made it a table of elements bingo game.

At the height of the financial crisis, Adam Davidson suggested I do a story about why the regulators failed to regulate AIG. It was clearly a very relevant question but unfortunately there are a million answers. There are too many different regulators; the big regulators pandered to the banks for their business, the banks played them off of each other. Oh, and Congress made it harder than it should have been for regulators to actually regulate. Each new thing I learned was so amazing to me, and that is how I wanted it to unfold for listeners too. Starting with the New York state insurance regulators who told me they were shocked AIG collapsed (despite the fact that AIG was based in New York State).

<http://transom.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Transom-AIG1.mp3>

I was on a search for who was supposed to be watching AIG. That gave me a narrative format. Along the way I could stop frequently for a "discovery" (explanation).

Trick #5: Organize

Last and certainly least, you can go with bullet points. If all you've got is talking heads, the least you can do is organize them for your listeners. David and I did a show China's economy becoming the second largest economy in the world (bumping Japan). The question we get all the time from Americans about this is "should we be afraid?". We tried to spice it up with people in China talking about how they were afraid too, but it just didn't work.

In the end we went with bullet points. There are three possible reasons you should be afraid. It wasn't the best radio but it made it possible to wrap your head around a complicated question.

To review:

- Find an actual example that gets at your big idea. The example allows you to tell a story and talk about the big idea at the same time.
- Take listeners on a reporting quest to find the answer to a compelling question.
- If all else fails, use lists and bullet points to help organize your points.

Lastly I'd say yes, Idea Stories are a pain in the ass, but they provide an enormous service. People feel so grateful when you clearly explain something complicated. It gives them an access point to all future stories on the topic. It can be powerful to hear a piece that gets at a big fundamental idea or question. It gets under people's skin. There are obviously more than five tricks to take a boring or complicated topic and make it interesting. The point is if you're fascinated by something but it seems really complicated, or if you can tell everyone is confused by something and you are too and you're thinking it's a monster to take on – do it. Find a way to make it work. It's worth it.

Comments

[Jay Allison](#) - December 13, 2010 - [#1](#)

Another useful Sign-Post technique, of course, is numbering... just like you did in your manifesto.

[Jon Miller](#) - December 13, 2010 - [#2](#)

Most of the (wonderful) work you folks do is with voices -- yours, phone interviews, in-person interviews -- and bits of music. As you point out, listeners occasionally get vivid eyewitness details, but in general we don't hear much of the outside world. (When I hear Planet Money pieces, I tend to imagine an office full of very clever people having lively conversations and making phone calls; I feel engaged and stimulated and delighted but rarely transported.) Do you think ambient sound and traditional scene-building gets in the way of the sort of storytelling you're trying to do? Or is it just impractical and expensive?

[Chana JW](#) - December 16, 2010 - [#3](#)

I am in Madrid where I just spent at least a half an hour arguing with a press woman at the public debt department about whether or not they'd let me SEE where the Spanish government auctions off its bonds. Eventually I won, walked into a room full of men I was barred from talking to, sitting at computers and making no noise whatsoever. This is the center of where the drama is taking place - can the Spanish government get the world to lend it money?! - and there was no sound. There was zero scene. Finance sucks for scenes.

I definitely don't think sounds or scenes get in the way of what we're trying to do. An ideal story for us has characters scenes. It's just really hard to capture the drama of something as it's happening because you're either not allowed, the drama requires so much explanation to actually understand and/or there is no sound that communicates the drama. For instance over the past couple months US regulators have been writing the new rules of financial regulation.

The actual financial reform bill just spells out broad outlines; these are the guys who actually choose the words and figures that will transform our financial system. Apparently they sit in basements and hash it out. Great scene! But so far no one will let me and my mic near any of them.

I think there's another kind of scene though that can work with these sorts of stories, which is just to get people to recall a scene on tape. If you get people to vividly describe something they experienced in retrospect it can feel the same to a listener as being transported there by tape of a "live scene." I did a story on an FDIC bank takeover this way. I just talked to people a month or so later and got them to describe step by step what happened. You always want to be there when it happens but if you can get the right people to talk to you about it after the fact it can feel almost "live" and exciting to hear the memory of it.

[HowardBrown](#) - December 16, 2010 - [#4](#)

Can you give any advice about overcoming intellectual intimidation on the part of the interviewee? I'm sure when interviewing economists you get your fair share of that. Do you think gender comes into play here (possibly in a beneficial way, actually, since the stereotype is they will try to dumb it down for you, which I can't see them trying to do to males....)

[Chana JW](#) - December 23, 2010 - [#6](#)

I wouldn't say I feel intimidated very often in an interview. I try to learn what I can before the interview in a phone interview, or I'll ask for reading that will help get me up to speed, but once I'm in the interview I am in charge. I think it's important that the interviewer is confident that he or she knows best how to communicate the ideas being discussed.

That doesn't mean that you shouldn't be genuinely curious, friendly, give them time to speak and make them comfortable. But you also want to make sure to interrupt them when something doesn't make sense, ask them to translate something technical into English and direct them to what you find most interesting. And yes, ask stupid questions. Don't pretend you don't know something that you do but when you're confused say so and act surprised when you are surprised. Remember that you know a lot more than they do about how to communicate what they're trying to say in a way that people will hear and understand it.

I am sure gender plays a role in how interviewees interact with me, as it does with everyone else I talk to all day long. I think every good interviewer, regardless of their gender, has to learn how to ask questions that help people explain what they mean. Jonathan actually just wrote a note about this right here on Transom:
<http://transom.org/?p=13108>

[Samantha Broun](#) - December 21, 2010 - [#5](#)

I'm a person who does "story stories." Not "idea stories." Should I ever venture out into "idea story-land" though, I'll be well prepared using your manifesto as a guide.

I'm curious, have you ever come up with an inspiration for an "idea story" that was just too difficult to conquer? What was it? And what do you think made it so difficult?

[Chana JW](#) - December 23, 2010 - [#6](#)

It's funny, I am sure this happens all the time but I think it's become so second nature that it's not easy for me to remember specific examples. Certainly a lot of the Dodd/Frank financial reform bill was just too into the weeds to try to take on piece by piece. In that circumstance, if there was something that was complicated but had a clear and important impact we'd try to take it on. But if the story was that bank capital requirements will maybe be higher in some complicated way and people on both sides make strong arguments for why that's good or bad and who can tell right now....maybe you skip it. I guess I'd say if you can learn from understanding the complicated thing, than it seems worth it to go for it. If it's complicated, is gonna take a ton of work to explain and in the end doesn't actually go anywhere, then that's when you leave it alone.

[Jake Warga](#) - December 23, 2010 - [#7](#)

Thanks for giving structure to the complex. I suppose we can go back all the way to the master of Socratic debate and the art of story-telling. And what it is a poet (writer/radio-geek) represents:

"He represents human beings involved in action, whether this action be autonomous or the result of external compulsion and including what men think of feel about their actions; that is how they interpret their effect in terms of weal or woe to themselves and their corresponding joys and sorrows."

In Plato's Republic, the first people to go are the storytellers and artists for they pose the greatest threat as they are able to combine facts (numbers) and feelings (emotions) into that high realm of "art". The threat to those in power are people (reporters/writers) who can give emotion to hard facts, mingle the two to create meaning in that higher realm of storytellers.

Thanks for uniting the dullness of numbers and making us actually care.

A personal query: any other tips on handling flack, getting past the shell of authority spokes people wrap themselves and hide behind? Other than changing my gender. I just hate the soapbox voice subjects adopt when it's not them speaking but policy. Encounter that a lot with the military, which is why I talk to them about something (ie music) they care about, that might allow the person to surface behind the uniform. Suggestions welcome.

[Chana JW](#) - December 30, 2010 - [#10](#)

I'm actually not gonna touch Plato, but flacks, I have a lot to say about that!

It seems like the first approach should always be honest and straightforward. Explain what you're up to, what you're hoping for, why you want them to give you access to people they never let talk, why you think it'll help the story come alive to hear the sound of some place they don't want you to see. Send them similar stories you've done, explain, plead, reason. You probably already know and do all of this. Sometimes it works right? If you can convince them that you want the same things - a story that people listen to and makes the audience care. That is, if you're interests are actually aligned.

Another way around flacks is to find people yourself who agree to talk to you and then go back to the flack. I did a piece about a bank takeover and tried for weeks to get the FDIC to let me talk to some people who take over banks. No. So I searched for people who had worked at a bank that was taken over by the FDIC a month before. Eventually I found some through LinkedIn. They were going to lose their jobs so didn't mind talking. When I was driving down I called back the FDIC and told them where I was heading and they offered up all their people working at that bank.

I think you're asking about getting people to open up in general though right? Not just working with/getting around flacks. Obviously you want to do the same with them - make your case, try explaining where you're coming from and what you're going for. And use all the great interviewing tips people here on Transom have written so much about.

But I'd say the best way around a stiff interview who won't go off the talking points is to find someone else. If at all possible ask around, search and find a lower level person who can talk like a human.

David Johnston - December 24, 2010 - #8

Good write-up, very helpful for what I'm presently working on. It's my first podcast project, and if I want to describe it, I think it would be something like "What makes good climate change policy?" So far, I've done a bit of reading about the economics and politics, and interviewed one person. It's moving along, if a bit slowly.

My question is about including characters and quests and narrative structure in general. It seems appropriate to mention that I'm an undergraduate uni student majoring in maths and physics, and I seem to be more naturally able to deal with "the way things work" than with characters and stories. I'm working out a sort of structure for how I imagine the podcast might turn out in terms of questions I'd like to answer or pursue, and who might be able to answer said questions, but this structure doesn't really describe a story - more of a set of questions for an investigation. If I was forced to suggest some kind story to fit the idea right now, I think it would be something like your suggestion of "Going on a quest" - explain why I wanted to ask that question, and how I went about pursuing it. Even then, without more material in place, it seems to be a case of "ok, that might work, now get some material together and see if it fits." It seems that this approach might lead to a story being a bit roughly stuck on after the fact; on the other hand, I am just beginning and I haven't got much idea what it's going to turn out like.

So, my question is, how much do you worry about the story side of things early on? Is it a good idea to have a plan, even though it may end up being drastically changed?

Chana JW - December 30, 2010 - #11

I worry a lot about the story side of things very early on. As soon as I start learning about something I am picturing how it will lay out as a narrative. I'd definitely advocate a plan. You will likely need to scrap it or adjust as you go but it'll help you aim for the right tape.

If your story is about an area you already know a lot about then it's a matter of breaking it down piece by piece. Try to remember the order you learned things and what struck you as surprising along the way. That will help you figure out the structure of the quest. Also try to pay extra attention to interesting details or discovery anecdotes (someone describing a discovery and what that felt like).

If it's something that's new to you then you'll need to learn the basics before you start taping. Not too much but enough to help guide your quest. Talk to people on the phone, read stuff and make sure to pay attention to what strikes you as interesting. Then book interviews that will allow you to sincerely investigate those things on tape.

Jay Allison - December 24, 2010 - #9

One trick of explanatory journalism is keeping things simple and clear without making the listener feel you think they're stupider than you. You have to avoid all kinds of tonal traps, from being forced-casual to teacherly.

A fitting tone is easier if you're learning along with the listener, but Chana, you're inevitably becoming educated about finance, so you can't always stand in for the listener because you know too much. Do you consciously try to find a right tone?

Also, are you always revisiting how simple to make things, especially as you learn more and do more pieces on these subjects? Do you have an "ideal" listener in mind? Do you even think much about who you're talking to, how much education they have, etc.?

Chana JW - December 30, 2010 - #11

I've been thinking about tone a lot lately. There's some line between faking ignorance and acknowledging that this is something most people aren't experts in. You can't fake ignorance; it doesn't work. I try really hard to remember when you first learned something and how it felt. Recreating that feeling in an interview (as you learn it again, even if it doesn't quite feel as new and interesting to you anymore) is a good service for the listener. Something you'll hear Adam Davidson do a lot is say "I remember when I first learned about x it was so confusing..."

Who do I picture as the listener? My mom. Doesn't everyone? She's smart and interested but doesn't know a lot about economics or finance. She'll pay attention if there's a story and it feels human but she'll tune out pretty easily if there's not.

Jacaru - January 3, 2011 - #13

I'm just here to gush. I love when writers break what they do down into the component parts. It simultaneously takes the mystery out of it and gives you new respect for the creative ways they find "in" to the story. Much appreciated.

[TimeHorse](#) - January 3, 2011 - [#14](#)

Although my plan for Project Kronosphere is to be what today is currently unthinkable, the very idea of drive-time drama in 5-minute bites forming a story of 9 acts that spans a week, part of my goal none the less is to get my listeners to think, to learn and to be enlightened. My job is to take drama and make it more of an idea story but it's so interesting to think about what it's like to come at it from the other end. So thank you Chana for taking the time to teach me how to write better radio as I attempt to climb a mountain much greater than any idea story you could imagine. And I look forward to hearing you again on the next Planet Money Podcast!

<http://blog.pks.timehorse.com/>

[Brian Matthews](#) - January 5, 2011- [#16](#)

I am a trial lawyer handling complicated criminal cases--mainly involving solely scientific evidence. In other words, they involve "idea stories." Planet money has a unique way of telling these types of stories that make them engaging. I am trying to use some of your techniques in constructing my defenses and arguments--and hopefully keep jurors from missing important information. Thank you both for entertaining and educating me and many others.

[natukashii](#) - January 5, 2011 - [#17](#)

Excellent, excellent, excellent.

I'll be taking these tips with me on my next feature assignment- really useful.

I particularly like the points about foreshadowing and underlining. I work for a more newsy kind of programme- where the house style is more formal.

Because of that, I really envy the freedom that radiolab/planet money presenters have to underline/foreshadow really explicitly. Eg: 'and this is the bit that is really crazy'- or 'and why not play bingo at home with the periodic table' (ok that last one not so much).

I'd be interested to hear if you think there are ways of doing that kind of underlining and foreshadowing in the context of a more formal style?

Anyway thanks again- I started listening to planet money because I thought that, as a journalist, I should understand the recession better. It turns out you were just teaching me to be a better radio journalist on the sly....

[sarah reynolds](#) - January 14, 2011 - [#18](#)

This was super helpful -- thank you! Your work is clear and refreshing. Thanks for making boring things interesting and for helping us understand things when BIG media doesn't.

[Chana JW](#) - January 20, 2011- [#19](#)

I'm told this conversation is about to be closed so before that happens I wanted to thank all of you. I think about this stuff all the time but it's rare I get a chance to talk to anyone about it. Thanks for reading and for the questions. I learned a lot,
Chana

[Jav Allison](#) - January 20, 2011 - [#20](#)

It's been great having you here at Transom, Chana. Really solid, useful stuff for everyone. Thanks!

About Transom

What We're Trying To Do

Transom.org channels new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and discusses that work, and encourages more. Transom is a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to pass the baton of mission and good practice in public media.

We invite Guests to come write about their work here to 1) keep the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) let us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) foster a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing. Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over.

We accept submissions for featured audio pieces and for "Sidebar" entries.

- Sidebars are short (500 words or so) essays, rants, opinion pieces, useful advice, etc.

- Submitted audio can be stories, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere--by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio. We're looking for things that are less heard, different angles, new voices, new ways of telling, and any other good pieces that haven't found another way onto public radio. Editors evaluate material more by what it does than what it is. Some questions they'll consider:

- On the air, would it keep you by your radio until it's over?
- Is the maker someone of talent who should be encouraged?
- Does it push at the boundary of conventional radio in an exciting way?
- Will it provoke fruitful discussion online?

Staff

Producer/Editor – *Jay Allison*

Project Manager – *Samantha Broun*

Web Wonk – *Robert DeBenedictis*

Web Consultants – *Holly North, Simon Baumer*

Editors – *Sydney Lewis, Viki Merrick*

Tools Column – *Jeff Towne*

Emeritus Site Designer – *Joshua Barlow*

Emeritus Web Developers - *Josef Verbanac, Barrett Golding*



ATLANTIC PUBLIC MEDIA

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts which has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM has been the creative force behind projects like the Public Radio Exchange (prx.org), The Moth Radio Hour, This I Believe, and others. APM is the founding group for WCAI, the public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. Transom.org receives funding from the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts. Lead funding was provided Florence and John Schumann Foundation. We get technical support from PRX.