**Production Roles: Focus on Sound Designer/Editor**

Lesson Objectives

In this lesson, the student will focus on the challenges associated with the role of the sound designer/editor on the short film project.

The Next Role in the Series

The role of [**sound designer**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3)/[**editor**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3)/[**recordist**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3)/[**mixer**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) gets special focus for this week's lesson. This role is special in that, besides [**director**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3), it is the one role that truly inhabits all three production phases. The timing of this lesson—as your crew starts to transition from production to post-production—is intended to coincide with the unique capacity of the sound artist to work in all three phases.

  
© 2012 Creatas / Jupiterimages /  
Getty Images / Thinkstock

This lesson, as usual, assumes you have decided to be assessed as sound designer/editor, but also provides worthwhile information for all IB Film students, especially if your crew does not have a dedicated sound artist. Nothing is so glaringly obvious in a student film as bad sound, so even if there is no one for whom this is his or her sole domain, the aspects outlined in this lesson still need attention.

Some Inspiration

Before we get started this week, take a little bit of time to get inspired. Browse through your DVD collection and pull out some big-budget blockbuster films. These are the ones that are far more likely to have a full set of making-of featurettes for you to watch. If you have access to them, the set of extended edition DVDs for [**Peter Jackson**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001392/)'s, [***The Lord of the Rings***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120737/) is the best of the bunch. There is also an excellent sound design featurette on the special edition of [**Peter Weir**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001837/)'s nautical adventure, [***Master and Commander***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0311113/). In it [**Richard King**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0455185/), the sound designer, discusses the challenges of bringing the aural world of cannons, big ships, and the open seas to vivid life.

Notice how much emphasis the director and sound designer both put on recording the "real thing" instead of using some canned, pre-made recording of something that sounds something like what you want, sort of, but not really. Sound design is not for the lazy, nor for the faint of heart. You have to be willing to truly listen to the world around you and then actively record it.

Jump Cut

Do you know what R2-D2 and a light saber sound like? You do, because of the work of [**Ben Burtt**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0123785/), who is one of the masters of the sound design field, and watching him at work is always worth your time, especially since he still believes in the value of finding and recording interesting objects in the real world—which you should do—rather than merely manipulating digital effects. View the YouTube videos below in which he talks about his work on the adventure classic, [***Raiders of the Lost Ark***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082971/), directed by [**Steven Spielberg**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000229/).

* [**Indiana Jones Sound Design Featurette Part 1**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWDSFihqyH8&feature=related)
* [**Indiana Jones Sound Design Featurette Part 2**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYdFiYGLr-s&feature=related)

In this module, you are studying the history and theory of the Western. What is perhaps the most iconic sound in this whole genre, the one that everyone knows, even if they have never seen the film? It is, of course, the incredibly memorable sound from **[Ennio Morricone](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001553/" \o "Ennio Morricone at IMDb - will open in a new window" \t "_blank)**'s soundtrack for [**Sergio Leone**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001466/)'s classic spaghetti Western, [***The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0060196/) (1966).

Listen to a [**short version of the intro**](http://www.hark.com/clips/xkrwgxlrdp-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-theme-intro#?clip=xkrwgxlrdp) at Hark.

This snippet of sound, such a brilliant combination of sound effect and composed music, of tribal drums, exotic whistle, and abstract chanting, perfectly sets the tone of this film. It is so perfectly suited to the feeling of the three-way standoff at the film's conclusion, anytime anyone wants to create a standoff scene in their own films, or even in their own lives, the gut instinct is to always reach for this sound. If you have ever caught yourself chanting "wah-ee-ah-ee-ahhhhhh, wah-wah-waaaaaaah" without even knowing the origins of the sound you were quoting, you have proven just how effective great sound work can be.

Sub-plot

Can you think of other highly quotable sound design elements, like Morricone's?

How about the shark sound from Spielberg's classic, [***Jaws***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073195/)? Or, the stabbing sound from the shower scene of [**Alfred Hitchcock**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000033/)'s thriller, [***Psycho***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054215/)? Does your sound design have something this quotable?

For inspiring sound editing and mixing, one need look no further than [**Walter Murch**](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0004555/), who edited sound on such cinematic classics as [***THX 1138***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066434/) (1972), [***The Conversation***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071360/) (1974), [***The Godfather: Part II***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071562/) (1974),[***Apocalypse Now***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078788/) (1979), and [***The English Patient***](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116209/) (1996). Murch is one of a select few editors who have achieved distinction in both audio and video editing, so we will return to him in next week's lesson as well.

Jump Cut

If you have an hour to spare, and really want to delve deeply into the sound editor's art, check out the [**interview with Walter Murch**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgrt8H4DucI&feature=related) on YouTube.

Quick Review

  
© 2012 Ablestock.com / Hemera Technologies /  
Getty Images / Thinkstock

There have been two prior lessons on sound design, recording, and mixing, all of which, though they are separate roles on a typical big-budget film, fall under your responsibility. The lessons can be found in Module 5 (Weeks 18–21) and Module 7 (Weeks 26–29), so if you have access to them, or to the notes you took during those modules, then it would be worth your while to go over them one more time, just to get everything fresh in your mind.

The previous lessons focused on sound recording (the practical skills of recording audio, both on and off set), and sound designing (the creative aspects of deciding what kind of sound you want and where to go about finding it). Therefore, this lesson will deal primarily with sound editing.

Sound Editing

If you are fortunate enough to be working on a crew, in which there are separate people doing the editing versus the sound editing, then make sure you insist on getting equal time at the computer. Too often the [**editor**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) will be stubborn about getting the pacing of the visuals just right at the expense of your role, so just be stubborn right back and remind everyone that the sound of a film is equally, and arguably more important than the assembly of the visuals. If you are editing both, then the same issue still applies. Devote an equal amount of time to your sound edit and mix, as you do to editing the shots. Never shortchange the sound.

Assessment Advice

These types of negotiations among the crew are completely legitimate to include in your written commentary, which will go in your [**production portfolio**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3). So, keep track of them as they happen. Do not trust your memory of these events. An examiner wants to read about your process, as much as hear a high-quality result in the finished film.

Quick Tip

Once you have the master audio laid out and nicely synced up, lock the track. You will be moving assets all over the place the deeper you get into your sound edit. There is nothing more frustrating than accidentally moving clips unintentionally. Lock the video tracks, too, while you are editing sound, so the editor's work will not be ruined. A really wise choice would be to save this version of the project (e. g., "FilmProjectTitle\_ Master\_Audio\_Done") so, in a worst-case scenario, you can always revert to the project in its current state.

In a typical scenario, you will want to lay out the audio for the master [**track**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) first. Make sure the audio recorded on set syncs with the video for the [**master shot**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) (unless, of course, you want them to be out of sync). This is one part of the sound [**mixing**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) you can justify leaving to the editor of the visuals if you are using the linked audio recorded on set by the camera, since the audio and video will be manipulated simultaneously. Once you have the master audio laid out, label the track as "master" if your software allows you to label the tracks. Usually, this will be Track 1.

All locked up and saved? Great. Now, your sound editing work truly begins.

Make sure you have a separate folder (or "bin") for your work in the project environment of the editing software. Name all your assets clearly and descriptively, including a judgment of the quality, if you have time (e. g., "scene020a\_footsteps\_hallway\_best"). The minor amount of extra time it takes to label everything properly will return to you a hundredfold when you do not need to waste precious time hunting down elusive sound files.

It is a good idea to reserve certain tracks in your editing **[timeline](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3)**for certain kinds of sounds. You already have the master audio track. Have one that is just for the music part of the [**soundtrack**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3). Label it. Nothing but music goes in that track. Lock it when you are not actively working with it. Perhaps a track (or more) for **[diegetic](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3)**sound effects. One (or more) for abstract or mood sound effects. Environmental sound, as well as **[foley](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3)** sound could get a track. A professional audio mix will often be dozens of layers deep. If you are not working with at least a half dozen layers yourself, then you are not doing all you can do to create a stunning audio mix. If this is your assessment area, then your work needs to be stunning.

It will be important for you to keep the overall [**balance**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) in mind as you edit and mix your audio. No matter how creative your sound work is, if it drowns out crucial lines of dialogue, your work impedes the clarity of the scene. Great sound design often works subconsciously, where the audience feels the sound without being consciously aware of its presence. Ideally, you want your sound to help evoke the emotions of the scene in the hearts and minds of the audience. If the sound is too obvious (think of the classic organ sting sound "duh duh duuuuuuuuh" derived from early [**melodramas**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3)), a modern audience will feel manipulated, and you run the risk of turning your serious moment comical. (Of course, this is a perfect technique to use if you are creating a [**parody**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3).)

Look at each [**angle**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) in each scene as an opportunity. What in this angle could benefit from sound reinforcement? Clothes being rustled, [**props**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) being manipulated, doors and windows opening and closing—all of these and more could get a boost from recorded sound. Do not be afraid to think non-literally, either. Abstract sound often evokes emotion more effectively. Again, consider the quotable sounds mentioned earlier in this lesson. All of them are sound metaphors instead of the literal sounds of the scene.

Use the [**split edit**](https://courses.pamojaeducation.com/shared/Courses%20M2016/M2016%20Film%20SL/Semester%204/week49/49_03.htm?_&d2lSessionVal=2dicqRFpCLeBUUxjQHoBQLex9&d2l_body_type=3) to your advantage. Hearing sound elements before we see the visuals of the new scene can help motivate the transition. Consider a stereotypical moment in a Western. A kid from town asks the local peacemaker, "What are you going to do when he gets here, Sheriff?" Cut to a close-up of the sheriff's face. We hear the train whistle blowing or the clock striking high noon, but we still see the close-up on the face—the anxiety, the tension, the fear. The sound helps create the tension, but it also motivates the cut to the close-up of the train pulling in or the close-up of the clock on Main Street. As you watch (and listen) to films, pay attention to how often the audio leads the cut. Then, try this technique yourself in your sound edit.

The Portfolio is Visual

Unfortunately, you have a slight disadvantage when it comes to the production portfolio, in that it is in a visual form. Unlike the cinematographer, who can include before and after stills of his or her work; or the writer, who can include script pages of earlier drafts, you have no clear way of showing what the scene sounded like prior to your editing and mixing. The examiner will only hear your final mix. So, how can you overcome this limitation and even turn it to your advantage?

  
© 2012 Photos.com / Getty Images / Thinkstock

First, be sure to take plenty of digital stills of you doing your work on set. Get shots of you holding a boom mic, placing microphones on set, and recording ambient noise. These are not to pad your portfolio arbitrarily, but instead show you doing your job in a professional manner. This matters.

If you create a particularly elaborate mic setup, take a still of it. If you do foley work, take a picture of the table you arrange with all your sound-making implements.

Learn how to take a screen capture, so you can show, visually, how complex your sound mix is. Select your most dense scene, in terms of sound, and capture a screenshot of it, as it exists in the editing software. Include that screenshot later in your production portfolio as you discuss your decision-making and experimentation process for that particular scene.

These suggestions are all ways of making your audio work apparent in a visual manner, so you can increase the likelihood of an examiner giving you appropriate credit for your hard work.

Ask for What You Need

On a final note, do not be shy about rounding up cast and crew for a re-recording of bad or missing audio. Just because a scene has already been shot does not mean it is necessarily done. Talk to your director, and explain what you need and then, insist on getting it. Of course, document all these decisions and discussions now, so you can write about them later. Your role matters and deserves the same amount of attention as everything else.

Your crew should be preparing to wind up production at this point, and head into post-production. Are you making adequate forward progress on your film?