

# How to Write about Sound: A Practical Guide

**Laura Feibush**

*Bookend Seminar, November 11, 2020*

Laura Feibush is Assistant Professor of English at Juniata College.

**I**n my years of teaching auditory materials, I have noticed that my students often have trouble writing about sound. There is a sense of quickly arriving at a boundary of expression and a sense of frustration about getting past it. From my journeys through the world of sound (sound studies, music, and writing pedagogy), I have collected here some of the most important and helpful ideas that I have encountered regarding how to write about sound.

My hope is that this essay will be of use to instructors incorporating multimodal objects and projects in their courses, possibly in English, communication, theater, anthropology, psychology, sociology, or other areas. I hope, too, it will be useful for students confronted with the task of focusing a piece of writing, whether it be an analysis, an argument, or even a personal narrative, around some kind of auditory object. When I use “we” and “our” throughout this piece, I imagine speaking to my colleagues and students here at Juniata College although I hope to end up “speaking” to others as well.

First, though, why is this important? The ideas I assemble here may make us more effective writers, but they also ask us to think about sound differently and even to think about language differently—stretching it, sharpening it, asking it to convey what we hear and think, and, in doing so, to expand what we hear and think. Writing—about sound, in particular—can be a powerful tool for intellectual and personal growth.

Intellectual and personal growth is all well and good, but why might sound, and writing about it, be important right now? The way I see it, we need more than ever to be agile and discerning consumers of all the media we confront in our lives. Recently, we have seen leaders who strategically utilize pauses (notably in public speeches) as a rhetorical tool, leaving listeners to fill in suggestive silences. Each day, as citizens, we evaluate which commercials and news streams are credible and which are misleading. In the recent pandemic months, hearing too many people gathered together has come to suggest not camaraderie or festivity but potential danger. One more: A tenant was evicted from my apartment building not long ago. In a brief exchange as she pulled a U-Haul away from the curb, she told me there had been too many complaints about her playing loud music and talking on the phone during nighttime hours. In the context of our living space, those sounds were deemed unacceptable. Her neighbors, some of them at least, interpreted those sounds as auditory disruption, invasiveness. Those reactions tell us

something about our expectations of living together and more about our expectations that, even together, we live apart.

The examples I list above are all sonic phenomena that show us how sound matters. With them in mind, it is important that we think and write about sound in purposeful ways. But, first, some context.

## WHY IS IT HARD TO WRITE ABOUT SOUND?

In general, we have a tendency to focus on visual modes, like written text and visual art. This tendency in the Western world is sometimes referred to as “ocularcentrism,” which refers to the privileging of vision above the other senses. We can even find in our daily vocabulary the prevalence of visual metaphors to talk about our experiences. When we understand something, we say, “I see.” To explain our opinion, we might say, “from my perspective,” or “from my point of view.” To clarify something is to “illuminate” it or even to gain “insight.” Thinking back on a situation, we might say, “upon reflection,” or “in retrospect.”

Due to a prevailing “hierarchy of the senses” that has privileged sight throughout much of the Western world, sound and hearing have historically developed different connotations. The historian Leigh Eric Schmidt illustrates (!) some of hearing’s main cultural connotations, arguing that the idea of “hearing voices,” or “hearing things,” was, in pre-Enlightenment times, often associated with faith.<sup>1</sup> He reminds readers that “prayer, meditation, and retreat were the constants in evangelical stories of conversion, calling, and holiness, and the voices that they heard need to be understood within the rubrics of those spiritual disciplines.”<sup>2</sup> Schmidt argues that over time, though, the flexibility of the ear came to be associated with psychological pathology and that “...dominant concerns about interior voices were no longer theological, let alone devotional, but instead centered on masking the rifts of interior fragmentation.”<sup>3</sup> Schmidt’s narrative is just one take on a cultural history of the ear, but, nevertheless, he shows how the eye tends to be associated with Enlightenment-style rationality while the ear tends to be the purview of unusual conditions, like altered mental states or communing with the holy.

One outcome of these different cultural associations with the senses is that our vision is deeply educated—that is, we are rigorously taught to see in certain ways. It may be because we learn to read and write quite early and because those forms of literacy are so important in twenty-first-century society. Consider how precisely our eyes are trained as youngsters in order to read. Similarly, upon visiting a museum, visitors are encouraged to look at the objects on display, to visually appreciate color, shape, and texture—but don’t touch! By contrast, now that what Schmidt calls the “rubrics of spiritual disciplines” are no longer with many of us, unless students are involved in music lessons or singing in a choir, for instance, forms of audition may not be trained and taught to the same degree or with the same intentionality as are forms of spectatorship. When we do learn about sound, it is often because we are

being too loud, using our “outdoor voices” inside, slamming the door, or otherwise using sound in a way that defies the conventions for what is appropriate in that setting. The Deaf artist Christine Sun Kim calls those rules “sound etiquette” and encourages us, as she does in her multimedia art, to consider unlearning them.<sup>4</sup>

I want to acknowledge that sensory regimes are always more complicated than they seem at first glance (!), and I have drawn ocularcentrism in broad strokes here. Nevertheless, the section above provides a very brief context for why many people find it challenging to write about sound.

## NINE WAYS TO WRITE ABOUT SOUND

The big idea that ties together many of the following techniques is this: we have certain habits of mind when we think about sound, and those habits affect the way we tend to try to write about it. In what follows, I want to share some of the habits that many readers are likely to have and how we might unsettle them in ways that help us write about sound with more depth and purpose.

### I. Reduced Listening

Here is our first habit: when we hear a sound, our first impulse is often to ask: what is making the sound?

What that means is that we tend to fall back on naming the source of the sound rather than focusing on the qualities of the sound itself. This is what the theorist Michel Chion calls “causal” listening, the first of three “listening modes” that he outlines.<sup>5</sup> Instead of causal listening, where we identify the source of the sound (which Chion calls the “most easily influenced and deceptive mode of listening”), or semantic listening, where we decode the meaning of spoken words, Chion urges us to practice what he calls “reduced listening.”<sup>6</sup> Drawing upon the work of his fellow sound writer and theorist Pierre Schafer, Chion defines reduced listening as “listening that focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause, and of its meaning.”<sup>7</sup> What is the result of reduced listening on writing? Chion writes: “Language we employ as a matter of habit suddenly reveals all its ambiguity: ‘This is a squeaky sound,’ you say, but in what sense? Is ‘squeaking’ an image only, or is it rather a word that refers to a *source* that squeaks, or to an unpleasant *effect* [on the listener]?”<sup>8</sup>

Practicing reduced listening may bring us to write with more precision, with the freshness of defamiliarizing a sound and with a greater awareness of our own positional perceptions. So, as Chion teaches us, ask not what makes the sound; ask rather what the sound actually sounds like.

## II. Avoiding Adjectives

At a certain point, writers may need to ask what makes the sound. But in doing so, beware this second habit of mind: when we move to describe something, we tend to reach for adjectives because adjectives are the types of words that usually help us describe things. In “The Grain of the Voice,” Roland Barthes writes, with frustration, that “music, by natural bent, is that which at once receives an adjective. The adjective is inevitable: the music is *this*, the execution is *that*.”<sup>9</sup> Moments later, Barthes urges readers to find out what happens if we prohibit ourselves from using adjectives.

Taking him up on this playful challenge, I tried this with students in one of my classes. Reflecting on her own speaking voice, one student, deprived of adjectives, wanted to convey that she sometimes speaks quickly with her words almost bleeding together. To describe this, she wrote: “My words tend to be naturally slurred. It almost sounds like I’m talking in cursive sometimes.”<sup>10</sup> This beautiful and evocative description gains its profundity from the way it draws upon another mode of inscription—handwriting—suggesting, as have many in the past, that our written traces bear vestiges of ourselves, as do our voices as they move through the air: of ourselves, but extending beyond ourselves. Briefly but memorably, this writer demonstrates how, when we are constrained by a lack of adjectives, we are sometimes able to arrive at more interesting, evocative ways of describing sound.

## III. Sound as Material

Because sound is often audible but not visible, we tend to think about sound as being non-material. That is, we don’t think of it as existing as a kind of physical substance. But it certainly is: from the disciplinary perspective of physics, sound is a wave made of the substance through which the wave moves. Focusing on sound as a material, when we go to write about sound, we can ask a fruitful question: what is it made from? Or, in other words, what materials are in play?

Recently, I wrote about a piece of music by the composer Steve Reich, called *Different Trains*.<sup>11</sup> Many listeners find *Different Trains* to be an arresting sonic experience, in part due to how Reich incorporates not just the familiar sound of a string quartet but also sounds seemingly foreign to the world of chamber music: we hear snippets of recorded interviews with Holocaust survivors, sirens, and train whistles. When thinking about *Different Trains* and its use of non-orchestral instruments, I challenged myself to focus not on how it feels to listen to those sounds even though sound can create profound affective responses in people. I even challenged myself to try to describe not what it sounded like but rather why Steve Reich may have chosen to incorporate such an unusual material. Reich’s piece is about the Holocaust, one composer’s representation, his working-through— which, of course, always also reflects back on the artist himself. So alongside the conventional beauty of a string quartet, why sirens? Why train whistles? I am going to quote myself from the piece I wrote about *Different Trains*:

...The important point is this: ...*Different Trains* expands the toolbox of what is usually used to make chamber music. The unusual sounds challenge the listener to consider: what instruments belong to classical music? Why do some instruments belong to this beautiful yet rarefied sphere, while other sounds do not? ... In *Different Trains*, Reich explores the boundary of where music crosses into noise. In doing so, he invites audiences to consider why that might be warranted, where it might be necessary to challenge what is usually permissible in chamber music, drawing instead from sound vocabularies beyond those of the traditional orchestra.<sup>12</sup>

Here, asking myself what the music was made from and why helped me understand what Reich may have meant by it, what he might have been trying to say about the Holocaust, and what he may have meant to put his audiences through when they listen to his work.

#### IV. Sonic Containers

This is the next question writers can ask of any sound: what is its container? In other words, what aspects of media transmission come into play? Much of the sound that we may find ourselves trying to write about is recorded sound: archives, podcasts or radio, soundtracks, any type of music that is not experienced live. Sound's material purveyor matters, as any vinyl enthusiast will tell you. Focusing on the media "container," or purveyor, of a sound can clarify what that sound means to us as readers.

Let me give an example. Jonathan Stone is a professor at the University of Utah who studies the archives of music collected by John and Alan Lomax in 1933. He describes the impact of the several technologies that carry a recording of John Gibson, a Black musician who the Lomaxes convinced, through what would now be called coercion since Gibson was serving a prison sentence at the time, to record a song called "Levee Camp Holler." Gibson did not initially want to record the song, and he goes on record stating just that before starting to sing. About this recording, Stone writes:

It is impossible not to notice the sound of the recording materials themselves—the scratch and glitch of technology's age and decay as well as the buttressing residues of preservation. There is the revolving swoosh of the original aluminum disc decipherable in an ebb and flow of static and a needle skip, caught and cut off quickly at the end. There is also evidence of the transfer by Library of Congress technicians, decades ago, from disc to magnetic tape. One can hear a hiccup in the audio—a faint echo of Gibson's voice as magnetic tape folds over onto itself momentarily in the mix. Finally, though much more difficult to detect, the song was transferred into the binary code of a compact disc where all previous imperfections codify forever in the digital version. ... compressed again as an mp3, "Levee Camp Holler" is available in ubiquity streaming on the Web (from iTunes to YouTube)—this song John Gibson never wanted to sing in the first place.<sup>13</sup>

By attending to the sounds of the media containers themselves, Stone shows us how those generations of media contribute to what the recording "Levee Camp Holler" now means to us—a moving yet troubled capture, whose process—its coming into being—is as important to understand as its content.

## V. Sound in Space

The next technique for writing about sound is to think about sound in relation to space and environment. That is, when we think about sound not as a ghost, or as immaterial, but as a tangible force, we are more likely to consider sound's relationship to other physical aspects of the environment.

Sound is in a constant relationship with the environment in which it occurs. It can even give us information about that environment: an echo, for instance, tells listeners that they are in a large space with hard surfaces, and they may associate that reverberation with the sudden solemnity of stepping into a grand Catholic church from a busy street outside. On the other hand, a sound without any reverberation at all informs us that we may be in a smaller space with softer, more absorptive surfaces. We may be in someone's living room, or we may have stepped into the church's confessional.

The scholar and musician Richard Cullen Rath writes about the acoustics of a Quaker meetinghouse, among other architectural types. It is important to know that many Quaker meetinghouses and schoolhouses employ a hexagonal shape. He writes: "...When I was there it sounded the same as it and other hexagonal Quaker schoolhouses and meetinghouses had sounded for centuries. The acoustics amplified everyone's voice, with no echoes building up anywhere because the shallow-ceilinged, obtuse-angled rooms had, according to one folk explanation, 'no corner for the devil to hide.'"<sup>14</sup> This description of the sound in that space connects Rath to the sonic past and even reflects the values of the community that originally used that space.

## VI. Sound as Both Physical and Cognitive

I have suggested above that it can be useful to think about sound as physical. But based on our lived experience, many readers probably share the sense that sound is not purely physical either. So it is not purely physical and not purely metaphorical or cognitive either. It's more complicated than that: it's both. A moving instance of perceiving sound in a way that encompasses its dual physical and cognitive aspects can be found in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers. In the following passage, Dr. Benedict Copeland, a Black doctor in a small town in the Deep South, listens to his daughter tell him that a tragedy has befallen his son, one that will affect all of their lives going forward and that was sadly brought about by racial hatred:

Portia spoke in a low voice, and she neither paused between words nor did the grief in her face soften. It was like a low song. She spoke and he could not understand. The sounds were distinct in his ear but they had no shape or meaning. It was as though his head were the prow of a boat and the sounds were water that broke on him and then flowed past. He felt he had to look behind to find the words already said.<sup>15</sup>

This description of sound refers to Portia's speech both as being a physical phenomenon in materiality, the way it acts in space and time, but also as having linked cognitive and emotional components.

Thinking about sound in this dual way allows for a powerful description like this—one that strikes us with the wide, painful human toll that comes with violence.

## VII. Is There a Story Here?

Here is a new habit to form: when you hear sound, ask: is there a story here? Or, is there context that can come to bear on how we write about that sound? For instance, the context of a Jewish-American composer reflecting on the Holocaust grounds Steve Reich's *Different Trains*. That context, if I seek it out, helps me understand how to approach thinking and writing about the piece.

I would like to share again a few sentences from an essay written by one of my students. In class, we had just read Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," a piece in which Anzaldúa grapples with her relationship to the many languages that she speaks as a member of the Chicano community—some honored and respected, others denigrated.<sup>16</sup> The assignment was for each student to write about their relationship with language and a time when they felt their identity was shaped by language. Here, my student revisits a childhood memory of what it felt like to hear Spanish spoken by some of his immediate family members although he himself did not understand it. He writes, quoted verbatim:

My 4-year-old self didn't understand the concept of various languages, but I knew there was a difference in the sound between the words I would say and the others of Spanish speaking family members. Walking around the house playing with the scattered toys upon the living room floor, I would hear the conversations between my mother and sisters in Spanish but wondering why I didn't understand them. I even remember hearing the playing of Spanish music banging against the walls due to the fast-intricate rhythms, and wondering why I didn't know what was being said.<sup>17</sup>

Here, the writer illustrates—again, through his dual physical/cognitive experience of sound—his own particular relationship to Spanish, which is connected to his sense of belonging and, at times, the sense of being an outsider or a black sheep within his own family. But this writer also captures, in microcosm, a broader national context, wherein heritage languages may not be passed down or in which other languages spoken by a family get subsumed into the dominance of English in North American life and how these dynamics may enable acculturation yet also unnecessarily "flatten" the linguistic identities of those they affect.

## VIII. Using the Sounds of Language

This technique is a little bit of a party trick: using language itself to evoke the sound a writer is trying to describe. A well-known example of this appears in a poem by Paul Verlaine called "Chanson d'Automne."<sup>18</sup> Famously, the first verse of the poem cites the sound of violins, and the words themselves incorporate many of the French nasal sounds, as if to imitate the languid pull of a violin bow over strings. Party tricks aside, poetry has a long, rich tradition of using the sounds of language as part of its meaning

and impact, and its analytical vocabulary reflects that: words like prosody, consonance, onomatopoeia, meter, and rhyme, among others.

One of the contemporary forms of poetry that works with the sound of language in profound ways is rap. I think of Kendrick Lamar's powerful verse in Beyonce's *Lemonade* album track "Freedom."<sup>19</sup> In it, Lamar raps lines that begin with a classic four beats per line of text, but then his lyrics accelerate and move into faster and more complex relationships to the track's steady beat, resulting in the gradual rising of intensity as he invokes hope, desperation, and strength in the pursuit of freedom. The idea here is that the rhythms—or the sonic qualities—of the language itself contribute to the meaning that we derive from that language.

## IX. Types of Listening

Ask this: What type of listening does this sound ask of me, or what type of listener does it ask me to become?

Some sounds make us adversarial by pushing us away or irritating us, like the sound of a weed-whacker hovering close to the window as we try to study, plan lessons, or conduct a meeting inside. Some sounds envelop us and run through us palpably, like the bass of a nightclub, not asking us to listen closely for detail but, rather, to turn our bodies into transducers and be moved to dance, to forget ourselves. Some sounds ask us to become aware of our moment in time, like the experience of listening to a faint, scratchy-tape interview of a family elder or of a Holocaust survivor, like the interview recordings that Steve Reich integrates into *Different Trains*.

Some sounds make us participants, like the sounds of a player's character running or jumping within a video game, while soundtracks to films and games often serve to transport us, as viewers and listeners, into the world of the game or the flick. I would like to highlight the writing of one of my students once more. Here, I asked my class to write a "Sonic Autobiography," reflecting on sounds that had shaped or defined them. One student focused on the soundtrack to a favorite childhood video game, which, for her, evoked a sense of stability and positivity during periods of struggle and displacement. It formed the soundtrack to hours of peaceful immersion into the world of the game in the face of troubled times in her life. She writes:

[During] one of the harder times in my childhood [I found] a game disc at a flea market after having searched for one fruitlessly for years—only to discover that it was scratched to the point of being unusable. ...That is the instance that triggered in me a love for technical problem solving after I desperately used toothpaste to buff out the scratches until the game worked. When the game finally booted up, I cried.<sup>20</sup>

The remembered and once-more anticipated sounds of the game made this writer a listener who was motivated to do her first restoration work, actively retrieving the game and its sounds from an otherwise wrecked and silent disc because of what it represented and what it promised.



## CONCLUSION

I close this piece by inviting all my readers to do an experiment: to listen, not to anything in particular, but to the rooms around us, to our own hearts and lungs, to environmental sounds that reflect so much about our world and society, and even to some of the voices that live in our heads “rent-free.” Consider trying it right now—set a timer for about ten to fifteen seconds and just listen to whatever arises.

At any given moment, we hear the communities that we shape and are shaped by. We hear in a way that is entrained, or taught, and in ways that are uniquely ours. We hear our own moment in time. I hope the approaches to writing about sound that I have enumerated here serve to empower us all to write about what we hear and how we listen.

## ADDENDUM

Students and acquaintances have sometimes expressed to me that aspects of sound—especially music—just can’t be captured in words. I agree: sounds do indeed manifest non-verbal rhetorics that defy description. Steve Goodman, for instance, develops a theory that focuses on how certain vibrations can create affective states like fear and dread, while Julian Henriques studies the way the sound systems used in reggae music exert “sonic dominance” and need to be understood physically as well as discursively.<sup>21</sup>

But describing something is not always aimed just at capturing it exactly. Writing about sound can bring about other valuable outcomes, too: with the methods I outline above, writing about sound or music can allow us to focus on new aspects of what we are hearing, it can contextualize complex cultural artifacts, and it can enrich a sound by invoking its entwinement with technology, memory, or metaphor. It also goes without saying that writers can choose to write about some sounds and not others, depending on what they are comfortable handling.

When people express that some sounds can’t be expressed in words, I sometimes sense the additional implication—like an admonishment—that they *shouldn’t* be. When it comes to music in particular, there exists a prevailing cultural belief that music, more than almost anything else, has the power to transcend intellect. And people, myself included, often understandably shy away from subjecting something they love deeply to the tools of analysis. As I mention in IX, however, we can listen in many ways at many different times in our lives. The verbal capacities of analysis and description do not contradict, or mutually exclude, a profound and wordless love.

## NOTES

1. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

2. Ibid., 50.
3. Ibid., 179.
4. Melia Robinson, “A Deaf Artist Explains the Rules of 'Sound Etiquette'—and Why She's Kicking Them to the Curb,” *Business Insider Australia*, October 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/deaf-artist-christine-sun-kim-2015-10>.
5. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
6. Ibid., 26.
7. Chion, 29; Pierre Schafer, *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).
8. Chion, 29.
9. Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 179.
10. “Voice” (student paper, Writing the Sonic, Juniata College, March 22, 2019).
11. Steve Reich. *Different Trains for String Quartet and Pre-Recorded Performance Tape* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1988).
12. Laura Feibush, “Learning Through Sound: Listening to Steve Reich’s *Different Trains*,” *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators* (forthcoming).
13. Jonathan Stone, “Listening to the Sonic Archive: Rhetoric, Representation, and Race in the Lomax Prison Recordings,” *Enculturation* (2015): paras. 15 and 16.
14. Richard Cullen Rath, “No Corner for the Devil to Hide,” in *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 97.
15. Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 254.
16. Gloria Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” in *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*, eds. David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, and Stacey Waite (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, Macmillan Learning, 2017), 24–34.
17. “A Bridge between My Culture and I” (student paper, First Year Composition, Juniata College, September 4, 2020). This passage is taken directly from a student paper with permission from the author.
18. Paul Verlaine, “Chanson D'automne.” Academy of American Poets, <https://poets.org/poem/chanson-dautomne>.
19. Beyoncé, “Freedom,” track 10 on *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, 2016.
20. “A Sonic Autobiography” (student paper, Writing the Sonic, Juniata College, April 27, 2019).

21. Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012); Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (New York: Continuum, 2011).