

Chapter 23. YA On the Air: A Scaffolded Podcast Assignment on YA Literature

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In this chapter, we describe and reflect on a soundwriting project titled YA On-the-Air, which we assigned to students enrolled in a large, general education lecture course about Young Adult (YA) Fiction. Students worked through the process of writing and recording episodes of podcasts about YA in two contexts connected to the large lecture class: Jennifer's discussion sections, and an optional, four-credit "attached" writing course that Jasmine facilitated. Thanks to this unique setup, we can offer you here a variety of materials and reflections about a shared assignment in two very different learning scenes. Students working with Jennifer engaged with the course material in four class meetings a week (three days of lecture plus one 50-minute discussion section), where they focused primarily on developing the content of the podcast episodes about the required YA novels. Students in Jasmine's section engaged with the course material five times a week (three times during the lecture and twice in 80-minute writing class meetings); the writing class meetings emphasized rhetorical decision making and strategies for composing.

YA On-the-Air asked students to work in small groups to develop an episode of a podcast series about YA novels. Students in Jasmine's course were invited to conceptualize a podcast series and create one episode from the series; they could imagine the larger trajectory of their podcast and decide if they wanted to produce a first episode, middle episode, or final episode for their series. Students in Jennifer's class were asked to imagine their episode as part of a defined podcast series, one that used YA fiction as an access point for young listeners into larger social and political issues. Students developed context knowledge for their podcasts in the large lecture course, where they learned about the history of YA fiction, read a selection of YA novels, and discussed the themes and goals of YA.

In both of our classes, we relied on our training as teachers of rhetoric and writing to help us guide students through this project. For example, we introduced the medium of podcasts by inviting students to listen to a range of podcast genres (e.g., book review podcasts; "talk show"/roundtable podcasts; narrative podcasts; interview podcasts; etc.) and discuss the conventions, audiences, and purposes of those examples. Students then selected a genre for their own episodes based on their groups' rhetorical goals. Many of our scaffolding activities focus on helping students articulate those goals: They ask students to think about

how they are positioning themselves in relation to their audiences through their episodes, what they want to achieve in speaking to these audiences, and how, through their content and concept but also specifically through sound, they can effectively reach their audiences.

We were very excited with the outcomes of the assignment. We found that the podcast medium not only encouraged thoughtful, critical, and collaborative engagement with YA, but also, more importantly, helped students achieve a deeper understanding of rhetoric. Composing with sound was a key part of those results: Students, in being given the opportunity to add their voices, literally, to conversations about YA and social issues that mattered to them, developed a different sense of themselves as rhetors. They explored ethos as an embodied concept and expressed a more robust sense of ownership and authorship of their compositions. Students engaged differently with matters of rhetorical decision-making than we had seen with more traditional composing assignments in our courses. That is to say, the aural dimensions of soundwriting made questions of, for example, how tone or pace affect audiences more present to students. We were excited to see that students engaged differently with revision as they composed with sound. Many groups approached revision radically after receiving feedback on their episodes. They rewrote scripts and re-recorded and re-edited audio in order to change the mood of their episodes, to make themselves and/or the content of their episodes more approachable and interesting for their audiences, and to try to find ways to keep their audiences' attention. When we introduced the soundwriting project to students, we learned that many of them had not listened to podcasts before; rather than hindering their work, however, the newness of the medium created exciting possibilities for students as they thought about how (and why, and under what circumstances) the podcast as a medium "worked" and what it could help them accomplish as rhetors.

The implementation of the shared assignment across these two different contexts produced some variation in how we introduced this soundwriting project and how we guided our students through it. Because of our students' general unfamiliarity with podcasts, the curricular complexities of this shared assignment, and the limited time we had with students in our courses (our institution runs on a quarter system), we designed this assignment with significant scaffolding. Our hope is that the materials in this chapter will assure you that while incorporating soundwriting into a curriculum can seem daunting, students can have meaningful learning experiences composing with sound in spite of time constraints and while still meeting diverse course objectives. This archive represents all the scaffolding activities we assigned between our classes. In other words, both sets of students engaged with different combinations of these activities. The preparatory assignments we share with you here are designed to help students develop an "ear" for podcasts, strategies for soundwriting, and a shared vocabulary related to rhetorical production. These activities create opportunities for students to workshop ideas, explore the rhetorical affordances of audio, and reflect regularly on both their textual products

and their compositional processes. The project as a whole, and its scaffolded parts, can be completed with the tools students already have; our students recorded on their phones or laptops, and all students used audio-editing software that came with their computers or Audacity, a free, open-source editing program. (Many free tutorials and guides are available online for users new to Audacity, a bonus for both students and teachers who are new to audio editing!)

Assignments and Sequence

The Podcast Episode Prompt

For the Podcast Episode Project, you will work collaboratively in groups of four to 1) create a podcast episode (10–15 minutes in length) in which you discuss or review a work of young adult fiction, 2) draft a memo in which you explain why you chose to work on this particular episode, 3) create an introduction to your podcast for high school listeners, and 4) create a transcript of your episode.

Your podcast episode will address a specific audience and purpose. In addition, it will address the class theme (or respond to one of the class texts). While you must create a podcast episode, there are many types of podcasts. Your group will need to select an appropriate type of podcast for this project and make appropriate rhetorical choices for this situation. In other words, your podcast episode will operate within a clear rhetorical framework—with a clear context, genre, purpose and audience—that addresses the class theme (or responds to one of the class texts).

Additionally, with your consent, your episode might be made available to students in our local high schools interested in hearing your views about YA.

This assignment will have a few moving parts: Once you've been assigned a team, you'll develop an episode proposal, compose an episode storyboard and script, participate in peer review of your script, record your episode, and then write an introductory memo to local high school teachers introducing your episode and explaining why the episode might be meaningful to their students. Details are forthcoming about each step.

The Listening Reports Activity Prompt

Below you will find a list of podcast series. Each link will take you to the podcast homepage; from there, you can locate an archive of past episodes.

Listen to two episodes from two different podcasts (one episode from each) and write a brief report on them using the questions below. Coordinate with your team so that you choose different podcasts and episodes. Share your reports with your teammates.

Report Questions

- What is the podcast series about, and how is it structured (episodically, serially)? Where does this episode fit into the series?

- What is the purpose of the series and episode? Does the episode “fit in” to the series?
- Who is the intended audience for the series/episode? How do you know?
- Who is the podcast’s rhetor? How does the rhetor’s position influence his or her connection with the audience?
- Describe the structure and setup of the episode. How many speakers were there? Were they all hosts or were some invited guests? What did they discuss, and how did they interact with each other?
- Outline the episode: What happened first, second, third, etc.?
- What sound effects or music was included, and to what effect?

Podcast Series

- *Hey YA!*: a podcast from BookRiot (<https://bookriot.com/listen/shows/thepodcast/>)
- *BookHype*: news, reviews, recommendations, and banter from Hypable.com (<https://www.hypable.com/podcasts/book-hype/>)
- *The Split*: YA book reviews (<http://thesplitbookreviews.com/category/podcast-episodes/>)
- *88 Cups of Tea*: YA interviews, reader questions, craft Q&A (<http://88cupsoftea.com/>)
- *Mugglecast*: a Harry Potter franchise fandom podcast (<http://mugglecast.com/>)
- *Clear Eyes, Full Shelves*: reading and reading-related discussion (<http://cleareyesfullshelves.com/thepodcast/>)
- *The Dead Authors Podcast*: imagined conversations with dead authors (<http://thedeadauthorspodcast.libsyn.com/>)
- *Adventures in YA*: YA-related discussions + interviews (<http://www.adventuresinya.com/>)
- *Candlewick Press Presents*: from children’s publisher Candlewick Press, an inside the industry look (<http://www.candlewickpodcast.com/>)
- *This Creative Life with Sara Zarr*: a YA author interviews other YA authors (<http://thiscreativelife.libsyn.com/>)
- *Says Who?*: a political podcast co-hosted by YA author Maureen Johnson (<http://www.sayswhopodcast.com/>)

The Pitch Activity Prompt

A “pitch” is a very brief (and engaging) account of what you have to offer to someone who might be interested in your idea. The quintessential pitch is the elevator pitch: Imagine that you’ve stepped onto an elevator with a person of influence who you want to sell on an idea or who you want a job from. You only have 30–60 seconds to make an impression and give the person all the relevant

details about your proposal. You must “hook” them before the elevator doors open.

The genre of the pitch can also help us sift through and combine our various ideas into a cohesive one. In this exercise, we’ll use the pitch to help us plan out our podcasts.

Refer to the podcast pitch proposal guide from WNYC (n.d.). Then, with your team, prepare a pitch for your own podcast. Share your pitch.

The Proposals Prompt

In your groups, compose a 500-word proposal discussing your plans for the Podcast Episode Project.

Your proposal should refer to the following:

1. Content, Message, Purpose

- a. Which text are you focusing on?
- b. Which topic would you like to discuss in your podcast episode, and how does this topic relate to our discussion of YA fiction? Why would this topic be important to your audience?
- c. What is the purpose of the podcast episode? How do you expect your audience to respond to it?
- d. Which cultural, social, or political conversations does your podcast join? How will you contribute to these conversations? Why is it important for you to jump in?

2. Audience

What specific audience do you want to address in your podcast? (Don’t simply say YAs. This is too broad.) Why do you want to speak to them? What’s your relationship to them? Do some research on your intended audience: What do you think they want to know more about? Why do you think they care about these things? Which rhetorical choices are you going to make that will be particularly appealing to them?

3. Podcast Composer

How will you present yourself as the podcast composer? If applicable, what persona will you adopt? (Are you private individuals, or are you the representatives of a public broadcasting agency?) Think about how this choice could influence the structure of your podcast.

4. Structure

- a. Which podcast sub-genre (solo; interview; roundtable; co-hosted; audio magazine; etc.) will your podcast belong to? Why is this format a good choice to reach your intended audience? How does it relate to your imagined position as podcast composer?
- b. What is the overall theme of the proposed podcast? How will the episode you produce fit into this theme?

- c. What is the position of the episode you are going to produce in relation to the podcast as a whole? Is it the first episode? Consider what may have happened before and/or what will come after this particular episode.

The Audio Inventory Prompt

Start collecting audio samples. You may need to go into the world to record ambient noise or sound effects. You may also need to search the internet for royalty-free music and sounds. You and your group will collect more audio samples than you will end up using, but having a good bank of sounds will be useful at this stage.

You might think of your audio sample inventory as a sort of sound “vision” board. As you curate sounds, you can begin to clarify your podcast’s tone, style, and overall vibe.

Collect your sounds on your team page. Give each sample a distinctive and identifying filename. You need at least two sound samples per person.

Storyboard Prompt¹

This prompt is delivered in a PowerPoint presentation and explains the concept of a storyboard, reasons to storyboard, and some suggestions for storyboarding.

The Script Prompt

Draft a script that sketches your episode’s conversation. The purpose here is to build on your proposal ideas by adding more concrete information; think about what, exactly, you will talk about; consider how (and why) you will incorporate sound (musical breaks, sound effects, etc.); and explore how you will conclude the episode. Please also include timestamps for each segment or topic.

The Production Journals Prompts

Note: Students respond to the following prompts in their journals throughout the project in response to scaffolding and peer review activities.

Entry #1

Once you have received your teammates’ podcast episode reports, read them! Then, using this information, write a paragraph wherein you begin to think about the kind of podcast episode you might want to make. You might discuss its structure/setup, topic/theme, music/effects, audience, rhetoric, or purpose.

Entry #2

In your production journal, transcribe your team’s episode pitch. Then, in at least 250 words, write about how your pitch came to be, what ideas you and

1. See the book’s companion website for a PowerPoint file that we used to teach storyboarding.

your teammates had to leave behind and why, and how you're feeling about the pitch and the podcast episode at this point.

Entry #3

After you have collected your sound samples, make an entry in your production journal wherein you describe what you were looking for on your sound search; what you collected; where you collected your samples; why you collected what you did; how you might use these effects; and what else you might need to collect. Write too about the overall sound “vision” you’re imagining for your podcast episode, and how this tone/style/vibe relates to the rhetorical situation (purpose, audience, genre) of your podcast. (This entry should be at least 250 words.)

Entry #4

Today, your team received feedback on your episode proposal. In at least 250 words, reflect on that feedback and your team’s responses to it. In your entry, you might consider these questions:

- What did you feel like the strengths and weaknesses were of your proposal? Were these in line with the feedback you received?
- How, specifically, does your group plan to revise the proposal over the next few days?

Entry #5

One of your tasks this week is to craft a storyboard for your podcast episode. As you and your group work on your storyboard, reflect on the experience. These questions might guide your entry:

- What did you and your team have to figure out and discuss as you were planning your storyboard?
- Were there any disagreements, debates, or competing visions about the podcast that were uncovered during this process? What were they, and how did you resolve them? Why did you ultimately end up with the solution that you did?
- What did storyboarding help you learn or understand better about your podcast episode?
- Did storyboarding prompt you to revise your podcast proposal in any way?
- What resources/scripting work do you need to do next to prepare you for production?

As always, your entry should be at least 250 words.

Entry #6

What has surprised you about drafting, recording, and editing your podcast episode? Be as specific as possible, and record both your successes and challenges.

Entry #7

Consider the feedback you received from your peer reviewers. Come up with a revision strategy with your team, and report about it here. What will you

prioritize as you revise, and why? What specific changes will you make, and what effect do you hope they'll have on your final product?

Entry #8

Imagine an episode that would follow your episode in your podcast series. What might it be? How does the episode you made serve as the “set up” for this next episode? Why might your audience value it?

The Transcript Prompt

An important consideration when composing—in new media or more traditional media forms—is accessibility. For a range of reasons, your audience may appreciate a transcript of your podcast episode.

Additionally, producing a transcript of your podcast episode can give you a different perspective on your audio composition.

As your final task related to the podcast episode, produce a transcript (complete with timestamps). If you feel so inclined, reflect on the process of transcribing, and what you learned from it, in your production journal.

Sample Student Projects

1. “Food for Thought” by Alejandra Santana, Oriana Gonzalez, Amy Vong, and Jailyn Fierro. Using Angie Thomas’s 2017 novel *The Hate U Give*, “Food for Thought” explores how the main character, a Black teenager named Starr, grapples with the death of her friend at the hands of a White police officer. “Food for Thought,” through discussions of Starr’s sense of double consciousness, close reading, relevant music, and honest, hardline opinions about police brutality, aims to teach listeners—high school juniors and seniors—about the perils of police brutality and soft racism.²
2. *Healing Through Narratives* by Alexis Garcia, Anika Flores, and Gabriela Martinez, Episode 1: “Voice of the Dead.” This episode of *Healing Through Narratives* explores the relevance of counter-storytelling in historically underrepresented folks using David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing*. The episode features The Recollectors, a storytelling community consisting of families and children, who are now adults, whose relatives died as a result of the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and 1990s.

Reflection

[intro music: *Dee Yan Key* (2018), “That Ain’t Chopin”]

2. Two student examples (audio or video files and descriptive transcripts) can be found on the book’s companion website.

Jasmine Lee: Hello, and welcome!³ Thanks for tuning in. Before we jump into a discussion of our soundwriting assignment, we want to take a second to introduce ourselves.

My name is Jasmine Lee, and I'm an assistant professor of English at the California State University, San Bernardino. My primary research interests include rhetorical education, affect, and cultural critique. Through my work, I often find myself coming back to popular culture, and YA (or young adult fiction) and youth culture in particular. You may have noted that my list does not include sound studies or soundwriting. The fact is that the assignment that we're sharing with you today was actually my first foray into soundwriting, as a scholar and as a teacher. The same is true for my coauthor, whom you'll meet in just a second.

Though we are soundwriting rookies, we are excited to share this pedagogical practice with you because we're excited about what sound added to our experiences teaching rhetorical production and composing strategies to our students. Before we get too far into that though, meet Jennifer!

Jennifer Geraci: And I'm Jennifer Geraci, a Ph.D. student and teaching assistant [now a lecturer at University of California, Irvine]. My primary research is in Latino literature and life writing, and I teach composition courses focusing on rhetoric and research writing. Although my primary research is not in sound, I found that our experiences with students on this podcast episode project align very well with many of the objectives of rhetoric and research writing classes that I teach.

Over the next 10 minutes, we'll tell you about the contexts for this podcasting assignment, how we helped students to prepare and produce their episodes, and what worked well for us, and what we might try differently the next time we teach this class.

We should talk a bit about what our podcast assignment involved and the contexts in which we taught it. I say contexts—plural—because we taught this assignment in very different kinds of classes.

Jasmine: Yes, good point! The soundwriting assignment that we're sharing with you here comes from courses that Jennifer and I taught together at the University of California, Irvine, where we were graduate student colleagues. The curricular details about this assignment are a bit complex, but, in short, it might suffice to say that Jennifer and I taught two different kinds of classes attached to a large lecture course on YA fiction. Jennifer's classes functioned as discussion sections for the large lecture, and my class functioned as a separate, four-unit writing and rhetoric course. Because of this setup, Jennifer and I had different amounts of time with our students, a different number of students, and different learning objectives in our classes. We nonetheless shared this assignment, which we designed and developed with the professor teaching the

3. The audio version of Jasmine Lee and Jennifer Geraci's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

large lecture course and two other TAs who taught their own sections of the attached writing courses. We wanted to share our experience in this collection because, despite the very different contexts that we taught our project in, our students in both cases really shined. We think that their successes speak to the flexibility, adaptability, and the great potential of soundwriting projects across a variety of courses.

When we began designing our classes, I think we had some reservations about soundwriting. Podcasting was an intimidating new medium for us, and we worried that we might not have the time or the technological know-how to guide students through the project, or that we (and our students) might get overwhelmed by the media production aspects and lose sight of our course goals. But we're happy to report that those anxieties proved unfounded.

Jennifer: You're also getting a sense of our students' work right now. We've borrowed some of their successful strategies in our own podcast introduction recording and used them here in our own reflection. This introductory structure, the music you heard at the top of our reflection, and the organization of our reflection into sections into sections, and the sound effect transition are all features of our students' podcasts.

Jasmine: That's a great point, Jennifer. I guess we should say a little more about this specific soundwriting project, right?

Okay, so our soundwriting assignment, YA On-The-Air, asked students to work in groups to collaboratively produce one episode of a podcast series. In my course, students could imagine their own podcast series and produce one episode from that series. Most students chose to address young readers as their audience, but the rhetorical purposes of their podcast series and episodes differed widely.

Jennifer: In the class I taught, students created one episode, but the objectives behind creating that episode was to inform a student population—a high school student population in our area. So they were very conscious of some of the course requirements for this particular district of high school students, and they also had a visit from some of the teachers of those high school students.

Jasmine: Right. The authenticity of this podcast production assignment, I think, really helped students cultivate a deeper understanding of rhetorical decision making. But I don't think it was just the framework of the task that mattered in the project. Sound opened up a new dimension to the way that we, and our students, thought about and talked about rhetorical work and composing. I for one really enjoyed watching my students work with a more embodied understanding of authorship. In the writing courses I've taught that did not involve sound, I had sort of given up over the years in talking about "voice"; voice felt kind of like a jargon, teacher-writing-oriented word. And I knew if I wanted to talk about voice, I actually meant that I wanted to talk about something, about where style and ethos and perspective and how you engage with and relate to an audience all met, but just saying "voice" didn't always help me communicate that to my students. In this soundwriting project, though, there was something more

direct and literal about talking to students about voice. Jennifer, what stood out to you about soundwriting with students?

Jennifer: Students working with sound are more attuned to the minute complexities of, literally, their every word or pause, and through recording and audio playback, they are able to see more clearly how each decision they make communicates meaning to their auditors. To me, asking students to produce episodes, and to really think of them as publishable, “real” sound projects, aligns with the objectives of process-based writing instruction: students had to envision their audience, come up with a project idea and the language, sound, and structure to execute it, and they revised their episodes based on group and instructor feedback.

One of the most beneficial takeaways of this sound project with students was that it gave them an opportunity to slow down and think differently about their projects. Like I said before, they’re thinking about their language and pause, sound effects and music (if they’re using any), and it’s also helping them to think about the tone of their voices, the moods that they are creating through their episode, how they’re going to introduce and talk about the complex terms that we went over in the lecture course, and which literary texts they are going to talk about and how they are going to be able to relay their analysis to an audience.

Jasmine: Yes, yes to all of that. So something that Jennifer and I have talked a lot about when we’ve been putting this chapter together is how interesting we find it that sound, or more specifically, introducing soundwriting into our classes, did important work in both of our very different learning contexts. What we found most valuable about soundwriting was different for each of us; soundwriting helped students engage with concepts more deeply in each of our classes, but what those concepts were weren’t necessarily always the same.

So I know that I will definitely incorporate soundwriting again in a different class, at my new institution, in part because of how exciting and, I think, productive soundwriting and composing with sound was in this course. In our chapter, you’ll find a whole host of scaffolding activities that we used between our two courses in setting up this project. So, if you are thinking about doing your own podcast episode project in a class that you teach, please feel free to take from this archive, change activities, mix them up, leave out what doesn’t work for you. And we’d love to hear if you use or any adapt of these materials, and what happens with them.

Jennifer: Well, we’re about out of time for this reflection, and we want to thank you all for taking interest in our soundwriting project. We hope our experiences are useful to you as you design and implement your own podcast episode units in your classes. Happy Soundwriting!

Jasmine: Happy Soundwriting! Bye bye!

[Outro music: Dee Yan Key, “That Ain’t Chopin,” continues to end.]

Jasmine: Jennifer and I would like to thank Jonathan Alexander, the professor who initiated and taught the large lecture course at the center of this project, for

his excitement about new media composing and for inviting us to be a part of this innovative course. The podcast episode project would not have been what it was without the smart work of our teaching colleagues, Fran Tsufim and Taylor McCabe. We are grateful for the opportunity to share this work and for the generous feedback we received from the editors of this collection. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to the Faculty Center for Excellence and the Institute for Child Development and Family Relations at CSUSB for providing some of the research support that enabled me to work on this chapter.

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