The most basic choice when you’re writing a radio play is whether to have a narrator or not have a narrator. If you have a narrator, then their worldview — the way they feel about life, and the events in the story — is as important as it is for regular characters. Don’t simply have your narrators describe or report the action. Let us hear, in the words they use, how they feel about it too.

Because the audience can’t see the action of a radio play, but has to imagine it, your characters will have to say things about the scene or action that they might not otherwise say. For example, a character might begin a scene by saying, “This place is a dump.” On film, or on stage, a character might not have to say that, because the audience could see that someone’s room is dirty and cluttered. On radio, you have to find ways to tell the audience how to picture things in their head. A narrator can describe how a room is dirty and cluttered, but remember what I said in number 1.

A good way to relate information to the audience about how the scene looks is to put characters into conflict. So, Character A might say to Character B, “This place is a dump! I told you to pick up!” That way, we get an idea of what the room looks like while we’re getting information about the relationship between the characters.

It’s your job to write where the sound effects (SFX) go, but you have to be careful about how many you write — especially when they’re meant to be heard close to each other. I try to only use general background SFX cues at the same time as dialogue or monologue. Otherwise, I plan for the audience to only hear one element at a time. Something like this: dialogue, sound effect, dialogue, dialogue, sound effect.
Mood is everything. It tells people how to listen. In radio, you build up the mood through the images you share through narration or dialogue. I find that smell does a lot of heavy storytelling lifting in this case. A good description of smell will linger with the audience a while. Likewise, a single simple sound effect can convey a mood for a whole scene. Probably my personal best here was in a radio play called STAND, in which a bad guy (actually, someone the audience was supposed to think was a bad guy) ate a cricket in front of the story’s hero. The crunch of the cricket, and the sound of someone enjoying the cricket, made the whole scene pop.

For a nice contrast in how the dialogue is heard, think about ways that your actor(s) can use their voice differently at different points in the story, according to your dialogue and parentheticals, or indications in parentheses (…) of how a line should be spoken. They usually appear right under the character name on the page, or to the right of the character name.

For example:

    PRINCE ADAM (while chewing) Gorgeous.

Whispering can be a special effect by itself and, unlike stage whispering, can be real whispering. Think of ways to get actors off-mic (also see director/sound designer Cheryl Ann Cluff’s and actor Jay Perry’s notes on this). Or chewing. Or singing. Maybe there’s a section where their voices echo. Shouting on radio is more intense than shouting in person. Be careful with shouting. Basically, in radio writing, you have to think a little more about delivery than with stage writing because you’re partly creating a sense of place, and how people are arranged in that place, through how voices are heard.
The thing I like best about directing radio plays is that you get to help create a picture in the listener’s (your audience!) imagination through sound. Think about the kind of picture you want to create for the audience using the script the playwright has created, the actor’s voices and sound effects.

The imagination of the audience is your stage and that’s pretty cool because A LOT of things are possible through imagination.

Close your eyes sometimes when you listen to the play during rehearsal, instead of looking at the actor. This will help you hear things that don’t make sense because the audience can’t see the actor. It will also help you know if you are close to creating the picture you want in the imagination of the audience.

When I’m directing radio plays, I often think about if the audience sees, through their imagination, the action up close or far away. It helps me to think of the audience’s imagination as a movie camera. You can make the “camera” “zoom in” on the actor by having the actor speak closer into the microphone – with their lips almost touching the microphone. If you want the “camera” to “zoom out” on the action, have the actor put a little more distance between their mouth and the microphone.

If an actor is supposed to start out a scene “off camera” – maybe they are coming into a room through a door or something – have them start their lines several feet away from the microphone and get closer to the microphone as they are speaking, and as they enter the scene.
There are many things you can use to create “music” even if you don’t know much about music or don’t know how to play an instrument, and you can use your phone to record your music.

If you have younger siblings, check out their toys. There are a lot of toys for little kids that can make great music – like a xylophone – you know those toys with the metal keys that are different colors that you hit with a wooden mallet. Those can make GREAT music. A bicycle bell could be potential music.

How about a toy keyboard. Do you have one of those? You don’t even need to play a song to create some effective music. A lot of times, just a few notes is all you need.

One time I created a sort of spider sound for a play using a guitar and I don’t play the guitar! I plucked the strings up at the top of the guitar where the tuning knobs are. Ended up sounding very spidery, like a spider walking on its web.

You can also use percussion to create “music.” Try tapping on a metal bowl - it’ll make a great ringing sound. Or use a spoon to circle around the top edge of the bowl for an interesting musical sound. Tap on a wooden or cardboard box for a more drum like sound.

Don’t forget about your own voice. You can hum to make music, or even whistle.

Once you start thinking this way, everything you hear will be a potential sound effect or music (see composer David Evanoff’s notes on music).
Hello friends!

Here are a few tips to help you with a performance when you are acting for radio and into a microphone. I cover most of this in the video I’ve created for you.

Here we go.

1. Keep speaking. No silence!
   As much as you can, try to keep moving with your lines. You should aim to have no pauses longer than one beat (about one second). If you were acting on a stage, a long silence can work because the audience can see the things you’re doing physically. On the radio, a silence sounds like the transmission has been interrupted or that maybe the radio has switched off. Keep moving with those lines.

2. Pace. Keep your energy up!
   You should have a sense of urgency. Do you know that feeling you have when you’re a little nervous? You speak just a little faster (but still clear enough to be understood), and your words and movements are a little bigger and brighter? That’s where you want to be. Think about the way a storyteller tells a story. It’s bright and full of energy. We call it “heightened.” It isn’t the same as talking casually to your friend. Be excited to tell the story, make it important, keep it energized and keep the pace up. Color your words to sound BOLD and bright and don’t slow down.

   In radio, acting happens as you say what you say. Not before or after you say it. Think about that for a second and then read it again. This is especially important for voice acting. We can’t see how you’re feeling about what you’re doing. We need to hear it. Does that make sense?

Watch the video here: https://vimeo.com/410411397
Use Your Whole Body

Just like in a play on stage or in real life, use your whole body when you’re acting for the mic. The microphone picks up all of your expression, even a smile. Your body should match what’s happening in the scene. For example: If you’re supposed to be cold in the scene, don’t just try to sound cold with your voice. BE cold with your BODY. Shiver, shake, rub your shoulders, jog in place, blow into your cupped hands. REALLY DO all the things the script says, or that you can imagine it might say. It makes all the difference in the way your performance sounds.

Use Proximity to Create the Illusion of Space

Proximity is the closeness in space between you and your microphone. Being close to the mic is the same a “closeup” in a movie. Movie closeups are usually more intense lines, or lines where you’re talking quietly to yourself or maybe whispering to another person. And then, when you move away from the mic, that’s like a “wide shot.” For that, you may want to move a few feet away from the microphone, especially for fights or for yelling from a distance away.

Try this Exercise: Record yourself on your microphone and count to ten, moving farther and farther away. You’ll notice that you have to get louder in order for the mic to hear you. Make sense? Practice this with your script, and make notes in places where you think your character might be in a “wide shot” or when they’re in a “close up,” so that you can practice your distance to the microphone.*

*Note: You should be about 6 to 8 inches from your microphone for a regular speaking voice. Practice this by recording yourself at the volume you will be speaking normally on the mic you’re using to record. Try being little closer for any “close up” parts, and farther back to create more distance. Also, you should listen and practice with a good pair of headphones to get the best sound quality possible!

Don’t Correct Yourself.

If you do flub a line, it’s okay! Don’t worry about it. The little imperfections are what make it real and natural. Just remember: Don’t go back and correct the line. If I’m supposed to say, “One potato, two potato,” but instead, I make a mistake and I say, “One potato, three” I don’t want to have the audience hear me go back and correct myself. I don’t want them to hear, “One potato, three... oh no oops I mean One Potato, Two Potato.” Instead, I want you to remember to be confident keep moving forward with those lines. Like this: “One potato, three... Two Potato!” 😊

Most Importantly - - -> Have fun!!!

The more fun you have, the more we have with you. So, go over these things, practice with your mic. Then, let it all go. Breathe, smile and have fun!
MUSIC COMPOSITION FOR RADIO
From composer Dave Evanoff

The KISS rule for producing music or musical sound design for a radio play:

- **Keep**
- **It**
- **Simple**
- **Seriously**

We can’t all be John Williams. Even if you are that good of a writer and arranger you probably won’t have Abbey Road and the London Philharmonic to play and record your work.

Keep your music simple. Rather than trying to score every word of the play, create a mood or feeling for each scene. Work with the playwright and director to establish these moods. Ask them if there are any special musical needs and what and where they should be placed.

Technically there are any number of programs to help you record or play your music live. Even from a laptop, iPad or iPhone.

If you are on a Mac, Garage Band is free. For smartphone options, use the search term GarageBand in the Apple App Store or the Google App Store and you will find multiple free apps. All will let you record your midi instruments (electronic musical data) and even build up many layers of instruments, if you feel like breaking my KISS rule.

Now back to the KISS rule:

Scene 1, lonely secluded: pick a piano sound, load it with lots of reverb and play a simple slow melody.

Scene 2, action: pick a drum loop, let it play and add occasional string or brass chords as needed.

Two scenes done with 3 sounds and it can be recorded or played live.

Simple works best. Pay attention to music in films, they are a great place to get ideas. There you have it, KISS and create some great music and soundscapes!