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## Toward a Pedagogy of Materially Engaged Listening

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**Abstract:** As writing teachers increasingly engage students with audio media, it has become crucial to coach listening explicitly in the classroom, activities that students may otherwise approach passively. In this article I suggest that a rhetorical approach applicable to (or derived from) print texts is not enough to help students listen actively, and offer instead a materially engaged practice of listening that helps students to understand their interactions with compositions on a material level that involves bodily activity. My proposed pedagogy moves students toward a reflective awareness of their practices, encourages purposeful listening, and acknowledges the role that attention plays in listening. Such a pedagogy can help students to engage with audio compositions on their own terms, encourage them to understand listening as a dynamic practice with critical heft worthy of their time and attention, and open insights into affordances of sound that are obscured by print-centric approaches.

Recently I taught an elective digital composing course at my university, the first course I had taught that was entirely focused around digital literacies. In addition to creating video, audio, and web-based compositions, I asked students in the course to interact with—or to read, listen to, view—course materials that ran the gamut from traditional print genres (book chapters, scholarly articles) to radio podcasts, video clips, and experimental new media webtexts. As I open all my courses with explicit conversations on rhetorical reading strategies and thought a rhetorical frame would be useful for students approaching nonprint modes, in the first week of class we discussed a go-to reading of mine, Karen Rosenberg’s chapter “Reading Games: Strategies for Reading Scholarly Sources,” from the open-access textbook *Writing Spaces*. Rosenberg frames rhetorical reading as “a set of practices designed to help us understand how texts work and to engage more deeply and fully in a conversation that extends beyond the boundaries of any particular reading” (212), and the conversations her chapter inspires are largely organized around strategies for first recognizing the rhetorical situation—identifying the intended audience, discovering the main argument, observing how the composer situates herself within a larger conversation, and so on—and then adjusting reading practices accordingly. Rosenberg grounds these rhetorical moves in suggested practices like reading the abstract, paying attention to section headings, or using the introduction to discern the structure and direction of the text.

Because Rosenberg (like many other scholars and textbook editors) frames reading as a rhetorical practice, my rationale for assigning her article in a class where only half of our “readings” would be made up of traditional print texts was my thinking, my *insistence*, that these ideas could travel. I thought that over the ensuing weeks my students would see connections between purposeful, rhetorically aware interactions with scholarly print texts and purposeful, rhetorically aware interactions with audio media, like podcasts from NPR.<sup>{1}</sup> But this transfer did not happen: it seemed that our rhetorical—and on reflection, medium-specific—conversations around reading in the first week of the semester were not enough to help students to critically and productively engage with audio media. For despite our discussions on active, rhetorical reading strategies, I found that students in my course had trouble making it through the length of a podcast and missed crucial details that betrayed they hadn’t paid close attention while listening. In fact, in talking with them I discovered that they were browsing the internet, even trying to read other texts, while listening to class assignments and so were tuning out what they were listening to.<sup>{2}</sup>

I discovered that semester that for my students to be successful listeners, my instruction had to go beyond rhetorical interactions with a composition; it was also necessary to help students consider the very nature of the medium as well as what listening might require of them in terms of bodily activity. And so while I agree with the prevailing wisdom that writing instructors should introduce to students the rhetorical layers of engaging with compositions like recognizing how composers reach their intended audiences or discovering a composer’s main intervention in a

conversation, I argue that there is not enough in a rhetorical approach applicable to (or derived from) print texts alone to help students shift their activities and disrupt their passivity. Students also need to understand how listening is intimately connected to the materiality of audio media and therefore demands bodily interactions related to but fundamentally different from reading. In a way, my argument echoes a key concern that Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes express in their book *On Multimodality*. We have not yet sufficiently embraced multimodality on its own terms, they write, and instead limit multimedia with print-centric perspectives:

our embrace of new and multimedia for composing often ignores the unique rhetorical capabilities of different media ... [and] we often elide such considerations—consciously or not—in order to colonize the production of multimedia texts with more print-driven compositional aims, biases, and predispositions. In the process, we hamper our students' appreciation of and ability to manipulate multimedia texts. (19)(3)

To impose text-centric frames onto multimodal work, as I did by coaching listening through a reading model, is to ignore the material differences, affordances, and constraints of nonprint media; and students need to understand these differences in order to engage with these compositions productively. Or, to put this all another way: a rhetorical framing influenced by print texts is a start, but unless it is paired with an awareness of the materiality of audio compositions and the bodily activities of listening—like considering one's listening environment or what to do with one's body while listening (e.g., walking, cleaning, sitting still)—students may have difficulty developing effective material listening practices. Such material practices are crucial for helping students pay attention to the form and affordances of the mode and for helping them to see listening as an active, dynamic practice with critical heft that is worthy of their time and attention.

Indeed, though listening is a familiar practice for our students, I found that students in my digital composing course had limited experience in parsing audio media in critical, analytic ways—something I was slow to realize in my early efforts to teach audio compositions. While students typically spend twelve years before coming to college learning strategies for approaching a print text (like sitting in a distraction-free space, annotating, or reading in multiple passes with varying speeds), I found that students in my digital composing course had naturalized as passive their engagements with the kinds of audio compositions (like interview clips and podcasts of *Radiolab* and *This American Life*, to name a few) that seem to appear more and more in college writing classrooms, whether or not they are courses explicitly centered on digital and/or multimodal forms of composing. For example, the first-year composition curriculum at my institution asks students to recast their research papers into a new, often multimodal, form; such an assignment is benefitted by—perhaps even necessitates—modeling through examples. And for instructors like me who are coming to listening without an explicit research background in sonic rhetorics or with limited experience teaching nonprint texts in writing classrooms, it is crucial that we continue to develop pedagogical frames for teaching listening.

To that end, I argue in this article for supporting student engagement with audio compositions through a pedagogy of materially engaged listening. This pedagogy views listening as a materially sensitive practice that involves bodies and responds to material objects. Its aims are to move students toward awareness of (and careful reflections on) their listening habits; to encourage students to listen with purpose; to acknowledge the role that attention plays in engaging with audio media; and to consider the affordances of sound. By building such a pedagogy, we can help students to engage with audio compositions on their own terms, which may not only help shift their bodily activity when listening in more effective directions but also open possible insights into affordances of sound that are obscured by print-centric approaches.

After exploring current scholarship in sonic rhetorics and listening pedagogies, I will establish that the material differences between audio and print texts call for medium-specific instruction in listening. Then I look to my digital composing class and present both my recollections of an in-class discussion about listening and also student reflections on their listening practices, which they wrote following that same discussion. Finally, I outline some suggestions for classroom practice that point students toward material engagement with audio compositions.

## Increased Attention to Listening in Rhetoric and Composition

Recent years have seen increased attention paid to the creation, comprehension, and analysis of audio media by scholars in rhetoric and composition. Particular evidence of this growing interest are special issues of *Computers and Composition Online* (in fall 2006) and *Harlot* (in spring 2013; Stone and Ceraso) dedicated, respectively, to sound and sonic rhetorics. In addition to work by Cynthia Selfe and by Michelle Comstock and Mary E. Hocks that calls for bringing aurality and sonic literacies, respectively, into composition classrooms, newer work by Katherine Fargo Ahern and Steph Ceraso has called for imagining new ways of teaching students to create, as well as listen to, sound

(Ahern; Ceraso; Ceraso and Ahern). As well, feminist theorists have taken up listening, both as a metaphor and as a literal practice (Ratcliffe; Ratcliffe and Glenn). And this is all to say nothing of the traditions in communications (perhaps unfamiliar to many of us in rhetoric and composition—certainly they were to me, until recently) that have addressed listening for some time.<sup>[4]</sup> Taken together, this body of work addresses the importance of including aural literacy in classrooms as one composing mode among many and considers the specific capacities that sound has for creating meaning and affecting audiences. Selfe, for instance, notes that speech “conveys a great deal of meaning through pace, volume, rhythm, emphasis, and tone of voice as well as through words themselves” (633), and Comstock and Hocks observe that “music and voice set mood, create drama, and fill in emotional gaps of the visual picture”; better understanding these affordances can make students both better composers and better listeners.

The pedagogy I offer in this article extends this body of work by considering how a material, embodied listening practice might be cultivated. Much of the literature I review here argues for building student awareness of how a voice fits into a cultural soundscape or of sound’s rhetorical effects for listeners; I ask, how might we coach students’ bodily *activities* of listening to bring them *toward* such awareness? Comstock and Hocks, for instance, crucially remind us that while hearing is unconscious, listening is “an art” that necessitates actively focusing and observing and “requires skill and practice” to do well; I take this as a reminder that making practical decisions about, say, where to listen (e.g., somewhere crowded or quiet), what technologies mediate that listening experience (e.g. headphones or speakers), or how the body is involved in listening (eyes open or closed, walking around or staying still, and so on) take time, experience, and coaching to do well. In this way, my materially engaged pedagogy is in line with calls to move beyond semiotic understandings of listening and include embodied perspectives—like Ceraso’s “(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences,” which offers “the concept of *multimodal listening* to expand how we think about and practice listening as a situated, full-bodied act” and teach students to be more aware of sound’s effect on their feelings and behaviors (103). As well, Ahern’s “Tuning the Sonic Playing Field” outlines a “tuning” pedagogy for auditory rhetoric, which combines an acoustic approach (that describes the sounds themselves) with a phenomenological approach or students’ “embodied experience of listening” (82). Along these lines, an interest in how embodied awareness and experiences played out for students in my digital composing course is what propelled the discussion on listening that I detail later in this article. In the section after next, I move toward this aim by developing a working model of listening as a material, embodied practice. Then I support those observations with reflections from students in my digital composing course; but first, I will briefly address the context of the digital composing course and how I solicited and collected student reflections.

## Course Context

Like much of the art of teaching, my research for this piece was emergent. About two-thirds of the way through the semester, I asked students to listen to an episode of *This American Life*, “#1 Party School,” for homework. We were starting to think about the final project—which students had the option of completing in many different forms, one of which was an audio and/or video documentary—and so I wanted them to have some models of the possibilities for audio documentaries. Although I had neglected to coach their listening practices in a material-specific way (for instance, I did not ask them to think about what it feels like to listen to something for an extended period of time, or advise them to carefully consider their listening environment), I did try to guide their listening rhetorically by asking them to listen to the podcast and to come to class with observations on how the subject matter of the episode was documented (tweeting at least two of these responses, using the class hashtag).

But the next class period I found they had little of substance to say about the episode and had difficulty recalling specifics. Recognizing an opportunity to fill a gap in my teaching and scholarship, I off the cuff disclosed that I was developing some research on listening and asked them to spend some time unpacking their listening practices for me. I wanted to know what it was like for them to listen to the assigned podcast: did they take notes? Or just sit back and listen? Where did they listen, and what were they doing at the same time? Do they feel that there is a similarity between how they approach reading a print text and listening to an audio composition? Do they value the two media forms differently? I wanted to know why this assignment seemed to be such a challenge. Perhaps factors like the rhythms of the semester (we were in Week 10, after all) or their unfamiliarity with the show (which they divulged in that day’s discussion; I assume this extends to the genre of radio documentaries more broadly) explained many of their difficulties, but still I suspected I had not done enough to coach their listening practices and wanted to know more about, as we often say in teaching, “where they were” with their listening practices.

These questions prompted a lively in-class discussion, parts of which I have anecdotally characterized throughout this paper. Then, I asked students to reflect on the same questions we had just talked about in writing. Students typed out their reflections on their computers and had the option of either keeping that writing private or emailing it to me with the consented understanding that I would use their comments for research and publication. The quoted

student reflections you will read in the next section of this paper come from those conversations and reflections, and I present their words anonymously and with their permission. Of the seven students who attended class that day (of the nine students enrolled at that point in the semester), four students chose to send me their writing;<sup>{5}</sup> one student was a sophomore, two were juniors, and one was a senior, and their majors included fine art, communications, and photojournalism.

Looking back on that conversation, I recognize I may have inadvertently shaped student reflections. Because we discussed their self-identified tendencies to multitask in class, there is a bit of bias toward that finding in their responses (indeed, all four students mention it in their written responses). Even though they were the ones to first bring it up in class, I am wondering—now that I read back over their words—if my line of questioning encouraged them to agree with that premise on multitasking. As well, my decision to collect responses at the end of our discussion meant students wrote their reflections once they had had the opportunity to “warm up” during our discussion; while I think this resulted in more detailed responses than I would have gotten earlier in the class period, the drawback is that it potentially created a false agreement between respondents. That is, perhaps I would have seen a wider variety of views represented if I had collected responses at the beginning of class, before they had heard from their peers and come to an agreement of sorts about their multitasking.

Nonetheless, their responses provide an illuminating perspective on “where they are” with their listening and watching practices. I am not claiming that their responses are fully representative of student experiences with audio media, though I do suggest that they provide a compelling mini-portrait of student experiences we may encounter in the classroom and that we might build on in future research.

## A Materially Sensitive, Embodied Practice

Our reading habits and practices are learned, not innate, and what is more we cannot (as I first did) expect students to simply transfer the rhetorical/contextual print reading skills they have developed over the course of twelve to sixteen years of schooling to a new material context like audio media. Textual interaction is a materially sensitive practice that responds to the medium at hand, and so alongside rhetorical framings we need to better emphasize the material-embodied nature of practices like listening, reading, and viewing.

Writing is material and technologized (Banks; Haas; Wysocki), a capacity that has been readily recognized in digital environments (e.g., Hayles, *Writing Machines*) but perhaps is less recognized in the naturalized page of written words. But even the page itself is a material presence. In “The Page as a Unit of Discourse: Notes toward a Counterhistory for Writing Studies,” John Trimbur and Karen Press write that the page, “a fundamental feature of print culture,” has been taken for granted by writing studies (94), which has prevented us from fully recognizing how the page is actually “active and alive, with its own invisible understructures and semiotic potentialities” (112). Accordingly, Trimbur and Press hold that, as an object of study, the page opens up inquiries into the history of print culture, design, and the rhetorics of texts. Similarly, in “What Should Be An Unforgettable Face ...,” Anne Wysocki and Julia I. Jasken argue that interfaces (which encompass all the things we inscribe) are not “transparent” or “invisible” but instead “actively shape not only what we see on a computer screen but also anyone who sits down to work at that screen” (32-3). And a recognition of the interactive nature of screens and their effects on how we think and read has been a central preoccupation of N. Katherine Hayles (e.g., *How We Think*). In short, when we naturalize, or look “through,” the interfaces of print pages and screens, we lose the opportunity to open up perspectives on interacting with and composing texts that are connected to bodies, objects, tools, modalities, and technologies. An approach to interaction that is sensitive to texts as material objects can make visible the importance of these material agents in the composing process.

For illustration, consider how the body encourages particular reading habits. In alphabetic-based reading, all of the text on the page (or over a two-page spread, or on the screen) is available to see all at once, allowing a reader to jump around as necessary. While the nature of alphabetic writing of course encourages a linear progression, a reader can backtrack (over a sentence, paragraph) without doing much more than moving her eyes, making it easy to retrace her steps over previous sentences and paragraphs if she loses her place or feels her line of thought slipping away from her. In contrast, audio materials have a more fleeting temporal nature; the composition is not necessarily laid out visually on the page. And so in order to do the same backtracking when listening to an audio track, a student wanting to replay a portion of an audio recording has to move her hand to a mouse, trackpad, or keyboard shortcut in order to navigate a scrub bar—which may or may not use concrete or abstract visual representations like timestamps (concrete) or soundwaves (abstract). Given how much more involved the whole body needs to be in backtracking on an audio composition, as well as how much more difficult it can be to accurately navigate to any specific point, I argue that breaking the linear progression of an audio composition is a more significant interruption than are breaks in the reading process (particularly for able-bodied readers).<sup>{6}</sup> Moreover, it is

also possible that students often view listening to radio broadcasts (which are linear) and the like as background activities, something that you would not typically interrupt; a perhaps relevant analogy is my memories of learning to annotate as a high school student, a practice I initially resented (and so avoided) because it interrupted my reading process, making it more time-consuming as well as challenging. As well, as sound is processed primarily through the ears, it is possible to listen (or at least, to hear—which Comstock and Hocks distinguish from listening as unconscious) while seeing, moving, or doing things with one's hands; it is imperative that we help students to consider how such activities affect their listening.

Attention to the material-embodied realities of engaging with audio could be instructive for students in setting up their scenes of listening: when I asked students in my digital composing class what their listening environment looked like (something I had failed to draw their attention to *before* they tackled their listening assignment), most informed me that they were multitasking. They were browsing the internet, or working on other homework assignments at the same time. One student, Alex, [\[7\]](#) wrote, “As for listening, the environment doesn't matter as much, at least not in the same way that my reading environment matters. I often feel the need to multitask when I'm listening to something but I can only do certain activities that don't require much thinking such as cleaning or driving.” Yet, despite that last claim—that she only engages in tasks that “don't require much thinking” when listening—she goes on to say, “If I'm just sitting at my computer listening to something I feel the urge to start browsing the internet or I see that I've received an email and get focused on replying etc.” Browsing the internet or replying to an email are, in my experience, fairly consuming activities; when I engage in these acts I tune out sounds around me, particularly word-based sounds like conversations, music lyrics, or news radio shows. Alex seems to recognize this difficulty in multitasking when *reading print texts*: she noted that “[i]n order to really focus on reading [print texts], I either need to be in a very silent environment or I need to be in a place where there is enough constant noise for me to tune it out. ... I really can't do any sort of multitasking when I read.” But despite her need to eliminate audio distractions while reading, she does not regard reading emails or internet browsing as a distraction interfering with her *listening*.

Another student, Theo, wrote very similar observations: “When I am reading [print texts], I need to be fully engaged in the text. Quiet room, taking notes, etc. Every once in awhile, I lie to myself and say that I can be watching TV or listening to music, but that never works out.” Theo continues, “When I am listening to something, I end up multitasking, and while I am able to comprehend what I am listening to, I think it would be better to just listen to it by itself as far as comprehension.” I suspect that this last point of Theo's—a self-aware reflection that he *could* listen more closely if he had more focused listening habits—holds true for Alex, as well. Indeed, when we opened up conversation about the podcast, the first point of discussion was student complaints about how difficult it was to pay attention to an hour-long podcast of what I consider to be one of the most entertaining episodes of *This American Life* (“#1 Party School” is centered around the party culture of Penn State University). This surprised me; students had had more success following (and initiating lively conversation around) somewhat challenging print readings earlier in the semester, like a chapter from Ann Berthoff's *Forming/Thinking/Writing*, a *Kairos* webtext exploring the conceptualization and construction of a digital archive (Neal, Bridgman, and McElroy), and the UCLA “Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0.” But when it came to discussing the *This American Life* episode, students had difficulty bringing details, let alone any kind of carefully considered analysis or opinion, into our conversation. Instead, our discussion centered around complaints about the depiction of students (a depiction I see as based on the surface of the episode and not its real substance). But I have come to realize there are several possible explanations for this difficulty.

One difficulty is that students may have very little first-hand experience with the challenges of sustained listening (bear in mind that all three acts combined of *This American Life* typically run an hour long). Indeed, a consideration I neglected to explore with students in class was how often they have listened to something as long as an hour-long *This American Life* podcast, something that surely exacerbated the embodied issues I have described. A second difficulty I neglected to consider was the intellectual and physical challenges that listening poses for most everyone, including professionals (think of how antsy a room gets when a keynote speaker runs over their allotted time, or of the fifty minute runtime for most fiction and poetry readings). In fact, I unreflectively assumed students would find listening an enjoyable “break” from our reading assignments and not the unfamiliar and critical challenge it actually was for them. And third, I did not anticipate that students would multitask while they listened (though in hindsight it makes sense, as most of us listen to the radio while driving or doing tasks around our homes), which is why I found Alex and Theo's acknowledgements of their multitasking so illuminating. As Cathy Davidson reminds us in *Now You See It*, “attention blindness is the fundamental structuring principle of the brain”: we naturally focus in on what is most important to us because otherwise, “the world is chaos: there's simply too much to see, hear, and understand” (2). In other words, trying to read or think about something else, or at least something else complex, while listening may be too taxing for our natural processing functions. And while the work of Stacy Pigg, for example, has shown that writers often successfully integrate habitual multitasking into their writing process, we have not yet seen studies that show that such multitasking is helpful for engaging with texts as readers, listeners, or viewers. While it is possible to listen while cooking or commuting (and in fact I know I find that I listen more attentively while walking or driving), it is very

difficult, if not impossible, to both listen and read with full attention. And I suspect that because students are accustomed to focusing on reading while tuning out sounds around them, it was hard for them to reverse their focus and pay attention to audio.

Another student, James, makes the interesting observation that “just” listening does not feel like a sufficiently substantial activity:

When you're listening to something all you have to do is listen and process what you are hearing. You can be in any environment, you are free to do so much, your hands are free so you feel like you should be doing something. I almost feel selfish or lazy if i [sic] am just listening to something, i feel like i could be getting something else accomplished. However, if i try to watch something while listening to something else i completely miss what i am listening to and have to keep rewinding in order to try and get what i missed.

I find James’s comments very significant—he gives me the impression that he feels expected to engage more significantly, that listening in and of itself is not a deep-enough engagement. And when he follows this impulse by attempting to multitask he, as a result, cannot maintain enough attention to follow the line of argument or thought developed in an audio composition. Part of me wonders how much of James’s opinion was formed by the academy’s privileging of print over other modes of expression; alternatively, it might also be a recognition that textual engagement is supposed to be an active process and that listening on its own—or perhaps more accurately, *the ways in which* he listens—does not feel active enough for him.

The final student of the four who shared writing with me, Dylan, seemed to come away from our conversation with the view that when listening there is a real *need* to multitask that does not exist for print reading. He wrote, “I think the most interesting difference between reading and listening to audio is our need to multitask. When I am reading I am complacent with simply do[ing] nothing else.” He further characterized reading as more difficult than listening, as something that “is not only more physically challenging but ... takes more mental effort. However when I listen to a recording I feel like I am not getting enough done if I do not attempt other tasks.” The perceived increase in difficulty when reading for me points again to the different ways in which students come to value compositions in other modes: they see listening as less taxing, something that can be done at the same time as other tasks. Dylan notes that he can “take in visuals” while listening (though “any background noise will distract me very easily”), whereas he says of reading, “I can do nothing else while reading, if I am listening to audio at the same time I will begin to substitute the words [I am reading] with what I am hearing. I also find myself reading paragraphs without actually processing the information.”

In all, students in my digital composing class noted that listening to words and reading words on a page are competing modalities that they cannot do simultaneously when their primary goal is to read a print text. What I find strange is that they do not see these two acts as competing in the same way when the primary goal is to listen to an audio composition; if the two overlapping acts are the same, why do they see a difference in their ability to multitask? I believe there is no difference. That is, multitasking with more mindful tasks (ones that take more attention than, say, driving or cleaning) changes their interactions with audio media, just as it does with print texts, particularly in an academic setting and with informative, word-heavy genres. But what *is* different are students’ attitudes toward and relationships with these audio texts, attitudes and relationships potentially fostered by the fact that listening (in and of itself) does not necessarily involve the eyes or the hands, freeing the body to take on extra tasks if the listener so desires. While I do not want to condemn multitasking, which has long been a reality of our everyday lives, I do want to build student *awareness* of their multitasking capabilities so that they are conscious of what they are noticing and what they are tuning out when engaged in particular environments or activities. This awareness of their attention toward audio media is something we have the ability to address, coach, and consider in the classroom with students, and I believe that a materially engaged approach can lead to a more active listening and watching experience. For indeed, these four reflections indicate a passive listening experience: despite my setting up the rationale behind assigning the podcast in class beforehand (i.e., seeing the podcast as a model of documentary moves), students in my course were clearly viewing the goal of their listening as simply enduring the length of the recording and making it to the end rather than noticing the details in what was said, how the episode was constructed, how it told a story, what kinds of evidence and artifacts were brought in, and any number of other concerns. In what follows, I explore some potential remedies to this disconnect.

## **Toward a Pedagogy of Materially-Engaged Listening**

Informed by the student reflections I discussed in the previous section, I propose a pedagogy that capitalizes on the unique sensory and embodied aspects of listening. I build this pedagogy by developing students’ awareness of their

listening practices, giving them a working vocabulary for listening, and helping them to more actively “speak back” to what they hear.

### 1. Students need to develop a self-awareness of how they engage with compositions

In my experience—and teaching a literacy analysis essay in intermediate composition has made this very visible for me—the first difficulty in asking students to reflect on their interactions with compositions is asking them to see their practices as strange. That is, the students I have worked with tend to see practices like reading as something they (and everyone else) can simply do, as something universal and undifferentiated. And so I begin discussions about reading print texts in my writing courses by asking students to think about the contextual nature of their practices: how they learned how to read, who taught them, where they came from, what they had access to, and other social-material considerations that affect their literacies. I would advocate for doing the same with listening to help students see these practices as differentiated, learned, contextual, as well as active. Ceraso echoes this in her article when she writes, “To develop as listeners, students need to unlearn the listening practices that they have become accustomed to in their everyday lives. We need to find ways to defamiliarize these habitual practices—to make them strange again” (112).

I suggest we initiate that process of “making strange” by beginning with something students are already familiar thinking about and doing in the context of school: their reading practices. Below are questions that might guide a discussion of students’ material and embodied experiences interacting with course texts:

- How do you progress through a text (linearly? Doubling back at key points? Skimming or scanning before reading closely)?
- Do you vary your reading speed at different places? How much time do you spend with a text when reading for academic purposes (as opposed to, say, reading for pleasure, in other situations)?
- What material triggers in a text (e.g., boldfacing, particular words or phrases, call-out text boxes) cause you to annotate the text, to stop and take notes, or to otherwise stop and take notice of some kind of resonance?
- How do you physically hold a text? (For instance, are you more likely to sit with a book on a desk, where it is easy to write alongside the text or to turn pages? Or are you more likely, say, to recline with a text, holding it up with one hand while lying back?) How does that affect how you read?
- Where do you like to read? What does that environment look like, sound like, and/or feel like?
- Do you employ any other strategies in order to find the main point of a text, or to “see” what’s happening?

For instructors, conversations shared around these questions can be enlightening, developing our understanding of what students are doing (and how that compares with what we *assume* they are doing) in their reading lives. For students, such conversations can demonstrate the hard work involved in navigating and parsing a text, as well as help them to break down and consider the varied, layered strategies they employ when undertaking the more familiar task of reading print texts. But even more importantly, these questions encourage students’ awareness of reading as a material, embodied practice.

Then, having laid this groundwork through reading—in other words, using reading as a bridge—we can help students to become more self-aware listeners. Below are some questions I have developed, many through my own experiences learning how to listen carefully to music as a trained classical violinist. Having noted the usefulness of keywords for talking about critical reading (e.g., “topic sentences,” “boldfacing”), I offer a working vocabulary below for discussing listening. Because students will find varying levels of musical lexicon accessible to them as individuals (Ahern), I offer both music-specific and more general keywords here (e.g., in one question both “tempo” and “pacing” are offered). That is, the exact terms students use to describe what they hear is not what is important; what matters is learning different ways to categorize and break down sound.

Questions we might ask students:

- Consider the various elements (like tone of voice, background or transitional music, and/or ambient sound) used in the piece:
  - How would you describe their use? (How often are they used? How are they layered?)
  - How do they influence your perceptions of the piece? Your affective relationship to the piece?
- How about the use of dynamics, how loud or soft the piece is? (Are there contrasts? Crescendos/builds, decrescendos/decreases?)
- What effects does the tempo and/or pacing of the piece have?
- Do sounds evoke memories or associations for you? (How do those memories or associations intersect with the message of the piece for you?)
- Does the way this piece sounds influence the way the message(s) of the piece came across to you? (In other words, can you imagine receiving the message(s) of the piece differently if it was written on a page? Or in

- some other mode?)
- What expectations did you bring to this piece—how did you think it would sound, what did you think it would include, how would it be structured, and so on? (In other words, how would you define the genre this piece fits into, and what do you know about the typical patterns of that genre?)
  - How do you typically interact with pieces of this kind?
  - How might your expectations for the genre have affected your listening experience?
- How do you bodily listen? (Eyes open, closed? Do you notice vibrations? Where are they located in your body?)
- Did you move around or stay still while listening? (And, how does your understanding of and relationship to the piece change if you try doing something new with your body during your listening session—e.g., walking and listening if you hadn't before?)

These questions also point to some potentially useful comparison-contrast exercises, like asking students to both read and listen to a reading of a text and describe the different relationships they had with each mode of the piece.

## 2. Students need to understand the ways that listening involves the body and examine the role attention plays in these processes

Related to the conversations I outline above is discussing with students the role that attention plays in listening to audio media—something that I think that, through years of experience, many have already figured out for themselves with print texts. My students, for instance, noted that they took entirely different approaches to setting up their print reading environments (e.g., many noted they needed a quiet room to block out distractions) and their listening environments (most didn't go to a place associated with “work,” but simply listened in their rooms; they didn't consider the level of distraction they can handle in their environment; etc.). And because listening is more temporally fleeting and takes on a different level of bodily engagement—again, eyes can't backtrack over the page if they miss a phrase; students have to move to rewind and relisten or else they might miss a crucial detail—I think that it takes a different kind of attention and energy than reading does.

Despite having assigned the podcast along with a rationale (asking students to notice how the episode models audio documentary moves) and instructions to respond to the episode on Twitter, what I heard from my students after they had listened to an episode of *This American Life* was that they sensed that sitting there in a quiet room and listening wasn't enough—they felt the need to do something at the same time. Dylan wrote that while he was typically content to read without multitasking, “when I listen to a recording I feel like I am not getting enough done if I do not attempt other tasks.” Alex responded to this same impulse by browsing the Internet. What these behaviors said to me was that students sensed the need to more actively interact with the podcast in some way. But instead of recognizing their listening practices as *passive* (as something that could be made more active), they saw listening as something that did not *need* attention, that could be done with half an ear on a podcast and half an eye on Facebook. They either didn't know how or needed reminding that notetaking, say, would be productive to their listening experience.

To help students recognize what's involved in productively listening, instructors might have students spend some time, perhaps in a commonplace book<sup>[8]</sup> or course journal, reflecting on and/or logging their listening practices. The following are example prompts a student might consider:

### 1. How did your listening go? Possible questions to address:

- How hard/easy was it to sustain your attention and follow along? Did any tools you used or other people/animals/things around you affect how hard or easy this was?
- Did the composition leave you with memorable moments? What made them memorable for you?
- Did you come away from your listening session with opinions, with something to say? What are those opinions, and why was the piece so thought-provoking for you?
- Have you listened like this (for this amount of time, to something this complex, etc.) before? How was this similar or different to what you typically listen to?

### 2. Describe your bodily approach to listening.

- Did you keep your eyes open or shut?
- Did you stay still? Move around? Complete tasks or chores at the same time? (You may find it helpful to compare/contrast your body with how you read...)
- Did you listen through once from beginning to end? Listen multiple times? Pause partway? Rewind and relisten to small snippets?

### 3. Describe the setup of your listening environment.



- What did it look like?
- What did it feel like, sound like?
- Does it differ from your reading environment (and if so, how)?
- What impact, if any, do you think your listening environment had on your experience with the composition?

#### 4. Describe the technology(ies) that mediated your listening experience.

- Did you listen through headphones? Or through the speaker on your phone? On your computer's speakers?
- How did the technology you used affect what you heard? How you heard?
- Did the technology afford any opportunities in your listening, or constrain you? (E.g., perhaps headphones allowed you to move around outside or in different rooms?)

Questions such as these may help students more fully to comprehend the ways in which their listening and watching practices are attentive, embodied, and embedded in material environments. They also might help students to find bodily activities that complement, rather than compete with, their listening (like walking, driving, cleaning, or crafting hobbies like knitting—to name a few that have helped me in my own listening practices).

### 3. Learning to “speak back”: The dialectical soundbook

One of the gains we have made in the field is theorizing reading as an active process of making meaning, which David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky frame as learning to “speak back” to a text. I would like now to consider some ways of extending this metaphor for active practice to audio media.

One way of creating this bridge might be asking students to try an audio twist on what may be already familiar to *Composition Forum* readers, a dialectical notebook (as outlined by Ann Berthoff). In its original print form, the notebook essentially is a page divided into two columns: on the left the writer records concrete details and on the right the writer then responds to, or dialogues with, those observations. While working with a print-based notetaking strategy has the benefit of allowing a student to record what is temporally fleeting, I think an audio twist on the dialectical notebook further emphasizes the importance and weight of these modes (potentially helping students to value them as highly as they value the meaning-making capacities of print). Students could take multiple passes through an audio recording to represent the columns of the print-based dialectical notebook: first audio recording their concrete observations, then listening back to the audio recording of their notes and noting what they reflected on while listening to those first observations. This second pass could be done by annotating the original audio track by using the SoundCloud platform, which allows students to upload a recording and then insert annotations at specific moments on the track. This method would be more time-consuming than a print-based dialectical notebook but potentially fosters even more productive thinking for students by encouraging them to slow down and sit with their thoughts for a longer period of time.

As scaffolding is built right into the structure of this method—asking students to first make concrete observations, then more abstract responses, and finally to reflect and note the interactions between the two—it is, in my experiences teaching print versions of the dialectical notebook, a user-friendly way “in” for students not used to interacting with these media more critically. When I have used dialectical notebooks, we first do an example together as a class, and I remind students that no observation is too insignificant or too big. As well, we talk about how those small moments of noticing can help them speak back to a composition. In all, the dialectical notebook (and now the dialectical soundbook) helps them begin to see a composition as made and lays bare how the composer has made decisions that shaped the composition they see in front of them. Dialectical notebooks and soundbooks also have the advantage of potentially mimicking a conversational annotation practice a student might have already developed for working with print texts, which again involves bodies: just as they might underline, highlight, or jot down notes in margins with print texts, dialectical notebooks and soundbooks increase whole-body participation through note-taking and response (or in the case of my twist, through speaking about their observations and typing SoundCloud comments in response).

## Conclusion

While a print-based rhetorical framing for listening is a useful starting point for helping students to break down sound, medium-specific instruction calls sharper attention to how sound can work on us audience members in ways that print cannot. Thus these three pedagogical suggestions all call attention to the material affordances of audio media, such as the layering of elements like voices, instrumentation, and/or background noise to create different textures; the ways tempo, tone, or arrangements, for example, might inflect meaning or create emphasis; the ways in which sound resonates in bodies and moves bodies, or the ways in which our bodies affect what and how we hear; or the emotional evocations and associational powers of music and voices. By providing students with tools for

understanding, recognizing, and analyzing how audio compositions operate differently than print media, they are better able to harness those affordances when producing audio compositions themselves. However, the aim of my pedagogical intervention is not to stop just at calling students' attention to these differences but also to inflect their activity by helping students consider different ways of physically interacting with these compositions. The student reflections I featured earlier taught me that students may not have go-to strategies in place for coping with the challenges of listening, and that without coaching—without opening students to the impact that their activities have on their listening—it is likely these embodied interactions will be governed by passivity.

As well, it is my hope that this pedagogy of materially engaged listening may help us address the *valuing* of multimodal compositions—an issue that composition continues to grapple with today despite the increasing incorporation of multimodal composing into writing classrooms, the increasing acceptance of digital publications for promotion and tenure, and the increasing presence of the digital humanities in the academy. While gains have been made professionally, we clearly must continue this work in the classroom with our students so that they recognize the importance of not only producing a wider variety of texts in the twenty-first century but also leaning forward to listen to them, too.

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## Notes

1. I have chosen to use the term “audio media” (instead of “new media” or “multimodal compositions”) for two reasons. The first is in the interest of remaining more specific: “new media” and “multimodal compositions” can signify many, many different kinds of texts and modalities, and for my purposes I find it most productive to stay focused on sound recordings. For another, I have also chosen not to use “multimodal” given persuasive arguments (e.g., Ball and Charlton; Shipka; Wysocki) that *all* texts are multimodal. ([Return to text.](#))
2. Although this article addresses only listening, I want to note that my students also had similar difficulty with video. Although it is a materially different practice to view than it is to listen—and listening often is more challenging for attention spans than viewing—I think that, unless coached, students approach watching videos with a passivity similar to their passivity with listening. Moreover, I think that building a pedagogy for viewing video is also crucial to our field work; while listening and sonic rhetorics are currently gaining a lot of traction in rhetoric and composition, there is little treatment within our field, by contrast, of viewing video. Performing a CompPile search for “viewing” yielded only a handful of relevant results, including a 2004 chapter on helping students critically engage with interactive television (ITV) in technical communication classrooms (Racine and Dilworth), a 2001 paper on critically viewing television (McClain), and a 1998 edited collection on critical media literacy (Semali and Pailliotet). Our field would do well to continue work on critical viewing, perhaps bridging work established by film studies and visual studies. ([Return to text.](#))
3. Alexander and Rhodes provide one of the most recent critiques of rhetoric and composition’s application of a textual paradigm (or in Burkean terms, a textual terministic screen) to multimodality; see also Cynthia Selfe’s “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing” and Ann Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola’s “Blinded by the Letter: Why Are We Using Literacy as a Metaphor for Everything Else?” ([Return to text.](#))
4. David Beard and Graham Bodie outline listening’s long history in communications in “Listening Research in the Communication Discipline.” Listening also has its own professional organization, the International Listening Association (or ILA). In addition to publishing the *International Journal of Listening* and the relatively new online journal *Listening Education*, the ILA has a section of its website devoted to educational resources, some of which I have drawn upon in developing suggestions for classroom practice (particularly, a short but foundational booklet by Ralph G. Nichols). ([Return to text.](#))
5. Because this course is a relatively new elective around which my department is trying to build momentum, I was allowed to run the course with eleven students enrolled at the start of the semester. By the time I conducted our discussion on listening two students had withdrawn from the course, bringing our roster to nine. ([Return to text.](#))
6. I want to acknowledge my awareness that I talk about reading print texts from a body-normative standpoint.

That is, a blind person engages with a print text differently than does a seeing person, and the same can be said for a deaf person's experience with listening. (For a fascinating account of a deaf percussionist's experiences with listening, see Ceraso.) ([Return to text.](#))

7. All student names are pseudonyms. ([Return to text.](#))
8. I found keeping a commonplace book useful for my own learning in graduate courses I took with Laura R. Micciche and so later began asking students to keep them, as well. For more description of the commonplace book assignment as Micciche has conceived it, see "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar." ([Return to text.](#))

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Return to [Composition Forum 35 table of contents](#).