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“Lend Ears!”: Creating Audio Recordings of Final Drafts to Develop Rhetorical Awareness

Heather Shearer

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Overview

Many composition instructors ask students to read drafts aloud during writing workshops because doing so helps writers identify logical gaps, stylistic mishaps, or localized errors they overlook when reading drafts silently. To amplify the writerly knowledge gained from reading drafts aloud, we can extend the read-aloud practice through the final (polished) draft.

The essence of the assignment is this: ask students to record themselves reading a polished draft and submit the audio recording along with the written version. The result is a basic version of what we commonly see online—a written text accompanied by a “click to listen” audio recording. This is not meant to be a complex multi-modal assignment. Rather, it’s a fairly simple add-on that enhances existing writing assignments.

Preparing an audio recording that is submitted alongside a finalized written draft carries with it all the revision-based benefits of reading aloud during workshops, but enriches those benefits by turning writers’ attention more seriously to rhetorical matters of arrangement, style, audience, and delivery. Writers find cause to revise and edit for readers’ eyes *and* ears, resulting in more readable and engaging prose. The benefits seem to come more easily when students are encouraged to develop a relationship with readers built on ethical considerations (Duffy) and empathy (Shearer), and when the written texts and recordings are made available to readers beyond the instructor (via the course LMS, for example).

This assignment unites considerations of rhetoric with those of accessibility. Attention should be paid not only to how things are said (delivery) but to *what* is voiced. For instance, should footnotes be given airtime? How should visuals should be treated when creating a recording of a written text (Donegan 117-20)? In considering these issues, students are drawn into important conversations about text construction and text delivery for which there are no set standards.

Time Commitment

3 weeks or longer

Materials

Necessary materials include a **final draft** of an assignment that lends itself to being read aloud (reports, op-eds, open letters, any type of essay, and so on), a **tool for making a recording** (a cell phone, a laptop, a USB digital recorder), a **quiet place to record** (closets, cars, blanket tents, and other echo-free spaces work well), a **site on which to publish the recording alongside the written version** (for example, a discussion forum in the course LMS), and **samples of written texts with audio recordings** that offer a variety of audio characteristics for students to emulate (Meyer).

Recording apps that come standard with laptops, tablets, and phones are more than sufficient for making recordings. For Apple products, simple free tools include the Voice Memos app and QuickTime; for Microsoft, Voice Recorder; and for Android, Voice Recorder. In addition, LMSs usually offer an onboard recording tool. For those wanting more creative power, Audacity is a good option; it's free and works across all common platforms. Mac users have free access to GarageBand, another powerful audio tool.

Other necessary materials include those already used in most writing courses: readings and activities that engage students with arrangement, style, audience, and delivery, and a post-submission

activity to prompt reflection on the assignment.

Assignment Process

I have found through trial and error that students get the most from this assignment when the recording accompanies a major late-term assignment so that they can be primed during the rest of the quarter to fully consider their own rhetorical ambitions and readers' needs. You likely have your favorite texts that address arrangement, style, audience, and delivery. To those I would suggest adding Bunn, Cassell, Donegan, Duffy, Meyer, and/or Vonnegut, as each offers students training in practical rhetorical techniques.

- First, students create a workflow. Once the project that includes the audio recording is assigned, ask students to create a timeline for project completion that accounts for the time needed to record the final cut of the audio—at least one full day. This is necessary because students are not used to integrating audio recording into their writing workflow, and they tend to underestimate the time it takes to produce a recording to their liking.
- Next, students compare audio versions of texts with written versions. 1-2 weeks out from the submission date, offer students examples of audio recordings paired with written texts and ask them to notice similarities and differences in styles of spoken delivery of written texts. This helps students identify their reader-based preferences as listeners, observe the ways that speakers handle written features of texts when speaking, and then establish delivery-based rhetorical goals for their own projects. Publications like *The Economist* offer many human-read recordings of their published articles. Famous texts are easy to find, too. For instance, recordings of Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" are readily available. LibriVox is another useful source of free human-read recordings. If you want to spend more time exploring

oral delivery of text, comparing human-read recordings with text-to-voice apps is instructive.

- Next, students consider the logistics of making their own recordings. 1-2 weeks out from the submission date, provide students with tips for recording and production-oriented videos that provide inspiration, such as Daniel Story’s “Tips for Recording Audio at Home” and Vox’s “How Audiobooks are Recorded.” Remind them to practice early and often so they can get used to the sound of their own voices. This also engages them in using speaking for revision.
- Next, students publish (submit) their work. By the due date, provide a “public” space to which students can publish their written text along with the audio recording. A discussion forum in the course LMS works well for this.
- As soon as possible after publishing, students reflect on the process. A useful set of questions can be found in Margaret Poncin’s work on reflection and transfer. See Appendix A for sample questions derived from Poncin’s.
- Finally, in the week following publication, students act as readers and provide reader-based feedback on the published texts. Ask students to go to the publication site, choose a specified number of published texts to read and/or listen to, and then provide reader-based feedback to the writer(s). This is where writers’ hard work is rewarded. I ask readers to provide audio feedback; this is made easy in the LMS, and hearing readers respond seems to make a bigger impact than does reading written comments. The feedback is usually specific and complimentary, and it therefore underscores the pleasure of having one’s work read by an interested reader. See Appendix B for sample reader response questions.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Gain increased awareness of arrangement, style, delivery, and audience
- Navigate issues of accessibility with respect to delivery
- Experience the difficulties and delights of writing and recording polished texts for “real” readers (i.e., an audience bigger than the instructor)
- Reflect on the past work with an eye toward transferring experiences and knowledge to future contexts
- Learn to give targeted reader-based feedback to writers.

Learning Accommodations

- Students can direct someone else recording the audio version of the written text so that the audio performance captures the writer’s intention. In doing so, the writer still takes responsibility for the written and audio versions.
- An alternative is open to students who sign: create a video recording of the writer doing American Sign Language with captions that provide the corresponding passages from the written text.

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Further Reading

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Appendix A: Post-Assignment Reflection Questions

I use the survey tool in the LMS to ask students the questions below, and they answer these using freewriting immediately after submitting the assignment. Separating out reflection on the written text from the audio works best; it allows students to compare and think about the influences of one on the other. These reflective questions are derived from those created by Margaret Poncin.

- **ASSESS:** On the whole, was preparing the written text less difficult, just about as difficult, or more difficult than you anticipated [multiple choice].
- **RECALL:** What steps did you take to produce the written version of your text? [long answer]
- **REACT:** How do you feel about the written version of your text? How does this compare to how you felt about previous written texts you created for this class? [long answer]
- **ASSESS:** On the whole, was preparing the audio version of your written text less difficult, just about as difficult, or more difficult than you anticipated? [multiple choice]
- **RECALL:** What steps did you take to produce the audio recording of your text? [long answer]
- **REACT:** How do you feel about the completed audio recording of your text? [long answer]
- **CONNECT:** Considered as a whole, what might your work on this assignment (written and audio) and experience with this project mean for your future work as a writer? [long answer]
- **Optional:** Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience completing this project? This of these as "words to a future you." If so, offer your response here. If not, leave the answer box empty. [long answer]

Ideally, students are also asked at some point to reflect on reader-based feedback given to them by peers.

Appendix B: Reader-Based Feedback Prompt

Read/listen to and then respond to two published [texts] in the discussion below. You'll do this by using [the LMS's] upload/record media feature to embed an audio reply in response to the published article. Your responses are limited to 90 seconds each. Set a timer! :-)

Respond as a real reader would. That is, let the writer know something about:

- what you liked 🥰
- what questions the [text] brought to mind ??
- what the [text] made you think about, what connections it helped you make, etc. 🤔
- what you might want to (politely) take issue with (so maybe this 😞 or this 🙄 but not this 😡 or this 🤬)
- and so on . . .

Be genuine in your response. Speak to the writer. Don't read from prepared remarks, but feel free to use a cheat sheet to keep you on track (if need be).