

## Teaching the Audio Essay: Sample Assignments

I've taken to describing these projects as "radio" essays rather than podcasts. They are projects modeled after the kinds of pieces aired on public radio stations across the U.S., and perhaps the most famous of these is the program "This American Life." My motive is largely rhetorical. It's far more powerful for students to imagine radio listeners in their vehicles hearing a writer's voice inviting them to pay attention to a story. This rhetorical situation is quite specific, and it has another compelling quality, too: Listeners will hear the essay only once. The writer has a single chance to make an impression. All of this makes the writing of a radio essay very demanding.

The assignments described below begin with the simplest approach to the more complex. Each assignment requires more technical and writing skills. Despite this, I've had success with all of these sound projects while working with students who have no background in audio production.

Project	Length	Audio Tracks	Description
<b>Commentary</b>	Two to three minutes, or roughly 300-350 words	One (voice only)	These pieces may be modeled after the commentaries from "This I Believe," or they may be opinion or informational as well as narrative. The brevity of these is particularly challenging for students. An excellent substitute for a paper assignment on a relevant course topic that would interest a more general audience. Unlike the other assignments, this may be more expository rather than narrative.
<b>Narrative</b>	Five to seven minutes, or roughly 600-750 words	Two (voice and music)	The backbone of these pieces is the narrator's story. The music track adds an additional element providing emphasis, feeling, and signaling shifts in subjects. Silence is also an important form of punctuation. Topics vary widely but must include a time-then narrator (what happened) and a time-now narrator (what it might be understood to mean now).
<b>Documentary</b>	Seven to twelve	Three, and possible four	A longer project on a topic that interests the narrator, bringing in the

	minutes, or about 1000 words.	(voice, music, interview clips, ambient sound)	voices of others who have something to say about the topic. These are not journalistic pieces. They don't merely report information; like any essay, they are driven by the writer's interests and questions that are explored by going out into the "field" to gather material. Frequently, the interview material challenges the writer's preconceptions about what the story is. This is a time-consuming project but richly rewarding, and an excellent alternative to a conventional research essay. Might also be an good ethnographic project.
<b>Variations</b>			
<b>Hosting</b>	30 to 60 second introduction		