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## ENG 300: How Can Writers Use Aural Media Distractions to Their Advantage?

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Dr. Jane Fife

ENG 300

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### How Can Writers Use Aural Media Distractions to Their Advantage?

Both students and writers in the modern era are undoubtedly familiar with multimedia distractions to their craft. They may come in the form of Facebook, television playing in the background, or even procrastination through the use of these mediums. Some may posit that music falls into this category, but studies show that while all music is often regarded as a distraction to writing, calm music can and should be strategically used on a case-by-case basis as an aid in creativity as well as to help students stay on task.

The presence of music while one is writing isn't necessarily detrimental to their progress, or the quality of anything produced. In a study of mobile phone usage and distraction during study conducted through the collaboration of several major universities, it was found that if music is regularly used as background noise or to drown out ambient noise, listeners gain "volitional" control over tuning it out. Listening is a more passive activity than texting or using social media. This particular study focused on how multitasking while studying leads to deficient self-regulation when it comes to phone usage, but not when listening to background music (David et. al 2014, 7). Music has also been found to help with the memory of events and recall/salience of them by Benjamin Kubit and Petr Janata, psychologists at UC Davis, in a set of experiments designed to determine how much 'brain power' attentive music listening requires as well as how the presence of music affects recall of autobiographical memories (Kubit and Janata 2018, 86). It is reasonable to conclude that hearing certain music associated with the act of writing or information studied while listening could aid in recall or motivation to write.

According to Patricia Potranova, a professor of communications and English, “Writing with media distractions has little impact on a student’s written product.” (253). Particularly self aware students are aware of the strain media multitasking can pose to the writing process and often mitigate it on their own, while some others were unable to determine where they became distracted. (Portanova 2014, 253). This information lends itself to the conclusion that while music is a form of extra media processed while writing, it doesn’t pose a heavy distraction to a writer in most cases. That being said, Portanova notes a specific student being heavily distracted when a Johnny Cash song he wasn’t familiar with was played. Distraction is not a one-size fits all affliction; while it is possible that some writers would remain unruffled with random or unfamiliar background music playing, others can be negatively affected. Writers should assess their own weaknesses and carefully choose background media based on their assessment.

It has been found that the type of music one chooses as background music has a huge effect on the writing process. An experiment conducted by Susan Hallam and Carey Godwin, researchers on the forefront of the education and music psychology fields, that tested whether different types of background music had an effect on writing in primary school children found that exciting, aggressive music has a greater detrimental effect on “creativity, planning and higher order processing” than calming music does. (Hallam and Godwin 2015, 20). In the study, when students were asked to rate which music they felt was more enjoyable and conducive to work, they almost always chose the upbeat music. This is interesting as the calm music elicited higher word counts from the students. Not only this, but the students were less fidgety while listening to calm music and settled into their work with fewer distractions. In a separate study conducted by Zekerya Batur, it was also found that students uninterested in writing found it easier to write with music playing. (Batur 2016, 85-91.) In an article centered on composing

focus in order to write, Jane Fife explains that her students “describe using music to increase their enjoyment and energy for the task of writing.” (Fife 2017). Not only are these effects of music anecdotally perceived by writers, there are tangible results of listening to background music. It was found in a study conducted by the University of Geneva’s Laboratory of Behavioral Neurology and Imaging of Cognition that background music that is perceived as “joyful and pleasant” led to better attentional processing in listeners and quicker recall of answers for questions than without background music. Not only this, but MRI scans revealed that the parts of the brain activated by music playing in the background were not entirely the same as parts activated by listening to music. (Fernandez, Trost, and Vuilleumier 2019, 1448)

These findings contradict those previously discussed from Portanova but illustrate a much more pressing point. While young writers (Hallam and Godwin studied eleven-year-olds) may not be metacognitively developed enough to determine what type of music leads them to produce higher quality writing, those at the high school, college, and professional level are typically able to pinpoint distracting stimuli and remove them from their environment. (Portanova 2014). This means that using a threshold amount of self-efficacy, writers should be able to determine if they are able to work efficiently with music playing in the background. That being said, even at the collegiate level Portanova found that not all students possessed the ability to identify these distractions. While not all music is helpful to turn on, calming music (typically slow and classical or instrumental) that will not command one’s attention can be beneficial to play when writing and can motivate them further.

Playing music in the background can also be used to help writers feel more creative. In an experimental study on the contribution of music to writing skills conducted at Usak University in Turkey, it was found that music being played in the background helps writers produce

significantly higher word counts as well as more fluent first drafts than those without. The study also found that music positively affects a writer's emotional association of ideas. (Batur 2016, 85-91.) While it's been found that the presence of background music has no discernible effect on basic literacy skills, stories written while 'calm' music was played were more exciting than those written with 'exciting' music playing. It can be inferred the exciting stories were at their core more creative, making them more interesting. (Hallam and Godwin 2015, 15) Certain background music selections have been proven to lead to higher word counts and aid in the creative process, yielding a higher quality final product.

While the practice is not without its faults, listening to music while writing is typically far more beneficial to writers than it is detrimental. When background music is viewed as a tool available to the writer instead of a distraction, it can lead to higher levels of motivation, better emotional connection to the piece being written, and even more creativity in the writing session as a whole. Some writers struggle to stay focused on writing because they'd rather be doing more pleasurable activities, such as watching television or using social media, but playing music in the background is a way to scratch that itch without fully shifting your attention. As was previously discussed, it actually serves to speed up connections in one's mind and strengthen attentional processing. Not only this, but playing appropriate background music can help writers work with fewer distractions or motivations to fidget. The implications of this finding are limitless. This information is of great benefit to both the individual writer and teachers of writing or those with full classrooms working in unison, who can utilize background music to aid their students in their tasks. One thing to remain aware of is not every writer will benefit at the same level or even in the same way as their peers, so background music should not be turned to as a foolproof way to jumpstart motivation and make writing easy. Background music is simply another piece in the

writer's toolbox that can be used to make writing more enjoyable and at times enhance the writing process.

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