

Chapter 17. Research Remix: Soundwriting Studies of the English Language

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Every English major has had that moment at a social gathering when a new friend asks the innocent question, “What’s your major?” They respond, “English.” And the now quieter person mumbles something like, “Ugh, I’m no good at grammar.” Grammar historically gets a bad rap, understandably so; yet those who love linguistics revel in its complex structures. Those who study grammar understand it to be more than a punitive tool used by iconic red-ink-bearing teachers to bring down students who use dangling modifiers. Many universities still require classes to help majors study the more nuanced grammar of the English language.

Our department’s response is ENGL 363: Structure of the English Language, a course with student learning outcomes that address the rhetorical purposes of grammatical structures and usage-related issues such as dialect and diversity. This course is taught on a two-year rotation in our department at Gardner-Webb University, a private liberal arts university in western North Carolina.

Many students who take this course are education majors required to take the class, planning to teach English (e.g., middle grades, high school, teaching English as a second language). Others who enroll are writing majors, looking for an in-depth study of language to improve their own sensitivity to choices in their writing. And there is usually at least one student who takes the class just because of their natural love of linguistics. When I agreed to teach our Structure of the English Language class, I knew that I wanted assignments that balanced this examination of language structures and their situated use to meet students’ varied goals in taking the course.

At a micro-level, we geeked out, identifying word classes and functions, diagramming and illustrating syntax. At a macro-level, students researched English language use through field observations, textual artifact analysis, and interviews in a discourse community. A discourse ethnography, a classic language study genre, seemed an appropriate way to invite students to do field research studying English in communities of their choice.

Though a couple of undergraduate programs on our campus use empirical research in classes, almost all the students in my class—majoring in education, English, and world languages—had never conducted human research. So, honestly, I was pretty nervous about the learning curve of teaching undergraduate students about qualitative research, considering our time limitations for course content and the IRB process.

While I knew a discourse ethnography would help them learn, I felt that a traditional, written version would limit their ability to connect with the people speaking the words. I also wanted this project to reflect the embodied nature of language use; in other words, I wanted them to listen to these voices speaking words to study affective aspects of English. When they rehear voices in the process of remixing an audio essay, their perception of language shifts from parts of speech to bodies, whose voices echo dialects, tone, and dynamics. Also, I was concerned that their reproducing a written essay from their research would result in an ethos of distant disinterest in their object of study, typical of undergraduate research papers. So I wanted to teach them a classic form but for them to remix it in a strange way.

That's when I heard *audio essay*: more to essay (i.e., verb: to attempt or try, to test) than essay (i.e., noun: a short piece of writing on a subject).

This assignment would be a mutt genre in the way it would blend traditional ethnographic methodology with multimodal media and genres. Even though I had no models, I felt that inviting students to create an audio discourse ethnography would empower them to actively engage with their participants and research. I hoped that making the process strange would hypermediate their process, synthesizing data and analysis in a final mash-up of voices. Technically, remixing audio from participant interviews and soundscape clips with their observations would help them synthesize data in an embodied way, implicating multiple acts of language use in a layered 3–4-minute essay.

Once I decided on the assignment, I realized that I was going to have to think carefully about how to scaffold this assignment to walk students through a research process. I planned a series of workshops, beginning in the second week of classes to work on research design and begin our university's IRB process. In the weeks that followed, I staged workshops to help students with research methods (interviews, transcription), data analysis, audio editing, and peer review.¹

Discourse Ethnography Portfolio Assignment

Students choose a discourse community to study during the course, engaging in an ethnographic study of its use of the English language. As part of this study,

1. Jennifer J. Buckner's guide for IRB workshops, a guide for workshops on interviews, recording, transcripts, and textual artifact analysis, and a guide for a "Writing for the Ear" workshop are available on the book's companion website.

they use several qualitative methods of research including gathering two textual artifacts created by the community, interviewing two members of the community, and conducting two field observations of language use in the community. Students compile their findings into 3–5-minute audio essays that highlight some unique aspect of that community’s use of English language. Finally, all pieces of the research project are submitted as a research portfolio during final exam week.

Discourse Ethnography Portfolio

Rationale: The study of the English language should include a study of language as situated in rich, diverse contexts. In order to learn more about the structure of the English language, you are invited to conduct a semester-long study of its use within a discourse community of your choice.

The Basic Assignment: You will choose a discourse community to study this semester, engaging in an ethnographic study of its use of the English language. As part of this study, you will use several qualitative methods of research including gathering textual artifacts created by the community, interviewing two members of the community, and observing language use in the community and writing field notes. Finally, you will compile your findings into a 3–5-minute audio essay that highlights some unique aspect of that community’s use of English language.

Table 17.1. Student Learning Outcomes Met with this Assignment

Assignment Portion	Student Outcomes Met
Textual analysis (textual artifacts, interviews)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> describe the structure of English sentences identify principles of modification and coordination in English sentences identify words and word classes in English
Audio essay (data drawn from observations and interviews)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> explain issues connected to the many varieties of English (dialects, usage, etc.) analyze the evolving communication and use of language and grammatical structures for different purposes, to different audiences, and in different contexts, including multimodal communication

Portfolio Components

For this project, you will submit artifacts that reflect your research process, including data you collect, your analysis of that data, reflections/memos/notes about what you’re learning throughout the process, and your final audio essay. This portfolio will include a range of media that will be hyperlinked within the body of textual documents you submit to Blackboard.

Proposal: Submit a proposal outlining which discourse community you wish to study and your rationale (see schedule, participation grade).

CITI Certification/IRB Application: In order to conduct research with human subjects as you will in studying a discourse community, you will need to complete an IRB application for “expedited” research. As part of this application, you will be asked to complete a CITI certification for Social and Behavioral Research. We will walk through this process together in class, getting you started. Then I will let you know the deadline for completing your certification and submitting your IRB application for review.

Observation: Choose at least **two** different settings in which to observe this community. Take notes about the activity within the community, especially related to their language use and the group dynamics. Submit notes with an informal reflection about what you are noticing early in the project to get feedback from prof (see schedule, participation grade). Also, include a copy in your final project portfolio.

Textual Analysis: Collect at least **two** different textual artifacts that represent genres of writing produced by this discourse community. Texts will likely be multimodal in nature, including a range of visual, aural, gestural, spatial, and linguistic features, presenting you with a challenge of questioning how other modes function with language in these texts. Annotate these artifacts, describing the structure of sentences and identifying grammatical structures present in the text. Submit these annotations with your final project portfolio, including a brief reflection (one page) that highlights features you find interesting/unique to this community’s use of English.

Interviews: Choose two members of the community to interview, investigating the community’s discourse features. Develop interview questions that will ask participants to think about their situated use of English with others within this discourse community. Acquire permission from two members of the discourse community to participate in your research. Audio record and transcribe those interviews. Submit your transcriptions with your final project portfolio with a brief memo about what interesting/insightful things you learned from your interviews.

- What are some of the shared goals of the community?
- What mechanisms/tools does the community use for communication? What are the purposes of each of these means of communication?
- What kinds of genres/texts does this community produce?
- What are some of its specialized language (lexis)? And what purpose does it serve?
- Describe the group dynamics (e.g., experts, newcomers) and how they impact language use and acquisition in the community.

Consent Forms: Include scans/photos of consent forms for those participants who helped with your project, including interviews and/or audio essay participation.

Audio Essay: Synthesizing all that you’ve learned about this community’s

language use, create a 3–5-minute audio essay that highlights some language-use feature(s) that you feel is/are important to this community. Present your findings in an engaging NPR-style audio essay that layers a range of voices, capturing the spirit as well as the insight of your findings in a way that invites language aficionados to celebrate nuances of this community’s language use. Create a transcript for your audio essay. Share your audio essay with the class.

Table 17.2. Grading Rubric

Criteria	A	B	C	D	F
Data Collection	Portfolio reflects robust evidence of data collection including observation field notes, interview transcripts, and memos.	Strong evidence	Evident, though some gaps	Partial	Missing
Textual Analysis	Analysis of two textual artifacts from discourse community describes the structure of English sentences; identifies principles of modification and coordination in English sentences; identifies words and word classes in English; and reflects on aspects of English language as evidenced in these texts.	Strong evidence	Evident, though some gaps	Partial	Missing
Audio Essay	Audio essay celebrates some aspect of English language use unique to this discourse community in a 3–5-minute audio project, using evidence drawn from research project to present findings to an interested audience in an engaging manner.	Strong evidence	Evident, though some gaps	Partial	Missing

Touchpoints (Hear:You are not alone.)

Ethical Research Workshops: Two class meetings designed to introduce you to empirical research and issues of ethics. In addition to these workshops, a body of resources are provided in Blackboard to guide you through the process while you work between classes.

- **Rationale:** In the first workshop, we will talk briefly about why conducting research with human subjects requires Institutional Review Board approval and review that process, registering you for CITI Certification. Following that workshop, you should complete Social and Behavioral Research Certification, uploading your certificate to Blackboard.

- **IRB Applications:** In the second workshop, we will review the IRB application and work on composing your own applications, given your targeted discourse community, including required portions (e.g., application, interview questions, consent form, debriefing form). You will submit a draft of your IRB application for feedback. Finally, you will polish your IRB application and bring a printed copy to class for handwritten signatures.

Methods Workshops: Workshops designed to help you work on research methods.

- **Observations and Field Notes:** We will explore observation and field notes methods, focused on capturing language use.
- **Interview Protocols:** We will examine interviewing methods including setting up the interview, designing open questions, handling awkward moments, and recording methods/options.
- **Transcribing Interviews:** We will explore basic transcription methods for interviews, introducing you to optional open-source tools for transcription.
- **Textual Artifacts:** We will practice annotating English structures in a range of textual artifacts and genres.

Soundwriting Workshops: Workshops designed to introduce you to composing with sound, including software introductions, genre discussions, and peer feedback.

- **Audio Genre Studies:** Throughout the semester, we will use audio pieces related to topics we are discussing in class as a discussion starter. Listen to form and content of these podcasts, preparing to discuss ideas raised as well as thinking like a soundwriter (i.e., how did they do that?). For example, you will find links to the World in Words in the navigational menu of the class; click and listen. As we approach the latter portion of the semester, we will start thinking about a range of short, audio projects in terms of genre to help frame your response.
- **Audacity Workshops:** We will use open-source software called Audacity, which you will download to your personal computer. These workshops will teach you how to import sounds, manipulate tracks, and edit sounds.
- **Peer Feedback Workshops:** In these workshops, you will be asked to bring samples of your soundwriting project for peer feedback.

Sample Student Projects

1. Benjamin Flourney's Discourse Ethnography on Campus Resident Life. Flournoy examines the balance between professionalism and personalization of a campus residence life program.²

2. Nine student examples (audio files and descriptive transcripts) can be found on the book's companion website.

2. Katie Furr's Discourse Ethnography on the University Wrestling Team. Furr celebrates the unique discourse of a college wrestling team, focusing on ways language helps to build a community of brothers.
3. Sarah Johnson's Discourse Ethnography on Intrinsic Bible Study. Johnson examines how language helps a group of Christians delve deeper into intrinsic Biblical study.
4. Katie Lewis's Discourse Ethnography on Be Your Own Beautiful Cancer Support Group. Lewis visits a Be Your Own Beautiful cancer support group to learn how language works to help cancer victims reshape their notions of beauty.
5. Angela Meade's Discourse Ethnography on Theater Discourse. Meade goes behind the scenes to learn about the activities and terminologies used by a theater community.
6. Hannah Ray's Discourse Ethnography on Professional Newsroom. Ray discovers how clarity can be both essential and ubiquitous in a professional newsroom.
7. Garrett Simpson's Discourse Ethnography on the University Swim Team. Simpson considers how a college swim team uses a specialized discourse to meet its athletic and team building goals.
8. Kate Vriesema's Discourse Ethnography on Wattpad as a Discourse Community. Vriesema enters the world of an online creative writing community to think about how language serves as a medium through which strangers become writing group partners.
9. Ally Ward's Discourse Ethnography on the International Equestrian Center. Ward considers how language functions to establish a community at a dynamic, international equestrian center.

Reflection

*[Sounds of dog tags jingling; dog panting; someone says, "Go get it" . . .
"Good boy. good boy. Go get it!"]*

Jennifer Buckner: When it comes to dogs, I have always been attracted to mutts.³

[Underlying beat begins.]

The scrappier, the better. They have great genetics, benefitting from the best qualities of each parent. Our mutts have had healthier, longer lives than the pure breeds we've raised. And many times, I've stood in the vet's office, you know looking at that breed poster on the wall, and I'm trying to find which nose or which body type looks most like my dog. And some of my favorite pets have just defied

3. The audio version of Jennifer J. Buckner and her students' reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

this visual mash-up. They don't look like any breeds on the poster. So I can't have any preconceived ideas about their behavior or appearance, their history, or how friendly they might be. It's just me and Ivan getting to know each other.

I've been thinking lately that mutts aren't limited to animal classes. In 20 years of teaching English, first in high schools and now at a university, I've come to see that pedagogy has its own mutts. We combine the best of different approaches to create somethin' scrappy, somethin' better. And when we do this, we're often pulling genetics from some trusted lineage, and we introduce these new genetics to help the pedagogy evolve.

[sounds of a class discussion in the background, with laughing and lively chatter]

I introduced a mutt genre—what I called the audio discourse ethnography—to a Structure of the English Language class in fall semester of 2017. So these students would spend a semester studying a discourse community of their choice, and then they would compile the data from portfolios of material, and that included textual artifacts from the community, field observations and soundscape recordings, and audio interviews. And they compiled all of this data into a 3–5-minute audio essay, rather than writing a term paper.

I knew it wouldn't be an easy sell to this group, especially because they were upperclassmen, undergrads, and very comfortable in their ability to write, at least in the traditional sense. But, at first, it seemed like they loved the idea of remixing their research into audio. But when we got into the nitty gritty of, like, really creating the audio essay, we all found ourselves kind of metaphorically staring at that [*laughs*] poster in the vet's office and trying to find this assignment on it. So the aural equivalent of "what does my dog look like?"—I guess—was "what does an audio essay sound like?" Or, in this class, we were trying to understand the grammar of audio discourse ethnography.

Computer Voice Reading: Noun: a word (other than a pronoun) used to identify any of a class of people, places, or things.

Garrett Simpson: One thing that I, uh, thought about yesterday was that you, um, kind of realize doing this, doing soundwriting versus actually writing an essay, the rhetorical effects of things that aren't words, so you know the effect of fading out a sound versus things cutting together and background music. And that sort of thing. Like, there's so much effect that nonverbal sounds have.

Sarah Johnson: Well, like listening to their tone rather than just reading. Something, like, there was like this of list of things, and one of them that if I just read it, it would have seemed really important to me. But listening to it, I could see how, like, she just mentioned it and kind of moved on, brushed it aside, and actually these other points were more important to her.

Hannah Ray: Yeah, it forced—it forced me to take them at their word. Because if they didn't expound on it. And even a few times I would say, "Could you

tell me more about that?” and they didn’t, then I couldn’t force it to be something important if it wasn’t. And I think with writing we supplement the material that we’ve received with our thoughts a lot more. And even though, obviously, all of us did that with this, we could only make it work so much as the sound bites that we had. So, we, I think, were a lot more truthful in this, in a weird way.

Jennifer: In this discussion, I realized that they were exploring the affordances of this genre we had created, and they were also talking about their identities as scholars. What was interesting was that working with sound had created an intimacy with the data that translated into what I thought was more investment in the project itself. And I started to realize that an audio discourse ethnography shifted their role as scholars in a powerful way.

Angela Meade: *[laughs]* Like, um, find my own voice and know how to influence the sound to be what I wanted it to be. . . .

Garrett: I felt like I had a right to be saying what I was saying, like I actually had some sort of authority.

Hannah: Listening to the audio over and over and over again to make those tedious sound changes. Without even realizing it, I processed what they told me a lot more thoroughly than if I had just written down and tried to turn that into a paper. Because I listened to two 30-minute interviews and a 45-minute staff meeting endlessly to find clips when people said “clarity.” Because I knew that that was there, but I had to process all the other stuff, which led me to a lot of other conclusions that I included in my essay that I wouldn’t have if I would have just heard it and said “clarity” and then just gone and copied and pasted sentences with “clarity.” Because you can do Control-F on a document, and you can’t do it on an audio essay.

[group laughing]

Computer Voice Reading: Adverb: a word belonging to one of the major form classes, typically serving as a modifier of a verb, an adjective, another adverb, expressing some relation of manner or quality, place, time, degree, number, cause, opposition, affirmation, or denial.

[Student in background says, “I can make friends elsewhere, you know what I’m saying!”.]

Jennifer: *[laughs]* I don’t think I have ever laughed that much during a final exam. If that wasn’t evidence that the project was a success. . . . They were enthusiastic—I mean, perhaps a little sleep deprived, it was exam week—but enthusiastic and invested. Invested in their projects in a way that I don’t often see, especially in a Structure of the English Language class.

Angela: Fun, I’m loving it so much more because if I had to sit down and write a paper about this, I would have put it off. But like I put off other projects to do this one because I enjoyed it more. *[laughs]*

Hannah: For me, this project completely made the class worthwhile, in that I didn't come for the grammar. I thought I did, and then I got here and the grammar was like *chhh chhh chhh*—insert in the transcript “mimics slapping.” [*laughs and others laugh too*] Um, but like, grammar suddenly didn't matter to me, and that was something that was really hard to care about knowing where all these, like, adverbial clauses and bleh, bleh, bleh, um, and so I was really burned out on the semester, and then when I started working on this, it started to matter again.

Sarah: The structure of the class itself helped, like going through all of the, like, grammar in the beginning and then going into the application part. Um. In most classes it's like, “Yeah, there's application to this, and, in the end, we're going to come back to just this formal information,” and that's pushed on you. But I feel like in this class the application was more important.

Jennifer: It was interesting when I learned that they weren't all on board from the start, though. Our English majors, well, they're typically introverted. I wonder, if most English majors aren't introverted? And, so, I was asking them to go interview people and record their voices. And when you have to record your own voice in an audio essay, there's not a lot of places for you to hide.

What was that like, being a researcher in the field?

Kate Vriesema: It was terrifying. I'm not going to lie. [*others laugh*] When you first pitched this project to us, I was like, No, no way . . .

[*laughter from whole group*]

Hannah [*as Kate talks*]: I'm dropping this class.

Kate: . . . I'm probably going to drop this class just to avoid this project.

Angela: WP [withdraw pass]!

Hannah: There were some stressful conversations about it.

[*sound of fire truck driving by*]

Angela: Pauses. For fire truck.

Ben: Yeah, just passing down the road . . . as normal.

Kate: Just the normal daily fire truck.

Jennifer: You did a hard thing too, going into a cold community.

Ally Ward: Oh my God, it was so scary. [*laughs*] I was just super nervous because I kind of was just like by myself over there, and I didn't like it. It was really scary.

[*Beat begins.*]

Jennifer: So, they really had to step out, from behind written letters and paragraphs into a newsroom, an international equestrian center, a Bible study group, a pool house, a cancer support meeting, a wrestling room, a theater, and even an online creative writing community of strangers.

I'm still getting to know this mutt genre that is audio discourse ethnography, or audiography, or soundwriting.

[Return to sounds of Jennifer playing with dog, tags jingling, and dog running by.]

I am fond of it though. And I've decided: It will have a home in my next Structure of the English Language class.

[In background, Jennifer says, "good boy," "sit," "that's a good boy," "you ready?," "go get it," dog running away, "that's a good boy." Beat fades.]

Note

References include texts referenced in Jennifer J. Buckner's materials hosted on the book's companion website. Buckner's reflection used sounds from Apple's GarageBand.

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