

Chapter 1. Mix It Up, Mash It Up: Arrangement, Audio Editing, and the Importance of Sonic Context

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While soundwriting presents countless pedagogical opportunities for invention—recording music, voice, and sound effects among other possibilities—so too does it lend itself to exploring the rhetorical canon of arrangement. Thanks to open-source audio-editing technologies, sound files ranging from music tracks to speeches can be easily cut up and recombined to create new meaning.

It's this affordance of audio composition that informs the assignment at the heart of this chapter. In the Audio Manipulation Project, students work to sample, decontextualize, and distort existing audio files and stitch them back together to produce a unique composition. While this assignment can be completed in any genre, be it a mock dialogue or musical remix, the end result must be a “lie” created through editing—a recording with some sort of central message that's been fabricated through the magic of audio editing. As composers cut, arrange, and rearrange the audio files they work with, they wind up transforming the meaning of these clips. This process of audio trickery obscures, covers up, and/or erases the original text and context of each sound file while also creating new circuits of meaning through the creation of a new composition. In listening to projects whose core messages aren't created through recording or invention but rather from digital editing and manipulation, audiences make connections they'd not thought of before; reconsider familiar songs, voices, or sound effects in new ways; or just ask themselves, “Did what I just heard *really* happen?” As one Writing Across Media student who reflected on this assignment put it, “We can't always trust what we hear.”

Additionally, I ask students to account for their rhetorical decision-making processes in a reflective video statement where they articulate goals for their work, speak to their composing process, and connect key concepts from class readings to their projects. This reflective statement provides an explicit opportunity for individuals to engage in metacognitive reflection about their learning. On the whole, then, this audio manipulation project helps students more fully understand how soundwriting operates from foundational issues of arrangement and context just as much as invention and recording audio content. Whether through rearranging an interview to allow for the interjection of different voices or clipping five seconds of a song to highlight lyrical meaning, this assignment helps students see how a few simple keystrokes on their computer can transform sonic meaning and context.

To better comprehend how this assignment is working pedagogically, it's important to situate it within the overarching course to which it belongs. I developed and taught this audio project as a part of my Writing Across Media (WAM) class, an advanced composition course at the University of Illinois. Cross-listed between informatics and writing studies, the class attracts students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds. Through prompts that require students to create video documentaries, podcasts, physical artifacts, comics, or other mixed media projects, WAM asks participants to engage with theories that guide multimodal composition. Students demonstrate their knowledge of these concepts by showcasing the affordances and constraints of these media through their own multimodal creations.

As students typically enter WAM with little audio-editing experience, my audio unit privileges both practical and theoretical work. I pair Erin Anderson's (2014) "Toward a Resonant Material Vocality for Digital Composition" with an in-class Audacity workshop to bring together theory and hands-on editing. It's helpful to discuss principles of how digital audio technologies allow us to "compose with the voices of *others*" (Anderson, 2014) and to provide students with a chance to put these concepts into practice. In the following class, we explore two concepts from a pair of posts from *Sounding Out!*, an online sound studies publication venue. In connecting Christina Giacona's (2014) "A Tribe Called Red Remixes Sonic Stereotypes" with Aram Sinnreich's (2011) "Remixing Girl Talk: The Poetics and Aesthetics of Mashups," we synthesize issues of sonic appropriation, context, and mashup-as-genre to examine the politics and power dynamics of sampling. As you'll hear in the sample audio projects in this chapter, these concepts provide a sound foundation for student work that takes up injustice, racism, and identity.

This audio manipulation project, however, is not without limitations and exclusions. Critically, d/Deaf and/or hard-of-hearing students are excluded from this assignment in its current iteration. While I touch on potential redesigns in this chapter's audio reflection, this assignment requires production through multiple modes to be more accessible. As my former students have suggested, this assignment could easily be reworked into a "media manipulation project," in which participants could mash-up more diverse pieces of media: video clips, sound files, and so on. These revisions would shift the focus of the project away from audio, but this redesign would ultimately result in a more inclusive, modally rich prompt.

More specific to the technological dimensions of this assignment, many students communicated that they would have liked to receive more explicit instruction in audio editing. While I provided an introduction to Audacity, students reported that they needed to spend much more time outside of class to familiarize themselves with the software. While I directed students toward Audacity for this assignment because it's free, many groups found it confusing and unintuitive. In future versions of this assignment, then, I would facilitate class breakout sessions that ask students to play with a range of audio-editing tools to find software that'd work best for them.

Though audio composition always involves some sort of editing, privileging this aspect of soundwriting in assignments provides an openness that enables students to experiment with, hybridize, and even invent new sonic genres. More importantly, it illustrates how soundwriting can serve as a vehicle for demonstrating how messages take on new or revised meanings when placed in different contexts. As students begin to see how frighteningly easy it is to manipulate texts—and often to great rhetorical effect—this work is not only central to our understandings of sonic pedagogy, but also essential to our work as rhetoricians, compositionists, and committed teacher-scholars.

Assignments and Sequencing

Audio Manipulation Project

Though it's the case with all media, audio is especially subject to manipulation: cutting it up, stitching it back together, sampling from existing sources, layering track over track, etc. Given these affordances of audio, what sorts of new possibilities arise for constructing meaning in this medium?

This project will require you to take advantage of digital audio technologies to create a 3–4-minute audio manipulation piece. You'll need to edit, re-edit, distort, take out of context, and/or alter existing audio files in order to produce an audio composition that's a "lie." That is to say, your goal here is to reassemble and rearrange existing recordings to compose something that didn't really happen.

You're welcome to do so through any genre you like. For instance, you could create a dialogue comprised of audio snippets between people who've never spoken before in real life. Or alternatively, you could take an audio recording of a public event and edit in new words, voices, and sounds to create a different effect. Whatever you decide to do, you should be able to articulate why you selected your subject matter. In addition, you'll need to justify why your composition matters and why it's important.

On the whole, this assignment will help you better comprehend how composing with sound can function as an act of writing and remix. In addition, you stand to gain a more critical and nuanced understanding of how digital technologies enable you to process and repurpose sound to create new meaning.

Note: You may either work with a partner or individually on this assignment. For those of you working together, you each still need to produce your own reflective statements.

(Video) Reflective Statement

You will each need to compose a reflective statement about your experiences creating your project. Yet, instead of writing this document in alphabetic text, I'm asking you to complete your reflective statement as a video text. This can

be something along the lines of a vlog or something more experimental in nature. All I ask is that you answer the same questions—and document your sources in the same way that you would in an alphabetic text statement—with the same amount of precision and depth that you’d normally include in a “written” statement. I won’t specify a length/time requirement for these multimodal rationales so long as you answer all the necessary parts listed above.

Composing your statement in this manner will help you understand connections between forms of multimodal composition: (moving) image, alphabetic text, and sound. Doing so will also help you cultivate an awareness and appreciation for how composition process shapes—and in turn is shaped by—the tools, goals, and contexts with/in which you create.

While you won’t need a thesis statement or argument for this statement, you should address all of the following questions/requirements:

- What goal(s) is your audio manipulation file trying to accomplish? What does your piece get people to do, or what might it get people to do? For whom?
- What rhetorical and material choices did you make to fulfill the goals of your audio manipulation file? In other words, what affordances and constraints were already decided for you in terms of working within this particular medium, genre, and context?
- Explain why you pursued this composition plan of action as opposed to others you might have considered. Refer to any ideas you came up with on the road to your audio file. How did the rhetorical and material choices you described above help you accomplish things that other combinations of choices would not have?
- A list of who and what assisted you in the creation of this piece (human and nonhuman). Think of this like the credits at the end of a movie.

In the process of completing this reflective statement, you’ll need to explicitly draw in at least two audio-related course texts that we’ve read this semester. How have these authors’ ideas influenced, challenged, and/or complicated your composing process for this assignment? Be sure to engage with and analyze the main ideas of these texts as opposed to citing peripheral details.

All sources, including course texts, should be cited in your reflective statement whenever you analyze, quote, or paraphrase someone else’s ideas or works. Your work should also include a works cited portion of your text that includes all (re) sources referred to in your statement. MLA, APA, or Chicago style is fine.

Scaffolded Course Schedule: Audio Manipulation Project Unit

Here’s how this audio manipulation project fits into the sound unit in this particular multimodal composition course. Hopefully, the schedule below provides a sense of what readings and tasks students are simultaneously working on at the same time as their audio work.

Table I.I. Schedule

Topics Covered	Reading	Assignments Due
Day 1 • Introduction to Audio	---	Bring in a podcast of your choosing.
Day 2 • Sound, Voice, and Digital Manipulation • In-class Audacity Tutorial	Anderson (2014), “Toward a Resonant Material Vocality for Digital Composition” (excerpts)	---
Day 3 • Remixing (Aural) Meaning and Rhetorical Arrangement	Giacona (2014), “A Tribe Called Red Remixes Stereotypes” (<i>Sounding Out!</i> blog post) Sinnreich (2011), “Remixing Girl Talk” (<i>Sounding Out!</i> blog post)	Blog Post: Mashup and Sonic Reappropriation
Day 4 • Proposal Workshop: Audio Manipulation Project	---	Blog Post: Audio manipulation proposal. We’ll use this post for an in-class workshop
Day 5 • Audio Formatting, Glitch, and Disruption	Hammer (2014), “WRITING (D1RT¥) NEW MED1Δ/GLITCH COMPOSITION” Sterne (2006), “The MP3 as Cultural Artifact”	---
Day 6 • Presenting Audio Manipulation Assignments and Audio Wrap-Up	---	Audio manipulation assignment/reflective statement due. Be prepared to talk about your projects in class.

Sample Student Projects

1. “American,” composed by Writing Across Media students Edgar Madrigal, Donna Dimitrova, and Saul Rivera, centers around immigration. The students edit together samples from Rihanna’s “American Oxygen,” Portugal the Man’s “So American,” and John Lennon’s “Imagine” to reimagine what it means to be an immigrant in 21st-century America. Throughout their work, they place these musical refrains into conversation with xenophobic immigration discourse—and later on, Barack Obama’s thoughts on immigration reform—to demonstrate tensions in how Americans think about immigrants.¹

1. Two student examples (audio or video files and descriptive transcripts) can be

2. In “Bend the Knee,” Writing Across Media students Lesley M. Rodriguez and Christian Nevarez-Camacho reframe recent U.S. National Anthem protests against police brutality and systemic racism as patriotic. Through juxtaposing sound clips of Donald Trump’s reactions to these protests with repositioned news coverage of these events, the composers make a case in their project for continuing conversations about free speech, race, and inequality.

Reflection

[An acoustic guitar strums in the background.]

Logan Middleton: Welcome to . . . not NPR.²

[Record scratch followed by a slow, industrial drumbeat; drums continue to loop in background.]

This is *Amplifying Soundwriting*, more specifically the praxis chapter “Mix It Up, Mash It Up: Arrangement, Audio Editing, and the Importance of Sonic Context.” My name is Logan Middleton. I am a Ph.D. student in English studying writing studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. And this is probably the tenth or so time *[laughing]* I’ve tried to record this introduction.

So as I’m editing together this reflection, I’m looking at my workspace, and I see all of these attempts at introductions just stacked one on top of the other. And in recording this particular introduction that you’re listening to, I went back and listened to bits and pieces *[edits of the speaker’s voice, layered on top of each other, simultaneously cut in and out of the background]* and parts from the attempts that I had made before, saying, you know, “I like this, I don’t like that. I’m gonna say this, I better avoid that.” So while you’re listening to one voice right now, mine, it’s really a conglomeration of many voices that came before it that is a response to all of these other attempts.

I’m choosing to begin this reflection the way I am to illustrate what it is that I ask students to do in the project I talk about in this praxis chapter—the audio manipulation project. Each vocal recording, background music track, and sound effect I’ve used so far in this introduction is coming from a different context.

[Acoustic music from beginning plays in background.]

I selected the acoustic music you hear at the beginning to suggest something along the lines of an NPR program, something you might tune into on public radio or hear in a podcast.

found on the book’s companion website.

2. The audio version of Logan Middleton’s reflection can be found on the book’s companion website.

[A DJ connects consecutive record scratches, followed by an “Oh yeah!” looped twice, played concurrently with narration below.]

The record scratch carries a number of connotations whether from scratching, turntabling, or transitions between records when you’re listening to music.

[A polyphony of the speaker’s voice recordings sound in the background; his words are incomprehensible.]

And, of course, the recordings of myself talking that I layered and edited in were never intended to be used in that particular context. They were my attempts at starting this reflection that didn’t work out.

All of this is to say that, whenever we listen to an edited audio composition, each of the component parts is bringing with it its own social, historical, cultural, and experiential meanings. And each of those meanings comes to bear in the overall meaning of the audio text itself. So whenever we’re editing together audio files, we’re not only manipulating or distorting the files, but we’re also playing with or experimenting with the contexts of each of those files. When we mash them up to create new meaning or take them out of context to alter existing meaning, we’re doing quite a bit of work that goes unnoticed.

[A feedback-amplified voice loudly proclaims “The assignment!” followed by the looped sound of glass breaking.]

And so all of this comes to inform the project at the heart of this chapter—the audio manipulation project.

[A downtempo, synth-heavy track begins playing; it persists throughout the next section.]

I teach this project as part of a multimodal composition class called Writing Across Media. And this audio manipulation project is largely concerned with ideas of audio editing, context, and arrangement. For this assignment, then, students work either on their own or in pairs in order to create a unique, 3-to-4-minute audio composition of their own. The trick is that this composition must consist primarily of edited, repurposed, and recontextualized audio files. Students are welcome to use any combination of music, speech, interviews, what have you, to create something that didn’t really happen. So whether students want to create some sort of audio collage or medley that combines content from political speeches—

John F. Kennedy (excerpt from 1962 Space Race Speech): We meet in an hour of change.

Logan: —and political songs to mock dialogues between two celebrities that might have never happened to something entirely else, the genre for this assignment is wide open. And that’s an intentional decision on my behalf so that students get some experience with creating their own genre conventions or working

within forms that don't necessarily have limits or prescribed boundaries as to what they should look and sound like. And finally, I ask students to compose a video reflection that explains their rhetorical decision-making processes. Primarily, I find this helpful because it allows students to participate in metacognitive reflection. So when they need to think about what they're doing and why they're doing it, and how their choices are working to create meaning in accordance with the assignment, this generally produces not only stronger texts, but encourages deeper thinking about the decisions that go into multimodal composition, particularly in this project.

[Glass breaks; record scratch. Slower-paced, dreamy electronic music plays in the background; the artist in the track occasionally sings "Destination Unknown" in a whispery voice.]

So in the latter half of this audio reflection, I want to talk a little about how this assignment actually unfolded in the classroom: what I thought, what my students thought, and where I might consider taking this in the future if I were to teach it again.

What I like about this project conceptually is how students made use of the core concepts that animate this audio manipulation project. So in the unit itself, I spend some time talking about reappropriation and mashup—

[Splat!]

—and these are concepts and genres students are familiar with already, that they encounter whether in news, in their own personal or social lives, or in what they listen to. So as far as the first concept goes, we talk a little bit about appropriation and where students might hear this term or where they might see it, you know, culturally, and so on. And students are often surprised to hear that appropriation and reappropriation can work sonically. I find that something similar happens with mashup.

[Splat!]

Students often can point to a number of remix tracks or mashups that they listen to in their own experiences, but translating this to their own practice is not only more challenging but something that students can feel accomplished when they can point to their own work and say, "Hey, I made something that is working in the same way as this thing that I listened to from Girl Talk." And on a final conceptual note here, in reappropriating and taking out of context audio files, students begin to see how this is working in the real world and how it shapes how we consume and process information.

Practically, I was pleased that this project zoomed in on editing as a tangible, foundational skillset for students to develop and put in their arsenal of tools in terms of multimodal composition. So, in making editing and arrangement the primary focus of this assignment, the way clips are repurposed, recontextualized,

and taken out of context, I felt as if these emphases lent themselves very well to topics that were oftentimes quite political.

[A protestor yells, high-pitched, "Not my president!"]

As savvy and sophisticated consumers of media and information, students recognize how things are packaged and processed and taken out of context in the media they listen to. And so that awareness makes its way into this project with students doing similar things in order to bend messages to their will and to craft really compelling statements about topics such as immigration, topics such as racism, and so on and so forth.

[Record scratch; background music transitions to a hip-hop, drum machine beat that loops.]

As far as student perceptions for this project goes, the reception was mostly positive. Many did comment that they found difficulties working with Audacity—

[A deep, distorted voice interjects "Audacity!"]

—other similar audio-editing programs and that they would have liked a little more scaffolding and practice working with these programs so that they could spend less time on the how-to, nuts and bolts of audio editing and more time working with actual, conceptual material for their projects. But I did want to read off some responses from students in terms of what kinds of takeaways they came away with regard to this audio manipulation project and the audio unit as a whole.

One student wrote *[pen scribbling noise]* in a reflection for the class, "Recording, editing, and recombining audio reinforces the fact that meaning can be made by taking lots of different things that already have meaning, to make a new, possible more powerful meaning. It tells me that when it comes to writing, literacy, and rhetoric at large, a piece might never be 'done.'"

And similarly, other students spoke to how manipulation is working with regard to this project. They wrote that *[pen scribbling noise]*, "In order to spot a lie in audio, one must have a ton of prior knowledge and context of the piece to spot the lies within the piece."

And another spoke to larger considerations of media and lies and manipulation when they wrote *[pen scribbling noise]*, "While this is probably one of the easiest ways to manipulate a media and change it into something that it maybe wasn't intended to be, we can take the principles of telling a 'lie' with audio into our other forms of media as well. We can't always trust what we hear or what we see."

[A high-pitched voice yells, "You lie! You lie!"]

And so judging from student responses—and granted, this is just a sample—it seems to me that the goals of the assignment are consistent with what students are taking up from the project at large.

[Record scratch; music transitions to electronic, futuristic, synth-heavy track with a robotic voice that interjects “How?”]

And so the final part of this audio reflection will be concerned with a few preliminary, exploratory thoughts on moving forward with this assignment, where it needs to go, and what changes can be made to it in the future.

[loud laser sound]

On a small-scale level—and this is something I reflected upon a bit in the introduction to this chapter—is the need for more in-class time and more support for audio-editing programs.

More pressingly, though, are considerations of access, disability, deafness, and hard-of-hearing people. Later in the course, I run a small unit on disability, access, and media. And as part of this unit, students are asked to reimagine and redesign a part of the course—whether that’s an assignment, a policy, or something else—to be more accessible. And a handful of our discussions obviously revolved around the audio manipulation project. As I noted in my introduction to the chapter, this is an assignment that’s not accessible in its current state, and it needs some considerable reimagining in order to do so.

Some of my students suggested making this less of an audio manipulation project and more of a media manipulation project, and this is something I’m inclined to do in future versions of this assignment. While opening this project up so that students can manipulate and take out of context any media shifts the focus away from soundwriting at large, I do believe it’s important to consider how modes are working together, and if that requires incorporation of visuals *[sound of film reel spinning]*, then so be it. And while we can talk about radio *[sound of high-pitched radio tuning]* and podcasts and other forms of aural communication, it’s important to observe that media and modes are always integrated. So in accordance with a few student suggestions, I believe that I would redesign this project to be more accessible by making it less of an audio manipulation project and more of a media manipulation project. That way, students could use any number of resources, technologies, media, and modes to complete their project in a way that’s not only more accessible but more accurate to how we produce and consume media generally.

That about does it for this audio reflection. Thanks so much for listening, and I wish you the best in all of your audio-editing and soundwriting endeavors in the classroom and beyond.

[Music fades out.]

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