

10.5 Reading for pleasure

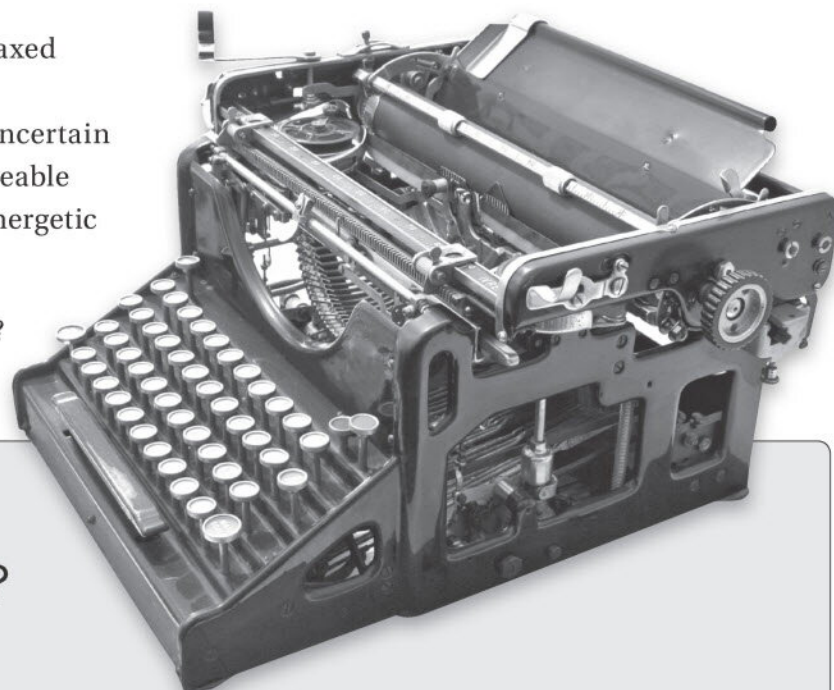
Authentic newspaper article

1a Match adjectives 1–6 to meanings a–f.

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 1 fast-paced | a making you feel peaceful and relaxed |
| 2 stimulating | b very bad, horrible |
| 3 calming | c making you feel less worried or uncertain |
| 4 unpleasant | d not something you enjoy, disagreeable |
| 5 hideous | e making you feel more active or energetic |
| 6 reassuring | f at a quick speed |

b What music or sound could you describe using each adjective?

2 Read the article.



A sound idea

Can noise make us work harder?

Julian Treasure

Can sound really enhance office workers' productivity?

The Times thinks it can. The newspaper has installed the sound of old-fashioned typewriters in its newsroom, with the sound getting louder and louder at press deadline.

Sound powerfully affects us in four ways, even though we're generally not conscious of it. Physiologically, sound alters all our rhythms, including heart rate, breathing and even brainwaves. Psychologically, sound changes our moods and emotions. Cognitively, sound affects how well we can think. And behaviourally, sound affects what we do and where we do it: we move away from unpleasant sound if we can. Hearing is our primary warning sense, so sound goes very deep very fast – and since we have no earplugs, our ears are working even while we sleep.

It's dangerous to generalize about sound because many of its effects work through association. These can be universal: we all instinctively associate any sudden, unexpected noise with danger; while most people find sounds like gentle rainfall or birdsong calming and reassuring. But many associations are very personal. Every individual's listening is as unique as his or her fingerprints because we all listen through filters that develop from our personal mix of culture, language, values and beliefs. That is why one person's musical taste is another person's hideous noise.

Most of the sound around us is accidental, unpleasant and counterproductive. We stand on street corners or sit in restaurants, yelling over 80dB of noise and pretending it doesn't exist. In society, noise is costing billions, mainly through loss of sleep, which affects one in five Europeans.

Is music a solution? Sadly, piped music in so many public spaces is often just more noise. Rarely is it carefully designed to improve our experience; much more likely it is there because retailers believe, incorrectly, that music makes people spend more. In fact, research has shown that fast-paced music generally speeds us up, so we leave sooner and spend less – exactly the opposite of the effect the retailers desire.

Music is designed to be listened to, so it's calling for attention all the time, interfering with our ability to listen to the voice in our head we need when we're doing mental work. Of course, listening to music may make a boring task more fun and help us to get it done – and everyone's different, so there may indeed be some people who are far more productive when they are listening to death metal.

Bearing that in mind, some useful rules of thumb are: slow-paced sound tends to relax; fast-paced tends to stimulate; stochastic sound (a wash of sound, like rainfall) tends to be good for working. The most distracting sounds are human conversation, telephones and alarms of any kind (hence the sounds in hospitals being disastrous for patient rest and sleep).

Conscious sound design can definitely help us all to become more productive, healthier and happier. But in offices, it needs to be designed after looking at the research available and installed by consensus on appropriate sound systems. Time will tell if *The Times* trial works, but my guess is that the sound won't last without the staff agreeing to it.

3 Do you find music or any other noise helps you work, or is it always distracting?