

Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

Learning to Listen for Immersion and Rhetorical Choices

Tanya K. Rodrigue and Kyle D. Stedman

This activity guide is a selection from the *Writing Spaces* Assignment and Activity Archive, an open access companion resource to the Writing Spaces open textbook series.

To access additional selections, visit: <http://writingspaces.org/aaa>.

Assignment and activity selections © 2024 by the respective authors. Unless otherwise stated, these works are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) and are subject to the Writing Spaces Terms of Use. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>, email info@creativecommons.org, or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA. To view the Writing Spaces Terms of Use, visit <http://writingspaces.org/terms-of-use>.

All rights reserved. For permission to reprint, please contact the author(s) of the individual articles, who are the respective copyright owners.

Learning to Listen for Immersion and Rhetorical Choices

Tanya K. Rodrigue and Kyle D. Stedman

Overview

Soundwriting assignments—those that ask students in writing and rhetoric classes to compose rhetorical digital audio projects—are becoming more commonplace in the college classroom (e.g. Alexander; Friend; Faris, Danforth, and Stedman). One of the ways students learn how to compose effective soundwriting is to listen to how others have crafted audio work. In doing so, students learn rhetorical strategies to impact and immerse their listeners in the sonic experience they design.

Many instructors assume students already know how to listen by the time they get to college, yet in reality, most have never been taught to do so. Listening is not an innate skill, nor is it easy to do. Students need guidance on how to listen—both with their ears and their bodies—and what to listen for.

This four-day in-class activity guide helps students learn listening practices that will help them become effective soundwriters through listening for immersion and listening for rhetorical choices. Listening for immersion calls for listeners to turn off their analytical lens and allow themselves to be transported into a soundwriting experience in the way the soundwriter designed. While listening to a piece of soundwriting in this way, students are asked to pay careful attention to immersive moments—those that call for them to visualize or feel an emotion. They then switch mental gears and practice listening for rhetorical choices, switching on their analytical lens to identify rhetorical moves soundwriters make, using tools such as music and

sound effects, to impact their audience.

Ideally, students who follow these assignments will learn how to listen across the listening spectrum, turning their analytical filters on and off, working to build a strong understanding of the rhetorical function of soundwriting strategies so they can create immersive, powerful soundwriting.

Time Commitment

4 class sessions

Materials

The instructor needs a personal computer with speakers and possibly internet connection (depending on where the instructor accesses audio work). Students will also need transcripts of the audio works the instructor will play for the listening exercises.

It will also be helpful to have a high-stakes audio assignment written and distributed prior to the start of these activities. That way students will understand that these listening activities will ultimately prepare them for crafting their own compelling audio work.

Activity Process

- Day 1: Students will begin attuning their ears and bodies to the world around them through a soundwalk: an entire class period where the group walks silently through sonically interesting and diverse spaces with their minds attuned to sound and its vibrations. Afterwards, students debrief the experience aloud to learn how life felt different when carefully, purposefully listening to the world around them, both natural and constructed. (See Rodrigue and Stedman 64, and Droumeva and Murphy for specific advice.)
- Day 2: In the next class period, introduce students to what

we call the “listening like a soundwriter” approach (Rodrigue and Stedman 60-75). Explain that we sometimes **listen to be immersed**, purposefully allowing ourselves to be transported into the sonic experience the soundwriter crafted, and other times we **listen to rhetorical choices**, strategically identifying and analyzing the specific choices the soundwriter made to invite immersion and achieve other goals. Practice this dual listening mindset by listening to clips from different podcasts, podcast trailers, short stories, or news segments—ideally those that have a rich, purposeful blend of voice, music, sound effects, and silence. (See the Further Reading section below for a place to start.) Get a big list on the board about the kinds of feelings and experiences the students had, and another list of what soundwriters did to create those effects. Use this list to begin building a listening vocabulary bank that students can use to name and analyze sonic rhetorical strategies and their effects.

- Day 3: Go deeper with the five-step listening activity below, which involves individual work, small group work, and large discussion. Before beginning the activity, the instructor should choose a brief piece of soundwriting that students will listen to together and generate or download a transcript (ideally with timestamps) of that work. Be sure the transcript is easily accessible for students during the activity.

Step #1: Students are divided into two groups: the “listening for immersion” group and the “listening for rhetorical choices” group. The instructor explains the class will focus today on listening to a single piece of soundwriting, and that each group will use their assigned method to listen. As the audio plays, students in the “listening for immersion” carefully take notes, jotting down the times and briefly describing moments where they felt an emotion, visualized something in their minds, or reacted to a certain part of the

soundwriting. Students should be reminded that their analytical lens is turned *off* and that they should try to engage without judgment. Students in the “listening for rhetorical choices” group listen with their analytical lens turned *on*, drawing on the vocabulary bank begun on Day 2, to identify the rhetorical choices used and how they might function. Each group should try their best to note the timestamps of their observations.

Step #2: Students in each group gather to discuss their individual notes. After their group discussion, each group reports discussion highlights to the class.

Step #3: The “listening for immersion” and “listening for rhetorical choices” students change roles and listen to the same piece of soundwriting again. They again take notes, identifying immersive moments and specific rhetorical strategies from the alternative perspective.

Step #4: After listening a second time, the students respond to the following questions in an individual freewrite: “What was it like to listen in this new way, and how was it different from your previous listening experience? What might these listening methods teach you about the rhetorical choices composers make when creating audio work?”

Step #5: Students use their freewrites to inform their participation in a think-pair-share, small group, and/or large group discussion.

- Homework after Day 3: Students practice listening like a soundwriter on their own, choosing an audio work of interest (either one that they find themselves or that the instructor assigns). They take notes on their own chosen piece of work, listing what they noticed when they listened for immersion and listened for rhetorical choices. Remind

them that listening like a soundwriter calls for moving from immersion to analysis, from thinking to feeling and back again, in a recursive cycle. This movement invites a rich rhetorical listening experience where a student can recognize the many rhetorical moves and their effects used in audio, and later try some in their own audio projects.

- Day 4: Next, in a low-stakes in-class writing assignment, students practice thinking about ways to employ rhetorical strategies in soundwriting to make an impact on their own listeners. In a freewrite in class, students respond to a simple prompt such as “Describe a time in your life when you felt happy,” or “Describe one of your most vivid memories from childhood.” After they’ve written this, ask them to think of this document as the beginning of a script for an audio piece where they narrate their story, but which should also include other sonic rhetorical devices (like voices, sound effects, music, and silence). Instruct them to annotate their document (with another color pen by hand, or with added comments in a word processor) with the rhetorical strategies they might use to create immersive moments and achieve their purposes. Then ask them to share their ideas with a partner, discussing the extent to which a listener may feel immersed from the chosen rhetorical strategies and other possibilities for creating immersion and strong listener engagement.
- Ideally, these activities build up to a higher stakes soundwriting activity, where students can actually record and edit digital audio to create the effects they want to have on their listeners.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of the relationship between listening and writing with sound
- Learn and practice a listening approach intended to help composers craft rhetorically effective audio projects
- Think critically about the composition of audio projects and the multitude of rhetorical strategies used to create them
- Practice thinking about how to employ rhetorical strategies in audio to create immersion and impact a listener

Learning Accommodations

- Soundwalks should be planned with the bodies of the participants in mind: only choose paths that can be accessed by everyone in class, and be sure to draw attention to sounds that can be experienced with the eyes (like branches moving in the wind) and in the body (like the bass feeling of a train passing nearby).
- Transcripts should be provided for in-class and homework listening activities.
- Instructors should provide students with the option to listen to in-class audio work through a speaker or headphones.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Kara Poe. "Reconceptualizing Literacy: Experimentation and Play in Audio Literacy Narratives." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 69, Sept. 2023. *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2023.102790>.
- Droumeva, Milena, and David Murphy. "A Pedagogy of Listening: Composing with/in Media Texts." *Soundwriting Pedagogies*, edited by Courtney S. Danforth et al., Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State UP,

Rodrigue, Tanya K. and Stedman, Kyle D. | writingspaces.org/aaa

2018, ccdigitalpress.org/book/soundwriting/droumeva-murphy/index.html.

Faris, Michael J., et al., editors. *Amplifying Soundwriting Pedagogies: Integrating Sound into Rhetoric and Writing*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado, 2022. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2022.1688>.

Friend, Chris. "Constructing Belonging through Sonic Composition." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 69, Sept. 2023. *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2023.102789>.

Rodrigue, Tanya K., and Kyle D. Stedman. *Soundwriting: A Guide to Making Audio Projects*. Broadview Press, 2022.

Further Reading

For more about listening and pedagogies of listening, see the following:

Brady-Myerov, Monica. *Listen Wise: Teach Students to Be Better Listeners*. Jossey-Bass, 2021.

Ceraso, Steph. *Sounding Composition: Multimodal Pedagogies for Embodied Listening*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2018.

Rice, Tom. "Listening." *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, Duke UP, 2015, pp. 99-111.

Use these podcast episodes as starting places to practice listening like a soundwriter with your students:

Anderson, Erin, producer. "Being Siri." *UnFictional*, KCRW, 3 Feb. 2017, www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/unfictional/you-want-a-piece-of-me/being-siri.

Menschel, Molly. "Just Another Fish Story." *Third Coast International Audio Festival*, 2005, www.thirdcoastfestival.org/feature/just-another-fish-story.

Miller, Lulu, host. "The Mastermind." *Terrestrials / Radiolab for*

Kids, WNYC Studios, 22 Sept. 2022,
www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab-kids/articles/terrestrials-mastermind-octopus.

Steinberg, Anya. "He's Just 23 Chromosomes." *Soundcloud*, NPR / The College Podcast Challenge, 8 Feb. 2021, soundcloud.com/user-680910906-257932974/hes-just-23-chromosomes.

Young, Aria. "What's in a Name." *Soundcloud*, NPR / The College Podcast Challenge, 28 Feb. 2022, soundcloud.com/aria-yq/whats-in-a-name.

Zacks, Andrew, and Brenda Theresa Hayes. "Men, Well Done." *Soundcloud*, NPR / The College Podcast Challenge, 15 Feb. 2021, soundcloud.com/andrew-zacks-181759332/men-at-the-grill-npr.

For more audio projects and podcasts that work well for listening activities, see Rodrigue and Stedman 73-74.