



Soundwalk Educational Activity

Objective

Attendees experience a contemplative walk for listening awareness. This activity allows listeners to focus and heighten their perception of the sounds in the environment, using their ears as their eyes.

Ages	10+
Group Size	10–20 students
Setting	Outdoors
Duration	30–60 minutes
Subject(s)	Health & Well-ness, Environmental Science

Overview

Listening is a skill that requires practice. Soundwalks have a well-earned reputation for helping people practice active listening. There are many types of soundwalks. The most complex use headphones to create audio-guided tours. These can feature narration, sound effects, live performances, or processed recordings. But the simplest way to experience a soundwalk is to explore a location in silence, either alone or with others. Soundwalks can also include stops for reflection or discussion.

During a soundwalk, the group focuses on listening to the soundscape. This includes sounds they make themselves, like footsteps, coughs, or clothing rustling. It is impossible for the group to be completely silent. But the best way to practice the skill of active listening is by not talking. This can be challenging for younger audiences. The leader should model this by staying silent and holding space for the group.

Every soundwalk is unique to its time and location. The sounds change with the time of day, the weather, the season, animal migrations, and human activity. If you take the same group on the same route on a different day, your listeners should notice changes in the soundscape. Each soundwalk is a one-of-a-kind experience that won't happen the same way again.

Logistics

Scout your route ahead of time without the group. This will reveal any obstacles or safety concerns along the path (fallen trees, detours, etc.). Once on the soundwalk, the leader should keep their pace slow and relaxed. Allow people to listen at a leisurely pace. Plan for at least 30 minutes, but adjust the time based on the route.

A natural environment is ideal, but urban environments like a city park can also be an engaging place for a soundwalk. Bring a clock to track the time and a map, especially for wilderness trails.

Soundwalks can also be adapted for accessibility. For those with mobility challenges, you can turn this activity into a “sound sit,” where everyone stays in one spot. This activity also works for those with hearing loss by focusing on visual and tactile cues like the vibration of sounds.

Important Vocabulary

Soundscape	The sounds heard in a particular location, considered as a whole.
Soundwalk	A contemplative walk through an environment for listening awareness.

Procedures

Step 1. Introduction and Prompt

A soundwalk is an activity to open the senses.

Say

“Here we are at [our location]. For the next hour we will be walking and listening to the soundscape. A soundscape is made of all the sounds at this location, including sounds we make while walking.

While we are walking, I’d like to request that no one speak so that we can focus on the sounds of our environment. Please silence your phones. Of course, if there is an emergency, let someone know that you need to peel off from the group. And if another hiker outside our group says hello, be polite and briefly respond. We just want to postpone our conversations until after the soundwalk is done.

Again, the purpose of this walk is to listen to the soundscape. The route we will take today is... (explain your route).”

Offer a listening prompt. This is an invitation to explore a theme or point of focus for the group to consider as they walk. Choose your own prompt based on the group learning objectives. Inspiration might come from environmental science, wellness, creativity, history, or culture. You may choose to include a creative activity at the end (before or after Step 3) such as creative writing, painting, or movement.

Sample Listening Prompts

- Listen for the closest sound. Then, listen for the furthest sound. Find your favorite sound.
- Listen to the changes in one sound.
- Focus on individual sounds. Then, listen for layers of sounds. And finally, listen to all the sounds at once.
- Find sounds that calm you / Find sounds that are stressful to you.
- Find sounds that are made by the Earth (wind, water, stones, etc.).
- Find sounds that are made by animals.

Say

“Before we begin, let’s take three breaths together. Find a comfortable posture, relax your shoulders, and inhale... exhale... inhale... exhale... inhale... exhale.

Continue breathing at your own pace, focusing your mind on your breath. <pause>

Now, let’s begin. I’ll lead.”

Procedures (continued)

Step 2. Walk Together

The group walks quietly behind the leader. Some attendees may wish to stray, so keep an eye on your group. Others may wish to rush forward in front of the leader. Keep your pace slow and deliberate to control the flow.

The walk itself is designed by the leader. We recommend you walk your route before you lead a group on this activity. Feel free to plan pauses at certain locations of interest (such as by water features or at an interesting sound). Your body language will communicate when it is time to stop and time to move on. If the route isn't a loop, the farthest point is a good spot for Step 3. After the discussion, you can let the group chat during the walk back.

Step 3. Discussion

At the end of the walk, stop at a safe clearing or return to your starting point. Motion to the group to create a circle. Wait for everyone to join the circle.

Say

"Let's take three (3) breaths together: inhale... exhale... inhale... exhale... inhale... exhale." <pause>

Ask

"I'd like to open our circle for sharing. What are you noticing?"

The questions in this discussion should match your listening prompt from Step 1. Create your questions before the walk, but be open to listeners' comments. Ask questions based on their feedback from the soundwalk.

Sample discussion questions

- Were you able to stay focused?
- How was this soundwalk different from a normal walk for you?
- What details did you hear?
- Were you able to hear a familiar sound in a new way?
- Did you hear an unexpected sound?
- Did any human-made sounds distract you from enjoying the natural ones?
- Did any memories come to you by listening to a sound?

Thank everyone for exploring their surroundings through a soundwalk. It's a skill that gets better with practice, so try it in different places and at various times of the year. Try it with the same group twice!

Fun Fact

"Listening is never static, cannot be held on to, and in fact needs to be found again and again." Hildegard Westerkamp



Fun Fact

The term ‘soundwalk’ was first used widely by Canadian composers R. Murray Schafer and Hildegard Westerkamp. Their aim was to draw attention to the sonic environment by teaching aspiring composers and the public new ways to listen. The World Soundscape Project



Resources

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Soundwalk Field Notes

Step 1. Introduction and Prompt

Say

Here we are at [our location]. For the next hour we will be walking and listening to the soundscape. A soundscape is made of all the sounds at this location, including sounds we make while walking.

While we are walking, I'd like to request that no one speak so that we can focus on the sounds of our environment. Of course, if there are emergencies or if another hiker says hello, you may briefly speak. Again, the purpose of this walk is to listen to the soundscape. So, please silence your phones. The route we will take today is... (explain your route). [Offer a listening prompt.]

Say

Before we begin, let's take three breaths together.

Find a comfortable posture, relax your shoulders, and:

inhale... exhale...

inhale... exhale...

inhale... exhale.

Continue breathing at your own pace, focusing your mind on your breath. <pause>

Now, let's begin. I'll lead.

Step 2. Walk Together

The group walks quietly behind the leader.

Step 3. Discussion

At the end of the walk, form a circle together.

Say

Let's take three breaths together:

inhale... exhale...

inhale... exhale...

inhale... exhale.

<pause>

Ask

I'd like to open our circle for sharing. What are you noticing?

[Add your questions for the reflection.]

Say

Thank you for trying something new and exploring your environment through our soundwalk.