

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

By Jennifer J. Buckner, Gardner-Webb University, Boiling Springs, NC

with Benjamin Flournoy, Katie Furr, Sarah Johnson, Katie Lewis, Hannah Ray, Garrett Simpson, Kate Vriesema, and Ally Ward

## Writing for the Ear Workshops

### Reading

I ask students to read Sean Branick's (2011) "Coaches Can Read, Too: An Ethnographic Study of a Football Coaching Discourse Community." In addition, I ask them to make bring notes about genre features working in this discourse ethnography with them to class the next day. Rhetorically, what is its purpose? audience? context? Formal genre features? How does it compare to other genres? distinctions? similarities?

### In-Class Discussion/Opener

I open class asking questions about the Branick reading, guiding students to identify features of discourse ethnography as a genre. We talk about the student sample they read for class. In doing so, we're trying to first parcel out formal features of a traditional, written discourse ethnography. Following mention of formal features in its written form, I pose the questions: how do we translate that into audio? For example, if a written discourse ethnography uses subheadings to indicate shifts in data groupings, how do we do that aurally? Or if the purpose of a discourse ethnography is to invite us to consider language use and significance in a community, how do we invite listeners into a community through sound? At this point, I am working to help them think about how our experiences are (dis)embodied in different ways when encountering writing than sound. And we start talking about the audio discourse ethnography as a mutt genre of sorts, taking a formal academic genre and translating it into a modality more often associated with informality and intimacy.

### Translating that into/through Audio Essay

After that discussion, we break into groups to explore the question: "What is an audio essay?" To answer the question, we look at some resources that talk about audio essays, such as the University of Wisconsin–Madison's Design Lab (<https://designlab.wisc.edu/>). Using links on this resource to a range of audio essay genres (e.g., *This American Life*, *Sound Print*, *Youth Radio*, *RadioLab*, *This I Believe*, *Wisconsin Life*), we explore a wide range of examples and create a collaborative list in an editable Google Doc of effective formal features we hear used. I ask them to plug in their earbuds then "Listen like a composer. How are they creating this audio essay? What do you hear?"

Below are some example student observations (from a fall 2017 Google Doc):

- I noticed that when music is introduced and used as a signal that the topic was about to shift; it is introduced a view beats AFTER the person begins talking about the new topic. Not the other way around.
- During one interview, as the interviewee was talking about the same thing several times, the researcher added commentary over top of their interview. So the interviewee was faded down and she was the louder voice added later "yes, we're still talking about this".
- ^Same as [another student, previously]. I noticed that too, and I really liked it because it reminded the listener that this synthesis that the reporter was making was based off a conversation with a real person.
- When using interview snippets, the researchers will fade separate commentary in and out of the conversation. They will sometimes even keep the interview in the background but in a muffled volume. // Music is sometimes used to "reorient" the listener. It will play for a few seconds and

grab the listeners attention before the speaker brings up another important topic or subject change.

- The interviewer didn't always use snippets from the interview. Sometimes, the interviewer would say "direct quote" and read the quote from the interviewee rather than playing part of the actual interview.
- The author almost never gave a structured introduction. Instead, they just started talking. Once they got everything flowing well they then introduced themselves. It makes the beginning far more interesting, but it also works with introducing interviewees.
- Music is also used to signal a mood shift, not just a topic shift. It shows how you feel about the subject, how the interviewee feels about it, or how you believe the audience perceives the topic.

There many resources that provide guidelines for "writing for the ear" (Grech, n.d.; Phillips, 2011). In short, help students understand that our cultural expectations for sounded compositions are much different than written ones, impacting our engagement with their material. Even those who choose to alpha-write their audio ethnographies will need to "write for the ear" not the eye.

Some of my advice includes the following:

- **Show, don't tell.** Help us to hear-see moments in your data that led you to your conclusions. Tell stories, include participants' voices and soundscape clips. Take us there through the affordances of soundwriting.
- **Less is more.** To compose this audio essay, you'll be forced to narrow the scope of what you're examining. You simply do not have the same amount of space in a 3–5-minute essay that you would in a 10-page paper. So, choose the golden ticket item(s) that are most interesting.
- **Write for temporality.** If arrangement is important in writing, it is even more important aurally. Your listener can't "flip back" or "forward" spatially if we lose focus; the audio will keep playing. Your listener will need to be able to follow your ideas as they unfold over time. Use keywords, transitions, keynote sounds to help us follow the essay.
- **Pace yourself.** While you may write your essay first, don't simply click record and start reading. Certainly, that will be recipe for a) mind numbing essay at a b) breakneck pace. Use [silence/noise/pauses] to give listeners a chance to mull a complex idea or transition between ideas. Likewise, don't be afraid of picking up the pace when you want to build to a compelling idea or increase anticipation/excitement.
- **Be accessible.** Aim for language that is easy to hear and understand. Avoid jargon. If you choose to use academese, explain it simply. Don't be afraid of short, everyday words, simple sentences, contractions; be conversational.