

Writing Spaces Assignments & Activities Archive

Our Sonically-Composed Worlds

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Overview

The activity is meant to encourage thinking about sonic pollution in our world and about the rhetorical nature of such pollution. It could also move into other sonic topics: effects of noise on hospital care, effects of anthropogenic noise on the natural world, how military sonic technologies have affected and continue to affect our sonic surroundings, etc. (see “Further Reading” below for some sources to help students pursue further research in these sonic ideas and others). I use it as an invention activity to help students develop research topics.

I base this activity on composer John Cage’s notion that everything we hear is “noise” (3), but the contexts in which we hear help us consciously and subconsciously define what we hear as “noise” or as something else (e.g., we often define pleasing noises as “music”). One goal is to help students develop a critical ear so that they may rhetorically analyze their sonic environments (soundscapes). I have students complete the first listening portion on the second day of an introductory course on sonic rhetorics, but it may easily fit at any point in your course.

The activity presumes some basic terms about sound (such as pitch, ambient, harmonious, and discordant) that may need some definition beforehand. Additionally, this activity presumes some common FYC concepts will have already been addressed either in this course or in previous courses.

Time Commitment

1 class session

Materials

Materials needed include: your preferred word processor, a

sound recording device (a cellphone will suffice – optional, but useful), and three or more different spaces in which to listen to ambient noise

Activity Process

- First, read Wagner and listen to Austwick (see “Works Cited” below) before the first day of the class activity.
- Then, begin the class listening for an agreed-upon amount of time (3 minutes should suffice). As you listen, note the quality of each identifiable sound that you hear, e.g., its loudness, its pitch (high, medium, low), how frequently you hear it, how long the sound lasts, whether it’s harmonious or discordant and any other qualities that come to mind.
- Next, describe where the sound originates. How near or far is the sound? Is the sound human-created, “natural,” or not determinable?
- Finally, conduct an in-class analysis and discussion of findings, in groups of 3-5 students. Choose a discussion leader and note taker. What similarities and differences were heard, especially if students were in the same space? What do you think accounts for these similarities and differences? In other words, does it seem like everyone listened in the same way? Finally, would you characterize the sound you hear as “noise”? What makes it sound like “noise” or like something else to you?
- After the class meeting, ask students to repeat the second and third bulleted steps above in at least two other spaces.
- Before the next class meeting, each student develops three potential research questions/directions by reflecting on the in-class listening and discussion by doing the following: 1) conducting more ambient noise listening sessions in at least two different spaces, and 2) listening to Parson (found in “Works Cited” below).

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain a further understanding of drafting, writing, and revising written work
- Develop stronger and more flexible rhetorical invention strategies that apply their lived experiences
- Think critically about the sonic elements of their worlds and how those elements converse with more traditional rhetorical forms (and learn that the sonic has been a longtime component of rhetorical practice)

Learning Accommodations

- The first in-class listening may be done in f2f, hyflex, synchronous, or asynchronous class meetings. The discussions and feedback sessions may also be done in whichever modality works best for the classroom situation.
- Students may choose from two different forms of participation in this activity, as a discussion leader or note-taker, in order to maximize engagement and accommodate different learning styles.

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Further Reading

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