



# LEARNING THROUGH LISTENING

L.A. THEATRE WORKS AND  
OTHER AUDIO RESOURCES  
IN THE CLASSROOM



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A non-profit media arts organization based in Los Angeles, **L.A. Theatre Works** brings together award-winning actors from the stage, screen and radio to perform classics of literature such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Macbeth*. The company's mission is to "present, preserve and disseminate classic and contemporary plays." Produced over a period of 25 years, its Audio Theatre Collection of more than 400 plays has become one of the largest libraries of its kind in the world.

Through its outreach programs, **L.A. Theatre Works** provides access to the arts for the general public and the classroom. The company also offers educators instructional-support materials, enhancing students' academic experience in core curricular subjects such as Science, Language Arts, Social Science and Literature, as well as Theatre, Civics, Art and Journalism.

The **L.A. Theatre Works** website, [latw.org](http://latw.org), features a comprehensive educational section, including recordings and teacher's resources. Live tours and podcasts complement the material here. And now, you can also access a selection of **L.A. Theatre Works** audio plays on [NFB.ca](http://NFB.ca).

## TEACHER PREPARATION: ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is a supplement to the **L.A. Theatre Works** plays available on the NFB website, where links to suggested sources for further inquiry accompany each production. The guide contains background information on audio recordings and activities as well as useful links for educators who want to explore audio recordings beyond the **L.A. Theatre Works** productions. It is intended for students in Grades 6 to 12, and educators should feel free to adapt the material to suit their classroom.

The guide contains several classroom activities, each of which provides external links to support a lesson plan. The **Discussion and Media Literacy Questions** sections are designed to stimulate critical thinking. Students should be encouraged to reflect and collaborate through discussion (agree/disagree, Think/Pair/Share, debate), using a method appropriate to their learning level.

## RECOMMENDED SUBJECT AREAS

This guide can be integrated into English Language Arts, Media Studies, Dramatic Arts or Social Science curriculums. Cross-curricular opportunities with Physics or Biology departments should be considered.

Understanding the science of sound will enrich students' understanding of the material. Consider Activity 1 below as a starting point for an exploration of what sound waves are, how audio recordings are created, and how these recordings are heard by the human ear.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### 1. "AU CLAIR DE LA LUNE"

*This activity introduces students to the first recording techniques and gives them an opportunity to reflect on the value and purpose of audio recordings, both in terms of their own experience and in general. Duration: 1–2 periods.*

The earliest known recordings of the human voice were captured by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville in 1857, using an instrument called a phonograph. In 2008, digital recording advances allowed researchers at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory to play one of Scott's "phonographs," an 1860 recording of "Au Clair de la Lune," a famous French lullaby. This is the earliest known recording of music accompanied by the human voice.

[firstsounds.org/sounds/scott.php](http://firstsounds.org/sounds/scott.php) – This detailed account of how researchers achieved their goal includes a number of early phonograph recordings. "Au Clair de la Lune" (#36) and the vocal scale (#46) are good places for educators to start. The sound quality is poor but an unmistakable human voice is discernible. Listen to the recordings with your class and have students discuss what they would have recorded first if they had invented the phonograph. Students can write and record a 5-to-10-second clip and share it with the class.

### DISCUSSION AND MEDIA LITERACY QUESTIONS

- How did you choose what to include in your recording? Was it difficult to decide?
- How much do you rely on the audio medium in your day-to-day life (podcasts/radio/streaming music)?
- What do you think motivated Scott to create the phonograph?
- What events are best captured by the audio medium? Can you think of any famous examples?

### 2. EVERY CHILD

*This media literacy exercise makes use of a classic NFB film, introducing students to a consideration of the audio medium and to the issues of social justice and children's rights, which are addressed in the film. Duration: 1–2 periods.*

In order to be media literate, students have to think critically about the medium in question; exploring the contrasts between sound and image is one means of doing this. In comparison to movies or television, audio recordings present some distinct challenges, yet they also allow certain freedoms. By studying these differences, students will be better prepared to critically engage with the audio texts.



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[nfb.ca/film/every\\_child](http://nfb.ca/film/every_child) – **Every Child** was the Canadian contribution to the UNICEF Year of the Child project, as well as the 1979 Oscar winner for Best Animated Short Film. Watch the film and note how the entire soundtrack is created by two sound-effects artists and a young child. Discuss how revealing the recording method at the beginning of the film affects how we view the rest of the film.

### DISCUSSION AND MEDIA LITERACY QUESTIONS

- Why do you think the filmmakers decided to make this UNICEF film without the use of dialogue?
- How does sound affect our understanding of other media such as television or movies (e.g., sound effects, background music)?
- How does audio recording differ from video recording?
- What limitations need to be considered when creating an audio production? How do you suggest those limitations be overcome creatively?
- Do you think that restrictions breed creativity?

### 3 – ALEXANDER AND HELEN

*Critical-thinking and deductive-reasoning skills are transferable and support media literacy. By practising these skills in different contexts, students will be able to apply them to audio productions. In this exercise, students decode a picture using a minimal amount of information and then discuss two of Alexander Graham Bell's quotes about sound and telecommunication. Duration: 1 period.*

In 1875, Alexander Graham Bell patented an acoustic telegraph and began developing what we now know as the telephone. However, he would likely prefer to be remembered for his contributions to deaf education and hearing research. Bell worked with Helen Keller and directed her to the Perkins Institute for the Blind, where she was introduced to Anne Sullivan, who would become Helen's closest companion.

[memory.loc.gov/ammem/bellhtml/004048.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/bellhtml/004048.html) – This picture of Bell with Helen Keller is part of the Alexander Graham Bell Family Collection. Show students the image and lead a discussion that answers five questions about the picture (Who/What/Where/When/Why), giving students the opportunity to decode it. Once the students have come to an agreement about the origin of the image and what it depicts, give them the background on the picture and have them reflect on the similarities/differences between the class consensus and its actual history.

### CONSIDER TWO OF BELL'S QUOTES:

- "To ask the value of speech is like asking the value of life."

Why does Bell compare speech to life? What challenges do mute/deaf individuals face that we might overlook? This is an ideal opportunity to discuss how auditory issues can affect students, creating either physical or intellectual challenges.

- "The day will come when the man at the telephone will be able to see the distant person to whom he is speaking." (c.1906)

What do you think gave Bell the idea that this would be possible? How would Bell react to smartphones and digital devices?

### 4 – WHAT DID YOU DO YESTERDAY?

*Auditory skills need to be developed, not unlike reading and writing skills. Students need to practise focused-listening skills before they are required to process the auditory information presented in a longer audio production. Duration: 1 period.*

In addition to developing critical-thinking skills, students should be given the chance to develop the specific skills necessary to process auditory information, as there is an important difference between hearing and listening. Even when students are engaging in active listening, other factors affect their understanding. For example, *prosody* is the use of rhythm, pitch and emphasis to convey meaning. Read the title of this activity and notice how placing emphasis on different words changes its meaning (e.g., What did you do yesterday?).

[tl.learningally.org/Listening-A-Powerful-Skill/The-Science-of-Listening/History-and-Overview-of-Listening/91](http://tl.learningally.org/Listening-A-Powerful-Skill/The-Science-of-Listening/History-and-Overview-of-Listening/91) – This website is devoted to audio learning in the class, highlighting *listening-focused* content. Listening can be divided into four basic categories or stages (see below). Reflect on the types of listening and various situations in which one is likely to observe each type. As a class, discuss whether the stages of listening can change within the same situation. Are there similarities between situations of inactive or active/reflective listening?

- **Inactive listening:** Being physically, but not mentally, part of a conversation.
- **Selective listening:** Hearing what you want or expect, not what is actually said.
- **Active listening:** Hearing and absorbing the content of a message.
- **Reflective listening:** Actively listening while also considering context.

### DISCUSSION AND MEDIA LITERACY QUESTIONS

- What techniques could be used in the classroom to ensure that students are engaging in active listening? (For tips, see [edutopia.org/blog-five-listening-strategies-rebecca-alber](http://edutopia.org/blog-five-listening-strategies-rebecca-alber) or <http://busyteacher.org/14387-how-to-improve-listening-skills-8-activities.html>.)
- Do students consider themselves auditory learners? Visual learners? Why? In what ways does their learning style affect their classroom experience?

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### **5 – SUGGESTION FOR CULMINATING ACTIVITY: STUDENT-CREATED AUDIO PRODUCTIONS**

*Using an online resource such as [Voicethread.com](http://Voicethread.com) or [Yoki.com](http://Yoki.com), or even personal mobile devices, students can create their own short audio projects for the class or the whole school to enjoy. The scope of the project should be determined by classroom needs/interest. Duration: 2–10 periods.*

After familiarizing themselves with **L.A. Theatre Works** productions and completing the activities in this guide, students should understand the conventions of audio theatre and the medium as a whole. By creating their own audio productions, students will have the opportunity to learn by doing. They can work in small groups and assign backstage roles according to individual interest, and everyone should be encouraged to perform.

The classrooms of the 21st century increasingly rely on digital formats, and they are also increasingly complex, so there is value in a creative project that engages only one of our senses. Remind students that their projects should make use of the following elements (depending on their grade level): a properly formatted script, thoughtful narrative structure, sound effects and background music, and possibly a radio jingle or advertisement. Give them the option of creating something new or adapting an existing book/movie/show. When determining the length of the production, keep in mind that one page of script is equivalent to about a minute of performance time. A detailed multi-lesson plan on student-created audio projects (including rubrics, checklists and additional resources/links) can be found here: [readwritethink.org/resources/resource-print.html?id=901](http://readwritethink.org/resources/resource-print.html?id=901).

Make sure there is time set aside for the groups to practise more than once before the recording. It is important that they get feedback on pacing, style of expression and volume. Students should also keep the listener's experience in mind. Is the performance easy to follow? Does it grab audience attention? Do the musical and sound effect choices properly define the setting and mood?

This project is ideal for peer-to-peer learning assessments. Each group should take a different approach to their audio production, ensuring that each acquires unique insights into both the process and the project. Ultimately, educators should ask themselves: Are students actively listening to each other? If they don't "get beyond the noise" and learn how to listen, they will never learn how to communicate effectively.

## **CREDITS**

This guide was produced by NFB Education. It was written by David Finkelstein. David is an OCT certified teacher with a background in performing arts and audio production. He is thrilled to be working with the NFB to create accessible and interesting curriculum focused on media literacy in all forms.