



SOUNDS LIKE A MYSTERY

Unit Overview*

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Grade Level: Junior High/Middle School/High School

In this unit, students will:

- investigate characteristics of the mystery detective genre through the study of vintage radio broadcasts
- write original 20th century vintage-type radio broadcast scripts
- record the scripts using 21st century technology
- add sound effects and music to produce original podcasts

Creating, recording, and producing the broadcasts is the embodiment of an authentic and purposeful literacy experience for the 21st century learner.

Hearing and listening require different skills. Hearing can be a passive activity whereas listening requires focused attention. In this unit, students gain experience developing their aural attentive abilities. They learn how characters, plot details, setting, mood, and tone are created through the voices, music, and sound effects in this medium. They will practice listening comprehension techniques and will develop better awareness of differences between HEARING, LISTENING, AND UNDERSTANDING.

After becoming familiar with the format of the radio show genre, students will write their own vintage-type mystery radio episode. They will then work on their oral acting abilities—focusing on cadence, articulation, diction, speed, and overall oratory skills prior to recording.

Students will record their scripts and then will add music and sound effects to complete the project.

***This is not intended to be a comprehensive step by step unit plan. It is an overview only.**

Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3.b](#)

Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3.d](#)

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.6](#)

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

National Education Technology Standards for Students (NETS-S): 1. Students demonstrate creative thinking, construct knowledge, and develop innovative products and process using technology. Students (a) apply existing knowledge to generate new ideas, products, or processes; (b) create original works as a means of personal or group expression.

National Education Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS-T): 3(b): Collaborate with students, peers, parents, and community members using digital tools and resources to support student success and innovation.

Background for Teacher: The initial lessons are designed to whet the appetite for the aural medium of Old Time Radio, to introduce your students to common patterns of character traits associated with the mystery/detective genre, and to assist students with the transition from the familiar mode of relying on visuals for information (TV/movies/books) to the unfamiliar—relying on their ears and their imaginations to create their own images.

Students begin with their prior knowledge about detectives, and then are introduced to some of the most famous male and female detectives of the Old Time Radio (OTR) era as they listen to some of the 20th century broadcasts. It is likely that the students have never been exposed to an old time radio show broadcast. It may take some adjustment for them to get used to the absence of visual images. Students may be more accustomed to visual cues supplementing information input but with a bit of practice, they will learn to enjoy creating their own images to accompany the radio shows by using their own imagination. This heightened awareness will serve to improve their attention to descriptive detail in their own writing.

As students become familiar with common character traits and plot elements of the mystery/detective genre, and as they become attuned to the critical importance of language, music, and sound effects in creating an engaging radio show drama, the students will be primed and ready to write and record their own shows. They will likely find that creating a “tight” script and performing in a fluent and expressive oral manner are all critical to the success of their own production.



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Suggested Lesson Steps

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1. Teacher distributes *Handout 1: Through the Mind's Eye*.
Instruct students to brainstorm a list of detectives from movies, TV shows, and books. Students brainstorm list independently and complete Column 1 on handout. Students recall physical descriptions of characters and complete Column 2. Ask students HOW they know the character looks and acts in certain ways. Help students to see that they generally gather this data from visual images or text-based descriptions. Discuss strengths and limitations of each. Orally review lists. Encourage students to include female detectives.
2. Pair Share: Students look at lists and identify personality traits and characteristics of the detectives. Write descriptive words in #2. (Common personality traits include: analytical, detail-oriented, loyal, strong sense of justice, moral, knows right and wrong, smart, observant, doesn't give up...). Ask students to support answers with evidence. Again draw out the differences between visual and text-based observations.
3. Large Group Discussion: Ask students to think about the plots associated with the characters listed in #1. How does the story usually progress? How is tension built? How does the mystery get solved? (usually includes element of good vs. evil, crime occurs, clues gathered, twist or red herring sometimes occurs, suspenseful elements introduced, climax, mystery solved, all's well that ends well.)
4. Independent Work: Give students time to complete the last section of the exercise—creating their own detective. Students may want to draw a picture to accompany the written description.
5. Distribute *Handout 2: Sounds Like a Mystery Listening/Stories Without Words or Pictures*: Ask the students if a story could be told without pictures. Could it be told without dialogue? Could it be told with no words at all? Play “Sounds Like a Mystery” from wefli.org. This is a 30 second sequence of sound effects including keys jangling, a lock opening, a door creaking open, footsteps across a wooden floor, glass breaking, an alarm sounding, something being dragged across a floor, a yell, and then a siren. Play the track 3 times. Ask students to create a plot to accompany the sound effects. Give students time to share the stories with a partner. Ask them to describe the person in the story. What can they tell about the character? What do they imagine about him? Good guy? Bad guy? What makes them think it's a guy? How is listening to the story told completely in sound effects different from reading the scene in a book or watching it on TV? (Each student probably came up with a different interpretation of what was

happening during the scene.) (If the wefli.org sound sequence isn't available, then create your own sequence of sound effects using garage band or another program.)

6. Distribute **Handout 3: Private Eyes and Private Eyelashes** (Need access to www.wefli.org) Explain to the students that before there was television, people used to listen to the radio for news and entertainment. In a later lesson, more details about radio as a scientific and cultural revolution can be provided, but for this lesson, the students will experience a brief introduction to OTR by listening to sample openings of detective shows. Tell the students that they should listen very carefully to the excerpts that you play. Ask what it means to listen carefully. (Pay attention to details, jot down notes, become attuned to the sound effects and music.) Direct students to make a list of descriptive words, images, and other thoughts that enter their minds as they listen to the excerpts. Play 3 openings from male detective shows, and 3 openings from female detective shows. Teacher should select openings based on which will hold the most appeal for a particular group of students. If time permits, more openings can be played.

Wrap Up: Discuss with students the words and images that the excerpts created. Compare how students envisioned the characters. Discuss how the show openings tried to “hook” them into the plot. Discuss the different types of products advertised in the show openings. Ask: What are some of the ways listening to a radio show, reading a book, and watching a television show differ?

Home Connection: Students should ask adults (relatives, neighbors, friends) to add to the list of detectives. If possible, students should try to find an adult who remembers listening to Old Time Radio shows to interview during a future assignment.

Tech Connections: Research slang names for detectives (flatfoot, gumshoe, hardboiled PI); Download and listen to free episode of one of the famous radio detectives from <https://archive.org/details/oldtimeradio> Such as Boston Blackie, Dragnet, Philip Marlow, Richard Diamond..

Providing Background Information

Now that students are familiar with some of the famous detectives from the Mystery Genre,

7. **WATCH** the video on www.wefli.org

“Who Knows What Info Lurks in the Minds of America’s Great Classic Radio Show Experts: Interviews with Carl Amari, Greg Bell, Steve Darnall, and Chuck Schaden”

Discuss

When did each of them become hooked on Classic Radio?

What did each one recommend as a way to hook this generation of students into Classic Radio?

What do you think was the most intriguing or surprising thing each one said?

8. NEXT (**Becoming Familiar with the Aural Medium Radio Broadcast Format**)

As a class, **LISTEN** to some of the suggested shows such as

Lights Out: The Dark (One of the Best Uses of Sound Effects)

<http://www.escape-suspense.com/2011/10/lights-out-the-dark.html>

Three Skeleton Key

<https://archive.org/details/ThreeSkeletonKey>

Talk with the students about how the music and the voices set the mood and tone, how they build suspense. What do they picture in their heads as they are listening? How do the sound effects play a part in moving the plot forward?

Distribute ***Handout 4: Through the Ear and Into the Imagination***

Select other shows for the students to listen to at home from various websites:

<http://www.escape-suspense.com/>

<https://archive.org/details/oldtimeradio>

<http://www.otr.net/>

<http://www.relicradio.com/otr/>

9. NEXT (**Becoming Familiar with the Written Script Format**)

Once the students have listened to a few sample shows, and have become familiar with the format have them **READ** a few scripts. (I suggest that you as the teacher select a few that you believe will grab their attention, are at an appropriate reading level, etc. rather than having them search the websites themselves.)

Distribute ***Handout 5: Learning from the Pros and Their Prose: Script Familiarity***

Copies of Classic Radio Show Scripts

<http://www.genericradio.com/library.php>

<http://www.olderadioworld.com/>

<http://www.simplyscripts.com/radio.html>

10. SCRIPTWRITING

Writing the scripts can be overwhelming. You may want to start by having them **ADAPT** a story rather than writing something original. Here are some Detective Parodies that would be quick and fun to adapt:

Ace Lacewing, Bug Detective (and sequels) by David Biedrzycki

Mystery at the Club Sandwich by Doug Cushman

Detective Larue, Letters from an Investigation by Mark Teague

The Web Files by Margie Palatini

Who Pushed Humpty Dumpty?: And Other Notorious Nursery Tale Mysteries by David Levinthal

For more of a challenge, they could adapt longer (but still parody type books that would be fun) such as the Chet Gecko Series by Bruce Hale. Sample titles include: Murder My Tweet, Dial M for Mongoose, and The Hamster of Baskervilles.

You also might want to have them begin by recording a ready-made script (e.g. Sorry, Wrong Number, Margie Palatini's The Web Files) <http://www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm>

If you are going to have them write their own scripts from scratch, you would handle this as you would any writing project. They will need to brainstorm the usual elements of

Characters

Setting

Plot Arc

And they will also need to consider the role of music and sound effects in creating the mood and tone. You'll need to build in time for editing and revising.

Distribute ***Handout 6: Let Your Imagination Go! Script Outline***

11. VOICE PRACTICE

The importance of the students' oral abilities can't be overemphasized. They need to practice their parts over and over. Remind them that no one will be able to see them, so they can be completely over the top in their performance. If your school has a Speech Communications teacher, or a Choir teacher, this would be a good time to ask for assistance in teaching projection, elocution, etc. Consider echo reading where you read the part and they repeat it so that you model the correct type of fluency, pace, accent, expression, etc.

Distribute ***Handout 7: Get in Front of (and Behind) the Mic: Recording and Post Production Planning***

12. RECORDING

A laptop or desktop computer with a recording software program (such as Audacity) and a snowball microphone (or any multidirectional microphone) will be sufficient for the recording session. The Technology Director comes in handy for this part of the project, but many teenagers are quite adept at sound recording.

13. POST-PRODUCTION

It is of course ideal if the students read through the entire script without error so that it isn't necessary to do too much editing of the voices, but that rarely happens. Generally, editing is needed—so again, it is helpful to have assistance from someone with tech expertise.

Students generally really enjoy adding music and sound effects. There are many sound effects available for free on the internet. One caution—it is easy to get carried away with sound effects, so use them judiciously.

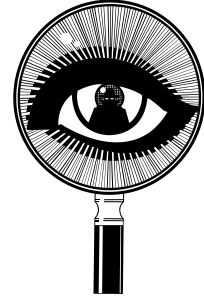
14. SHARING the FINAL PRODUCT

School Website, School Radio Station, Local Radio Station, Send to rowens@depaul.edu as an mp3

15. ASSESSMENT

Students would be expected to:

- Articulate what they learned from the unit related to reading, writing, listening, speaking, and technology
- Compare and contrast television and radio mysteries
- Describe ways in which radio enhances the imagination
- Analyze how music and sound effects contribute to the mood and tone of a radio show
- Identify the components of the mystery genre



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Handout 1: *Through the Mind's Eye*

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1. A detective is someone who investigates criminal activity and attempts to solve crimes. In the space below, write the names of as many detectives as you can think of from television, movies, and books.

DETECTIVE	Physical Description
Example: Sherlock Holmes (Book, Movie Character)	Smokes a pipe, wears a wool coat and a matching hat that has front and back brim, taller than Watson,

2. Write words and phrases that describe the personality characteristics and traits of 3 of the detectives listed above. (Write at least 3 separate descriptive words or phrases for each.)

DETECTIVE	Personality Traits and Other non-physical descriptors
Sherlock Holmes	Detail oriented and observant; smart; tried to help others; brave

3. Imagine your own detective. What does he or she look like? Sound like? What is his or her name? What are some of his/her distinguishing characteristics? Personality traits? What era does s/he live in? Where does s/he live? Married? Family? Vocal characteristics? What's his or her past history? How old is s/he? What kind of clothing does s/he wear?



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Handout 3

PRIVATE EYES AND PRIVATE EYELASHES

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Listen to sample openings of famous Old Time Radio detective shows (link on wefli.org or find openings on youtube.com). In the space below the show title, write descriptive words and phrases, draw images, list sounds and instruments you hear. How do you envision the various characters? How does the music impact the mood you feel? How does the scriptwriter try to “hook” you into the plot? Who are some of the show sponsors?

1. Dragnet – The Big Shot
2. Philip Marlowe – Where There’s a Will
3. Boston Blackie – Rockwell Diamond
4. Sam Spade – Lazarus Caper
5. Johnny Dollar – Star of Capetown Matter
6. The Shadow – The Man Who Murdered Time
7. Richard Diamond – The Bald Head Case
8. Phyl Coe – The Case of the Dead Magician
9. Candy Matson – Donna Dunham Case
10. Miss Pinkerton – Case 410721
11. Lady in Blue – Case 510505
12. Police Woman – Case of the Scheming Bridegroom
13. Meet Miss Sherlock – The Case of the Deadman’s Chest
14. Defense Attorney, Mercedes McCambridge—Client Mike Kelly



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Handout 4: *Through the Ear and into the Imagination*

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<http://www.escape-suspense.com/>

<https://archive.org/details/oldtimeradio>

<http://www.relicradio.com>

Select one of the websites above. Pick one of the mystery/detective shows to listen to and fill in the following information

1: Title:

2: Characters

Protagonists:

Antagonists:

3: Description of Main Character: How do you picture the main character (physical description? Other descriptions and traits?) What clues do you have?

4: Setting

5: Conflict

6: What type of music is used in this radio show? How does the music set the tone and mood?

7: What sounds effects were used in this radio show?

8. Summarize the plot.



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Handout 5: *Learning from the Pros and Their Prose (Script Familiarity)*

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Select a radio script from one of the websites

<http://www.genericradio.com/library.php>

<http://www.olderadioworld.com/>

<http://www.simplyscripts.com/radio.html>

1. Title of Script/Series/Show:
2. Original Air Date (if available):
3. Sample list of characters (3-5). Name and something about them:
4. Is there an Author/Writer listed? ___Yes ___No (If yes, please list)
5. Summarize the plot of this script.
6. Are there any abbreviations used? If so, what is the abbreviation and what does it stand for? (For instance, SFX,MFX...)
7. What type of script notes and directions does the author use to provide information for the actors and the producers?
8. What are some of the interesting slang/vocabulary words?



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Handout #6: *Let Your Imagination Go!*

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Author(s):

Title:

Characters (include name and short description, including role in plot), Think about Protagonists, Antagonists, Major Characters, Minor Characters, comic relief characters, supporting characters...

Setting (time, place). Describe in Detail. What does it look like? Feel like? Smell like? Sound like? How will you set the mood and tone of the location and time period?

Mystery to be solved:

Will there be a Plot Twist? a Red Herring?

Resolution:



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Handout 7: *Get in Front of (and Behind) the Mic:*

Rehearsing, Recording and Post Production

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Author(s):

Title:

List character and who will play the character

Character	Type of Voice	Actor

Time and Date of Table Reading (Rehearsal):

Time, Date, Location of Recording:

Recording Hardware Needed:

Recording Software Needed:

Additional Resources Needed Day of Recording:

Post Recording:

Music Clips Needed:

List of Sound Effects Needed

Name and type of file to be saved as:

Due Date for Submission: