

Chapter 25. Speech, Invention, and Reflection: The Composing Process of Soundwriting

Tanya K. Rodrigue
SALEM STATE UNIVERSITY

The assignment described in this chapter was designed for the final project in a graduate-level course on composing with sound, yet the assignment is indeed appropriate for an undergraduate writing course in digital or soundwriting or a graduate course in digital writing. The assignment has four components: a project proposal, audio and/or alphabetic process notes, an audio project in a genre and rhetorical context of the student's choice, and a reflection essay. The bare-boned audio project assignment prompt—compose an audio project in any genre for any purpose and audience—is intentional in its loose structure and meant to provide students with an opportunity to create a project that is meaningful to them. Yet students may indeed feel overwhelmed by the many options available to them, so I encourage instructors to give students the choice to engage with this open-ended prompt or a more specific and structured prompt.

While students should complete all four components of this assignment, they are assessed only on the process notes (75%) and reflection essay (25%). The process notes rubric draws primarily on the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing's* identification of habits of mind known to be important for learning (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011). The reflection essay rubric is made up of two categories related to students' understanding of sonic rhetorical strategies and what the audio composing experience taught them about themselves as writers.

Prior to this final assignment, instructors need to do a fair amount of scaffolding, teaching students both content and technical skills. Students must be introduced to and learn about the following:

- rhetoric and genre
- the aural mode and its affordances and constraints
- the rhetorical function of sound and sonic rhetorical strategies (such as voice, sound effects, music, and silence)
- strategies for active listening
- strategies for analyzing sonic rhetoric and genre
- the multitude of existing genres of audio stories, situated in authentic rhetorical contexts
- the elements of audio storytelling such as writing for the “ear,” scripting, narration, and delivery
- possible ways to approach the audio composing process

- audio-editing software (such as Audacity) and how to use it

Instructors should use in-class time to lead students in the analysis of audio stories, asking them to think carefully about the genre characteristics and the employment of sonic rhetorical strategies and their effectiveness. Students should also engage in several low-stakes activities that will help them build their technical skills in audio editing as well as their knowledge about how to write for the “ear.”

Assignment Rationale

There are five general goals of the assignment, as indicated on the assignment guidelines:

- to deepen understanding of rhetoric and the rhetorical function of sound
- to practice composing and revising in the aural mode with attention to aspects of audio storytelling
- to bring awareness to the value of play and experimentation in composing
- to strengthen metacognitive awareness and reflection practices during the composing process
- to practice and strengthen the abilities needed for deep, effective learning

While the four components of the assignment generally work toward helping students achieve the above goals, the assignment primarily emphasizes the audio composing process, as reflected in the assessment criteria. I designed the assignment in this way mainly because of my own learning experience from composing an audio documentary as well as my interest in the use of speech in the invention stage of the composing process.

The exigence for this assignment primarily emerged from reflections on the course in light of what I learned from composing my first longform audio project in 2017 on the Women’s Marches (Rodrigue, 2017). My audio composing experience shifted my thinking about the purposes and goals in a graduate course and my responsibilities as a rhetoric teacher working with students who are studying to be high school English teachers or who are already teachers of record. From my own experience, I recognized that the real learning of rhetoric, sonic rhetoric, audio storytelling, and the learning of learning something completely new (in a foreign genre and foreign modality) was in the process, not the product. I determined the best way for students to recognize and identify this learning was to consciously activate the habits of mind associated with effective learning while composing their audio projects and to capture this learning either in alphabetic or aural process notes. I define process notes as brief, informal documentations and/or reflections—on paper or in an audio recording—about one’s writing experiences at various intervals during the composing process. I encouraged students to try audio process notes because of my interest in the possible affordances of speech in the invention stage. In *Vernacular Eloquence*, Peter Elbow (2012) claimed that unplanned, informal speech is a haven for productive meaning making. Thus, the audio process notes, I determined, had

strong potential to play a significant role in helping students achieve course learning goals, strengthen their capabilities to learn as well as their aptitudes, as the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing states, in writing and thinking.

The Assignment and Rubrics

The Assignment

The major project for this class is the construction of an audio story in a genre of your choice for any purpose or audience. There are several components of the project:

1. **Plan:** You will compose a detailed plan as to how you will execute your story. The plan should be at least two double-spaced pages. You will work on this plan and revise it during the week we meet.
2. **Process notes and/or audio recordings:** While composing your project, you will reflect on your process along the way (I recommend after, or even during, each work session) either in written form or in audio form (I strongly encourage you to try the audio form). You are required to have at least five entries, yet you can certainly have more if you'd like. Written entries should be three to six pages and audio entries should be 5–10 minutes. I will provide you with examples of what these process notes might look/sound like.
3. **Audio project:** You will produce an audio story that is appropriate in length and nature to its genre. The story will have a distinct purpose and target audience.
4. **Reflection essay:** You will compose a written reflection after you finish the final version of your audio project that should be at least five double-spaced pages. The reflection should be a thorough exploration and analysis of the decisions you made with regard to sonic rhetorical strategies and your rhetorical situation. You can look to my previous students' reflections in the *Kairos* article (Rodrigue et al., 2016) for examples. It also asks you to reflect on what this experience has taught you about yourself as a writer.

You must meet the minimum requirements of all four components, yet you will primarily be assessed on your process notes/recordings (75%) and your reflection essay (25%). Please create a Google Drive folder specifically for the final project and clearly identify each component of the project.

The purpose of this project is five-fold:

1. To deepen your understanding of rhetoric and the rhetorical function of sound
2. To practice composing and revising in the aural mode with attention to aspects of audio storytelling
3. To bring awareness to the value of play and experimentation in composing
4. To strengthen metacognitive awareness and reflection practices during the composing processes
5. To practice and strengthen the abilities needed for deep, effective learning

Table 25.1. Rubric for Process Notes/Recordings

	A range The composer demonstrates this ability in a sophisticated and thoughtful manner consistently across their process notes.	B range The composer demonstrates this ability in an effective manner across all or most of the process notes.	C range The composer demonstrates this ability in a proficient way with room for growth in most or some of the process notes.
Creativity and Innovation: The ability to use a range of approaches for generating and expressing ideas			
Metacognition and Reflection: The ability to think about one's thinking, and to reflect on the impact of rhetorical decisions and their effects			
Persistence: The ability to sustain/maintain interest in and attention to the project. The composer stays on task and works through problems or issues without giving up			
Problem-posing and Problem-solving: The ability to pose challenging questions and/or recognize a problem or issue and making a plan for how to approach solving it			
Play, Experimentation, and Flexibility: The ability and willingness to try out different ways to address a problem or achieve a rhetorical goal; and/or take risks in an effort to determine what strategy/method is most effective			
Rhetorical Knowledge: The ability to consider purpose, genre, audience, sonic rhetorical strategies, and context when making decisions			

Table 25.2. Rubric for Audio Reflection

	A range	B range	C range
Sonic Rhetorical Strategies (sound interaction, voice, music, sound effects, silence) and the Rhetorical Situation	Composer thoughtfully and in detail explains and describes at least five ways they used sound to achieve their desired effect with regard to purpose, genre and audience. The composer draws substantially on class readings and/or experiences to explain these strategies in a sophisticated way.	Composer sufficiently describes at least five ways they used sound to achieve their desired effect with regard to purpose and audience. The composer draws on some class readings and/or experiences to explain these strategies in an effective way.	Composer describes at least five ways they used sound to achieve their desired effect with regard to purpose and audience. The composer makes only minimal or superficial reference to class readings and/or experiences to explain these strategies.
Your Identity as a Writer	Composer thoughtfully and in detail explains and describes what this experience has taught them about who they are as a writer/composer in general.	Composer sufficiently describes what this experience has taught them about who they are as a writer/composer in general.	Composer briefly touches on what this experience has taught them about who they are as a writer.

Sample Student Projects

Carolynn, a graduate student from my summer 2017 Composing with Sound class, composed the alphabetic and audio process notes, the alphabetic reflection essay, and the audio project shared on the book's companion website.

1. Audio process note #1 (out of 9)¹
2. Audio process note #7 (out of 9)
3. Alphabetic process note #5 (out of 9)
4. Alphabetic process note #8 (out of 9)
5. "Documenting the Mundane: Reflections on Documenting and (re)Creating Aurally," an alphabetic reflection essay
6. Documenting the Mundane, Carolynn's final audio project

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

Reflection

[a loud horn sound]

Tanya Rodrigue *[Recording informally in a car. The sound quality is poor with lots of background static noise.]*: Bubba, I'm gonna record myself, so I'm just going to talk into this phone, okay?²

Tanya *[as narrator]*: That's me. It was sometime in March in 2017. And I apparently felt compelled to let my three-year-old know that I was about to start talking to myself.

[Car recording continues, poor audio quality, and lots of static continues in the background. Some words are audible, but most of the sound is muffled and words are unable to be deciphered. Sound plays under the following narration for a couple of sentences before fading out.]

Tanya *[as narrator]*: Again. It was becoming a habit. At that time, I was working on my very first long-form audio project. It was a documentary; it was similar to the kind of long-form audio projects I assign students in courses that either focus on soundwriting or include a soundwriting unit. The documentary was about the women's marches . . .

[Protest song fades in for a few seconds before fading out. The chant is: "We Want a Leader, Not a Creepy Tweeter."]

. . . that took place the day after 45 was sworn in. At the time, I was really busy at work and at home, and the car trips back and forth to my kid's daycare, or to the grocery store . . .

[Car recording fades in. No words can be deciphered, but the faint sound of a voice and static is heard.]

. . . became a time when I could dwell and flip over my ideas about this documentary. Initially, I just did it in my head. But then I decided to start recording, and I used the recordings as a way to work through some of the struggles I was having. And then.

Tanya *[car recording]*: So I got accepted to the Cs regional conference, and what I proposed was to talk about how my experience composing audio—an audio documentary—shaped my pedagogical practices in the teaching of writing with sound. So I thought, what better way than to record snippets as I work on, um, composing this thing.

Tanya *[narrator]*: And so that's what I did. I documented and reflected on my process in writing and in audio recordings, but mostly in audio recordings. And this was intentional. I already knew from my car recordings that talk was

2. The audio version of Tanya K. Rodrigue's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

rich for invention. I had also recently witnessed talk as a productive invention tool, while facilitating student think-alouds for a research project I was doing on digital reading practices. Time and time again, I heard students use talk to draw connections, to make meaning, and to comprehend what they were reading. None of that awesome cognitive work made it to their writing, but that's a different story. So anyway, I observed the value of talk and Peter Elbow (2012) confirmed my observations in research. In *Vernacular Eloquence*, he argues that speaking is easier than writing and “the kind of language that we blurt” (2012, p. 5) is incredibly rich for meaning making. So knowing all that, I wrote or recorded a dozen process notes, before or during or after my work sessions. Some process notes were similar in nature to my car recordings—me just riffing on ideas or working through a struggle—while others focused on where I was in what I was doing at that moment in the composing process.

Tanya [*process note recording*]: I got back some feedback from several people. One is a radio producer. I got feedback back from him, and I was completely overwhelmed. Um, I finished reading this and I thought to myself, wow, I have no idea what I'm doing.

Tanya [*narrator*]: After analyzing both the written and spoken notes, I learned that this is where I was doing my learning. I was learning how to write with unfamiliar rhetorical tools in a foreign genre—initially, I couldn't even figure out the genre—and in a mode I was uncomfortable in.

Tanya [*process note recording*]: I really thought this is exactly what it's all about. I am so uncomfortable writing in this genre. I'm so uncomfortable about inserting myself in any way and thinking that I actually can tell a good, interesting story, one that's about real life and not about the classroom or my experience as a graduate student.

Tanya [*narrator*]: I learned what I knew, what I needed to know, and what I didn't know. I also learned an awful lot about myself both as a thinker and a writer. And then it occurred to me: This is the kind of learning I want my students to do. I'm a rhetoric teacher; I'm not a journalism teacher. I'm working primarily with English majors, high school teachers, and people studying to be high school teachers. I want them to learn about rhetoric and writing in general, sonic rhetoric in particular, sonic composing processes, and perhaps most importantly, how one goes about learning something entirely new and composing in a foreign mode, and possibly in a foreign genre. So it made sense to craft a flexible soundwriting assignment that emphasizes the process of writing and then to create an assessment mechanism that measures learning. So I gave this assignment to graduate students in a one-week intensive soundwriting class that asked them to compose a project plan, alphabetic or aural process notes, a reflection essay about

their writerly choices, and an audio project in any genre for any audience. This assignment is flexible, and it can really be used in any undergraduate or graduate course that has a soundwriting unit or focuses on sound writing.

[Blue Dot Sessions's (2020) "Kilkerrin," a folk song that features a mandolin, fades in.]

Analyzing my students' process notes, they taught me a lot—more than I have time to talk about in this reflection. But let me offer some initial observations here.

[Music fades out.]

I initially thought the students would be annoyed at the emphasis on process rather than product. After all, it takes a lot of time, a lot of energy and focus and persistence, and the end product is what you have to show for this tremendous amount of effort and work. With that said, though, there was a general sense of relief among the first-time audio composers in my class.

Student 1 *[female voice; sounds of wind in the background]*: This is something that I've never done before. So it's hard not to be a little intimidated by it and feel pressure to produce something like really good. I mean, obviously, I'm going to do my best and try really hard to make a good product. But that being said, the guidelines for it are focused on the process of it, which I think is kind of reassuring to myself and the other people in the class just because I think this is the first time a lot of us have done anything like this. English majors, I think, we're so used to writing and getting our ideas down on paper as opposed to just speaking them aloud.

Tanya *[narrator]*: We all know that stress has a negative impact on someone's ability to write. So I think the low-stakes aspect of this assignment was really key to student engagement and buy-in and investment in the project. Interestingly, my students were divided in choosing to compose audio process notes or alphabetic notes or a combo of the two. In both the audio and alphabetic notes, people talked about their methods, the strategies they used, the challenges they faced, the decisions they made, or what decisions they needed to make, yet the audio notes, for some reason, they welcomed more macro-conceptual learning than the alphabetic notes. So for example, several students explored the similarities and differences between alphabetic writing and soundwriting in their recordings. And through this talk, they were working toward a more sophisticated understanding of modes, their affordances, their constraints, their composing processes, and how to write in them.

Student 2 *[female voice]*: Using Audacity was challenging, but at the same time, really awesome. And I enjoyed that as a writer.

So I liked being able to plan out what I was going to do first, and then kind of checking off my story plans like a checklist: “This is how I want to start, do that sound effect, moving on. This interview, moving on.” And then kind of filling in with my narration in between. So it was writing because it’s just like building brainstorming, um, kind of doing a graphic organizer type deal, for sure: It is writing. And you don’t think about it until you’re actually doing it. It’s like oh, okay, here I am making my first draft, essentially. And then as I go in and edit things, here’s my next draft. . . . *[fades out]*

Tanya [*narrator*]: Also, these first-time composers tended to elaborate much more on their ideas in the audio process notes than their alphabetic notes. So, for example, in an alphabetic process note, a student might simply write one or two sentences about how they felt frustrated or how they were working through a particular idea. In an audio note, students said much more. And they also allowed themselves to digress and move into talking about something either tangentially related or not at all related. I noticed that some of the most interesting moments—some of that really rich invention work in my students’ audio process notes—occurred both in the digressions and also when people took the time to work through and grapple with ideas. It seemed like the longer people talked, the more meaning-making and invention occurred. Take a listen to the very end of this 8-minute audio process note.

Student 3 [*female voice; static in background*]: And I could call St. Elizabeth’s, but they didn’t see her till after the fact. And she had cardiac arrest. But! Oh, her death certificate could determine how . . . who? Well, basically, if Mark is lying, I don’t think I don’t believe at all that my parents are lying, but it would be like the ultimate proof, so maybe I could try again to get a copy of her death certificate and use that as the ending. But that could be an idea. Okay, I’m going to look into the death certificate idea. And play around with that and then see where it leads me.

Tanya [*narrator*]: After listening to my students’ process notes, I realized I did the same thing in my car audio recordings: I would just sit in the car and blab on and on; I would stumble and fumble and then I’d hit on something, something that was good or insightful, or something that was awful and horrible. But whatever it was, I couldn’t get there in any other way. This “freespeaking,” if you will, this freedom to use language without constraints and limitations, it is no doubt valuable for student learning. And no doubt valuable for teaching students how to write effectively in any mode, but especially in the aural mode.

[Blue Dot Sessions’s (2020) “Kilkerrin” plays again in the background.]

So this is all to say that a soundwriting assignment that focuses on process and the learning and the doing of soundwriting is incredibly valuable for students, especially first-time audio composers.

[Music. Car recording fades in.]

Child: Who are you talking to?

Tanya: I'm recording myself. So when I set out to write this story. . . .

[Car recording continues to faintly play in the background, words inaudible.]

Tanya [*narrator*]: I'm Tanya Rodrigue, an associate professor in English at Salem State University in Massachusetts. A big shoutout to the students in my Composing with Sound graduate class back in the summer of 2017. And a big thank you to Blue Dot Sessions for the music used in this reflection.

References

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