

Chapter 3. Elements of Sound: Three Scaffolded Assignments

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Featuring the Work of Averi Ager, D'Arcee Neal,
and Dorian Blue

This chapter presents assignments from an upper-level undergraduate course in digital rhetoric and audio composition. In this course, students explore theories of digital and sonic rhetorics through reading, listening, and composing with sound. I had two major goals when I began this class: (1) I wanted students to develop strong listening practices that allowed them to listen to, analyze, and critique sound, and (2) I wanted students to develop their rhetorical abilities to compose with sound. In approaching this course, I aimed to scaffold student work, to give students opportunities to play with sound on small, specific tasks that they could build from over time. Taking inspiration from scholarship by Tanya K. Rodriguez et al. (2016) and Heidi McKee (2006), I decided to structure the body of my course around four, 2–3-week units, each devoted to one of McKee's elements of sound: music, voice, sound effects, and silence. My units on music, voice, and sound effects were each anchored by one major assignment featuring that sound element. Together, these assignments offer students the opportunity to gradually develop listening and composing practices by focusing their attention on particular elements and asking them to reflect on their compositional choices and their learning throughout the course.

Heidi McKee's 2006 article "Sound Matters: Notes Toward the Analysis and Design of Sound in Multimodal Webtexts" provided a framework that helped students understand sound as rhetorical and cultural artifact. Faced with the complex field of sound studies, McKee drew on a variety of disciplines to present a framework that breaks sound down into four elements: vocal delivery, music, sound effects, and silence. I found her article especially useful in conceptualizing my course because it would allow students to focus their attention on one particular element of sound at a time. They could practice listening with especial focus to an element, read pieces theorizing that particular element, consider how the element worked in concert with other sound elements, and finally practice working with that element.

Within each unit, I used McKee's work as a starting point for developing a class vocabulary for talking about each element. For example, McKee drew on Aaron Copland's framework for listening to music on three planes: the sensuous, the expressive, and the sheerly musical. This gave students a place to start,

and we listened to musical pieces to practice hearing and naming these elements. To supplement McKee, I asked students to read the introduction to Daniel J. Levitin's (2007) *This Is Your Brain on Music*, which gave them yet more terms for describing the musical sounds that they heard (pitch, timbre, instrumentation, etc.). Beyond this descriptive work, I wanted students to understand music, like writing, as a socially situated and ideologically weighted practice. Although they can articulate basic genre distinctions and values associated with, say, hip-hop as opposed to classical music, students still often have an idea of music as a "universal language." I wanted to trouble this idea and get students thinking about the relationship between music and power. To that end, we explored histories of American protest music and read pieces like Jonathan W. Stone's (2015) "Listening to the Sonic Archive: Rhetoric, Representation, and Race in the Lomax Prison Recordings." My goal, for music as for the other units, was to help students think about the sound element from both a compositional and analytic perspective, understanding how sound works as compositional element and as cultural artifact.

Although I asked students to complete focused assignments on music, voice, and sound effects, I chose not to do a specific assignment focused on silence. As we neared the end of the term, I wanted to give students the opportunity to revise earlier assignments for a bigger final project. Students had the choice of revising two pieces for a portfolio or more extensively revising and expanding one single piece for their final project. As students revised their earlier work, they would incorporate their growing understanding of silence into their revision. Giving students more time to work on final projects allowed them to thoughtfully revise and to learn from the experiences they had with earlier assignments.

Students came into this course with varied soundwriting experience. A few had done some basic audio work, and others were complete novices. I included a series of workshops and minor assignments to help students develop their listening practices and to practice recording and editing sound. We began the first week with a low-stakes "audio journal" assignment in which they recorded sound from their daily activities and wrote about what they heard, how they heard it, and how they recorded it. I encouraged them to use various methods for recording (phones, laptops, microphones checked out from the library, etc.) and to record a variety of types of sound in a variety of spaces. I led in-class workshops on Adobe Audition, which students could get for free through the university, and included at least one peer-workshop day and one studio work day for each unit. This gave students ample time to get feedback from me and their peers and to get help with any technical issues they were having.

In what follows, I share my Elements of Sound assignments: a remix assignment featuring music, an audio narrative featuring voice, and a Concept in 60 Seconds assignment, featuring sound effects. Although each of these assignments has been part of other digital media composing courses (DeWitt et al., 2015), they are designed in this course to function together. Each Elements of Sound assignment is paired with an artist statement in which students communicate their ar-

tistic choices and goals. Artist statements gave students the opportunity to reflect on their composing choices in a recognizable, real-world genre.

This chapter provides writing instructors with an assignment sequence that helps students to gradually develop their listening and composing practices and encourages student reflection. The student examples, including artist statements, demonstrate how students might respond to individual assignments and the challenges they encountered completing the assignments. The reflection that follows provides insight into the challenges that I encountered supporting and, especially, assessing student work throughout the sequence.

Assignment Prompts

Audio Remix: Elements of Sound Assignment #1: Music

Assignment Description and Goals

This is the first of our series of Elements of Sound Assignments. For these assignments, I encourage you to choose a theme, topic, or question that you can explore in various ways. This might be a topic directly related to our course content (for example, uses of particular types of sound or how sounds are linked to places or identities), or it might be a personal or academic interest that you can explore using sound as a medium (for example, a particular cause that matters to you, or a theme, like childhood). While you don't have to stick to the same topic all semester, choosing one may help give you some ideas for these projects and for the final project later on.

Remix, broadly defined, is combining multiple things to make something new. The best remixes bring together old material in a way that lends it new understanding or power. This assignment is designed to engage you in remix as a rhetorical practice while also exploring music as a powerful sound element. Finally, it will help you develop your skills in digital audio editing.

For our music-focused project, you will create a 3–5-minute audio piece that incorporates various pieces of sound. Your piece should combine and juxtapose at least two different sound objects, remixing or mashing them up to create a new piece with a new purpose. Your project should also include a musical element (song(s), instrumental samples, etc.).

As part of this assignment, you will also write a 200–250-word artist statement describing your goals for this piece and your choices in composing (see below for more detail).

Please submit your assignment in the form of an MP3 file and Word document or PDF via our course website.

Assignment Evaluation

This assignment is worth 15% of your final course grade.

We will further discuss evaluation criteria together in class, but generally, I will ask the following questions as I evaluate your piece:

- Is there a purpose or central idea unifying the piece?
- How does the remix or mashup amplify or alter the meaning, tone, or message of the original pieces of sound in a way that furthers the overall goal of YOUR piece?
- Does the arrangement (structural design) further your rhetorical purpose?
- Did you experiment with different techniques or ideas to creatively use the affordances of audio?
- Does your piece creatively or purposefully use music as a key element?
- Do you carefully edit the audio, using control over volume, various effects, etc. to further your rhetorical purpose?
- Does your artist statement thoughtfully reflect on your composing choices?

Audio Narrative: Elements of Sound Assignment #2: Voice and Narration

Assignment Description and Goals

For our voice-focused project, you will create a 3–5-minute audio narrative that incorporates your own and/or others' voices. You may also choose to use other types of recorded sound (music, recordings of events or spaces, sound effects, etc.). The goal of this assignment is to help you put into practice some of the principles we've learned regarding voice in sonic compositions.

Audio narratives, like written narratives, are driven by their story. You should think about what story you want to tell and why; your story should have a clear purpose or argument. Remember that compelling stories establish character and setting, center around a key problem or conflict, and resolve that conflict, often showing character growth. Strong stories that stick with you include concrete details. Audio narratives harness the power of sound to fill in some of these details. Many audio narratives include both story and reflection, helping guide listeners to the overall argument of the piece.

As part of this assignment, you will also write a 200–250-word artist statement describing your goals for this piece and your choices in composing (see below for more detail).

Please turn in your assignment in the form of an MP3 file and Word document or PDF via our course website.

Assignment Evaluation

This assignment is worth 15% of your final course grade.

We will further discuss evaluation criteria together in class, but generally, I will ask the following questions when I evaluate your project:

- Does the audio narrative have a clear purpose or argument?
- Does the narrative effectively structure the story and organize the piece?
- How does the narrative make use of sounds other than the main voices of the story (such as music or sound effects)? Do these sounds enhance

the story and contribute to the overall purpose? For example, do sounds illustrate what’s happening in the narrative, provide details about the setting, transition from one part of the story to another, or emphasize particular aspects of the narration?

- How well have you edited the voice(s) in this piece? Are there unnecessary ums and uhs or are there places where we need a bit of silence?
- Does your artist statement thoughtfully reflect on your composing choices?

Concept in 60: Elements of Sound Assignment #3: Sound Effects

Assignment Description and Goals

For our sound effects project, you will create a 60-second piece that illustrates a concept using sound effects. This piece ought to be conceptual—if you choose the concept “school,” for example, you should critically explore the concept of school rather than illustrate the sounds of a particular school.

Although the piece may include voices, it should not rely primarily on narration to explore the concept. For example, you want to avoid a speaker explaining a concept with the occasional sound effect thrown in. Rather, integrate the sounds so that they are featured significantly in the piece and do much of the rhetorical work. The goal is to practice the principles we’ve learned regarding sound effects in audio compositions.

As part of this assignment, you will also write a 200–250-word artist statement describing your goals for this piece and your choices in composing (see below for more detail).

Please turn in your assignment in the form of an MP3 file and Word document or PDF via our course website.

Assignment Evaluation

This assignment is worth 15% of your final course grade.

We will further discuss evaluation criteria together in class, but generally, I will ask the following questions when I evaluate your project:

- Does the piece critically and creatively illustrate or interrogate a single concept?
- Is it no longer than 1 minute?
- How does the Concept in 60 make use of sound? Does it foreground sound effects or “noise”? Does it integrate these sounds to contribute to the meaning of the overall piece?
- Does the artist statement thoughtfully reflect on composing choices?

On Artist Statements

Artists often use written statements to communicate about their art, including their process, ideas, and their place in their chosen field. Artist statements can

vary based on purpose and audience. A statement for a grant proposal, for example, might focus on the identity of the artist and the overall purpose or interest of their work. An artist statement for a show or even for a particular piece will tend to be more focused on the choices the artist made in composing that particular piece or show.

For the purposes of this assignment, you'll take the latter approach, focusing specifically on your composition. In your statement of 200–250 words, address the following sets of questions:

- What is your overall purpose for the piece? What goal did you have in putting it together? What is your piece about? Why do you think it is significant or interesting?
- How did you go about designing and completing your audio project? What choices did you make in order to further your goals? How did the piece change as you continued working on it?
- What do you hope listeners will understand about your work? What has your work helped you to understand?

Sample Student Projects

1. “Prelude to a Dream” by Dorian Blue. In this audio remix (Elements of Sound Assignment 1), Dorian uses musical elements and voices to explore a separation between sound and subject, creating a sense of disembodiment and unease.¹
2. “The Execution” by D’Arcee Neal. In this audio narrative (Elements of Sound Assignment 2), D’Arcee remediates one of his poems, using sound effects and music to illustrate the story told by the poem’s speaker.
3. “Alien Abduction Concept in 60” by Averi Ager. In this Concept in 60 (Elements of Sound Assignment 3), Averi tells the story of an alien abduction by creating a soundscape and making use of recognizable genre conventions.

Reflection

[Ethereal chimes musical introduction.]

Sara Wilder: When I designed my advanced writing course focused on digital rhetoric and audio composition, I knew I wanted students to strengthen their practice in both listening to and composing with sound.²

I decided to draw upon Heidi McKee’s (2006) framework for analyzing and teaching audio in multimodal compositions to help structure my course. McKee

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

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

breaks sound down into four elements: music, voice, sound effects, and silence. I structured the bulk of my course around these four elements, anchoring them in three soundwriting assignments: a remix (focusing on music), a narrative (focusing on voice), and a concept in 60 seconds (focusing on sound effects and soundscapes). These three assignments formed my Elements of Sound assignment sequence. Students then chose one or more of these pieces to revise and expand for a final project of their choosing.

[Chimes fade in.]

In this reflective piece, I address each assignment from the sequence in turn, first describing my approach to teaching the element and then giving examples from student work to explain how students took up that assignment. Along the way, I will address how these assignments challenged me as a teacher and what I think students ultimately learned from the experience.

[Musical interlude: chimes.]

Unit I: Music

[Chimes fade out.]

By the end of this unit, I wanted students to be able to listen to a piece of music, describe what they heard with some specificity and depth, and to be able to manipulate music to suit their compositional needs. Further, I wanted students to interrogate music as a cultural artifact. To that end, we read pieces like Levitin's (2007) introduction to *This Is Your Brain on Music* that introduced students to terms that would help them describe what they heard. To deepen understanding of music as a rhetorical practice, we discussed musical genres and remix, grounding those discussions by watching videos like Ferguson's (2016) *Everything Is a Remix* and Vox's recent short documentary on the history of protest music (Henwood, 2017). We listened to podcasts about music, like *Switched on Pop's* episode comparing Toby Keith's "Made in America" with Jay-Z's song of the same name (Sloan & Harding, 2016).

To help students put what they were learning into practice not only as critical listeners, but also as producers, I tasked them with making a remix.

[Chimes begin again, quietly under voice.]

Students were to manipulate music by remixing it with another piece of sound, whether another piece of music, a narrative voice, or some other element. My overall goals for the assignment were for students to manipulate music to make something new, to demonstrate engagement with concepts from our reading, to demonstrate reflective and purposeful use of sound, and to simply gain facility with the technology, to learn to use the programs for soundwriting.

Students responded to the remix prompt in a variety of ways, some choosing to remediate creative writing pieces, some choosing to reflect on their own music

literacy, and still others doing more conceptual pieces, exploring, through sound, a concept that interested them.

[Music stops.]

The variety of pieces I received speaks to both a strength and a weakness of this assignment. This sequence is fairly flexible; it allows students to pursue their own interests and make their own decisions about the genre their piece might most fit. This flexibility allowed students the creative freedom to meet their own goals for their projects. But it also led to problems for me as I responded to and assessed their work. It was difficult to compare students' pieces. I wanted to reward students for taking creative risks. I didn't want to mark them down for trying something new that ultimately failed, as long as they were learning something from the process.

Take Blue's remix as an example.

[Eerie music from remix starts and then continues as background.]

Blue's piece, titled "Prelude to a Dream," included a variety of music and other elements that were purposefully interwoven to evoke a feeling of unease and detachment. That purpose isn't explicitly in the piece itself exactly, but it is developed in their artist statement.

Blue's piece, experimental as it was, was one of the more difficult for me to assess. Were I to listen to this with a rubric in hand that, for instance, designated clarity as an important factor, I'm not sure how well Blue would have done. And yet clarity was not one of my goals for this particular piece. Blue demonstrated a sense of purpose in their artist statement and drew on specifics from the piece to show how they tried to achieve that purpose. Although my feedback to Blue asked for a bit more development of the artist statement, it seemed to me that they had begun to play with sound; they'd manipulated music from various sources (some originally recorded, some found online); and they'd done so with a sense of rhetorical purpose. And for this assignment, that's exactly what I wanted to see.

[Eerie music stops.]

To try to account for the various goals and projects, I ended up working with students to develop a rubric. During an in-class workshop, we collaboratively designed and tested an assessment rubric. Once students turned in their piece, I gave them feedback in two stages. I first listened to their piece and wrote a response detailing my listening experience. I then read their artist statement, listened again, and used the rubric to write another brief response justifying the grade.

Especially for this first assignment in the sequence, I think that this kind of transparency and collaboration in the assessment was crucial to creating an atmosphere in which students felt they could push boundaries and play with sound.

[Musical interlude: chimes.]

Unit 2:Voice and Narration

As we transitioned into the next unit on voice, we listened to podcasts and other pieces that featured voices prominently. In addition to reading pieces theorizing voice, we also took the opportunity to focus on storytelling.

In the anchoring assignment for this unit, students composed an audio narrative. Many students began to build from the skills they started to develop with the first assignment, choosing to use music or other sounds that would help them illustrate a scene, convey a particular mood, or emphasize particular elements of the piece. While some students started by simply adding music to a narrative, I encouraged them—through in-class workshops and mini-conferences—to use music or other sounds to enhance, extend, or change meaning, in particular focusing on using music for emphasis.

D’Arcee’s poem, which he remediated for my class, gives us several examples of how students used music and other elements to foreground and emphasize particular parts of a vocal track. In this piece, titled “The Execution,” D’Arcee uses sound effects for illustration, as he writes, to create “a mini movie.”

For example, he illustrates the speaker’s descriptions with the whispers of voices:

[Metallic drone, quiet voice, underplayed with whispering sounds: I heard from my neighbor, who told her cousin who whispered to her boss.]

and the crunch of gravel.

[Metallic drone, crunching footsteps.]

Further, though, he uses musical elements to evoke the sense of anxiety and impending doom, he also uses music to create emphasis.

The metallic drone sound that repeats throughout is silenced just as we reach the climax of the plot. Listen:

[narrative voice over crickets, wind, and metallic drone] Every-
one is silent. [swirl of wind] She says one word and the village
stops.

[silence]

Ultimately, it is the voice of the poem’s speaker that drives the piece, but the use of music and the use of silence helps emphasize important parts of the poem.

As you’ll see in his artist statement, D’Arcee actually completed this piece in response to the remix assignment, but I include it here as an example of how a student might respond to the narrative assignment because I think it fits this prompt just as well, if not better, than it fits the remix because it is driven by vocals. What we also see in D’Arcee’s artist statement, however, is a reflection on the

composing process that helped him to approach later assignments with a better sense of the amount of time involved.

One of the key takeaways that many students learned from these first two assignments was how long it takes to complete a piece of soundwriting. They learned that the process of planning, organizing, recording and collecting sound, drafting, mixing, and editing took much longer than they might have expected. In this second assignment, students were a little less ambitious in their plans than they were in the remix assignment. I also worked with them to think about how they could use the narrative as a small piece of a larger final project. For example, several students interviewed family members, ultimately expanding their audio narratives for longer podcast-style audio essays. For these students, this was just the start of what would become a longer piece for the final project.

[Musical interlude: chimes.]

Unit Three: Sound Effects

As we moved into our unit on sound effects, we returned to some of our readings from earlier in the term, revisiting concepts from McKee but also our experience of sounds in everyday life, this time from the perspective of producers of sound as much as listeners. We focused the unit on soundscapes, listening to pieces such as the *Sound Matters* podcast episode “The Sound of Life Itself” (Hinman, 2016). We listened to Stedman and Stone’s (2014) sonic review of Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric*, returning again to rhetorical principles to understand sound. To anchor this unit, I assigned students an audio Concept in 60 project, adapted from a video concept in 60 assignment I had been introduced to through the Digital Media and Composition institute at Ohio State several years before. Students had 60 seconds in which to convey or interrogate a concept, primarily through using sounds other than music or voice.

Perhaps because it followed our narrative projects, many of my students—like Averì’s example demonstrates—chose to tell stories or evoke characters with their 60 seconds. Averì’s 60-second piece about an alien abduction also provides us a strong example of how students could build on earlier work, expanding their repertoire and putting concepts from the course into practice.

Averì’s initial remix piece (the first piece they wrote for me) combined a poem, told in first person, with music that played up less obvious themes in the poem and with sounds like the opening of a door and chatter in a café.

[Door opens, bell rings, background voices.]

And these sounds told us that we, as listeners, were walking along with the poem’s speaker.

In Averì’s Concept in 60 piece, they again put listeners in the position of walking with the main character, this time a hiker in the woods who is abducted by

aliens. In workshoping Averi's 60-second piece in class, we focused on feedback that would make this feel "realistic,"

[Owl hooting, footsteps, crickets.]

such as making an owl hooting sound further away than the crackle of twigs underfoot. The result was a piece that made use of genre conventions (a hiker, nighttime noises, alien sounds) to tell a story with no narration. In their artist statement, Averi reflected on these choices and eventually built on this idea even more, making their final project into an audio essay on subject position and sound.

Averi's experience of figuring out how to convey subject position through multiple pieces and then using that experience to drive their final project was one ideal outcome for the way a student might experience this assignment sequence. I hoped that this sequence gave students flexibility to pursue subjects of interest, as Blue did in exploring embodiment, D'Arcee did in remediating creative work, and Averi did by exploring how to account for subject position in designing sonic experiences.

[Background music: chimes.]

As students completed these three projects, they became more adept at both listening and producing sound that made use of music, sound effects, and voice. Along the way, they learned key rhetorical concepts that would help them with a variety of multimodal projects.

[Music fades.]

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