

APPENDIX A: ACOUSTICS PRIMER

Expressing Sound in Decibel Levels

The varying air pressure that constitutes sound can be characterized in many different ways. The human ear is the basis for the metrics that are used in acoustics. Normal human hearing is sensitive to sound fluctuations over an enormous range of pressures, from about 20 micropascals (the “threshold of audibility”) to about 20 pascals (the “threshold of pain”).² This factor of one million in sound pressure difference is challenging to convey in engineering units. Instead, sound pressure is converted to sound “levels” in units of “decibels” (dB, named after Alexander Graham Bell). Once a measured sound is converted to dB, it is denoted as a level with the letter “L”.

The conversion from sound pressure in pascals to sound level in dB is a four-step process. First, the sound wave’s measured amplitude is squared and the mean is taken. Second, a ratio is taken between the mean square sound pressure and the square of the threshold of audibility (20 micropascals). Third, using the logarithm function, the ratio is converted to factors of 10. The final result is multiplied by 10 to give the decibel level. By this decibel scale, sound levels range from 0 dB at the threshold of audibility to 120 dB at the threshold of pain.

Typical sound sources, and their sound pressure levels, are listed on the scale in Figure 22.

Human Response to Sound Levels: Apparent Loudness

For every 20 dB increase in sound level, the sound pressure increases by a *factor* of 10; the sound *level* range from 0 dB to 120 dB covers 6 factors of 10, or one million, in sound *pressure*. However, for an increase of 10 dB in sound *level* as measured by a meter, humans perceive an approximate doubling of apparent loudness: to the human ear, a sound level of 70 dB sounds about “twice as loud” as a sound level of 60 dB. Smaller changes in sound level, less than 3 dB up or down, are generally not perceptible.

Frequency Spectrum of Sound

The “frequency” of a sound is the rate at which it fluctuates in time, expressed in Hertz (Hz), or cycles per second. Very few sounds occur at only one frequency: most sound contains energy at many different frequencies, and it can be broken down into different frequency divisions, or bands. These bands are similar to musical pitches, from low tones to high tones. The most common division is the standard octave band. An octave is the range of frequencies whose upper frequency limit is twice its lower frequency limit, exactly like an octave in music. An octave band is identified by its center frequency: each successive band’s center frequency is twice as high (one octave) as the previous band. For example, the 500 Hz octave band includes all sound whose frequencies range between 354 Hz (Hertz, or cycles

² The pascal is a measure of pressure in the metric system. In Imperial units, they are themselves very small: one pascal is only 145 millionths of a pound per square inch (psi). The sound pressure at the threshold of audibility is only 3 one-billionths of one psi: at the threshold of pain, it is about 3 one-thousandths of one psi.

per second) and 707 Hz. The next band is centered at 1,000 Hz with a range between 707 Hz and 1,414 Hz. The range of human hearing is divided into 10 standard octave bands: 31.5 Hz, 63 Hz, 125 Hz, 250 Hz, 500 Hz, 1,000 Hz, 2,000 Hz, 4,000 Hz, 8,000 Hz, and 16,000 Hz. For analyses that require finer frequency detail, each octave-band can be subdivided. A commonly-used subdivision creates three smaller bands within each octave band, or so-called 1/3-octave bands.

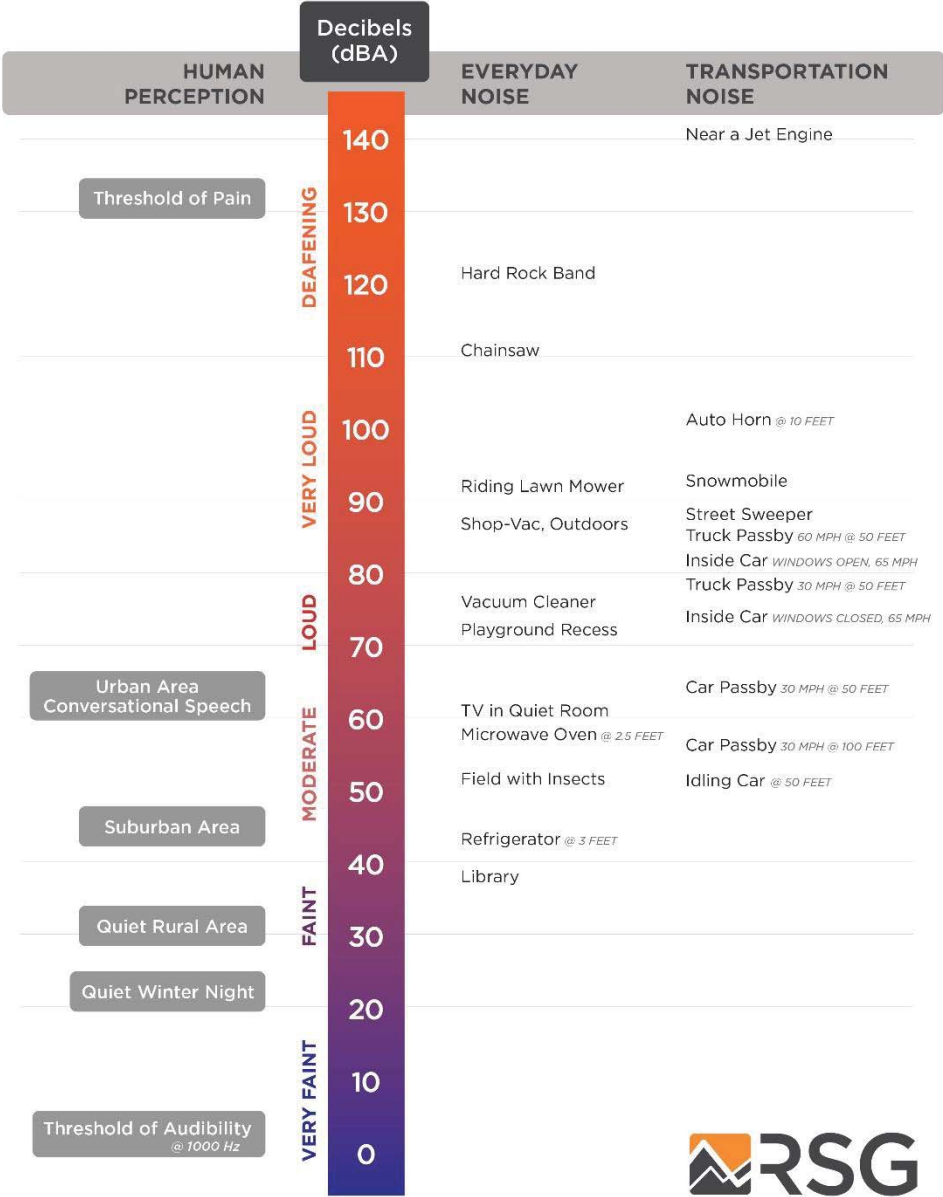


FIGURE 22: A SCALE OF SOUND PRESSURE LEVELS FOR TYPICAL SOUND SOURCES

Human Response to Frequency: Weighting of Sound Levels

The human ear is not equally sensitive to sounds of all frequencies. Sounds at some frequencies seem louder than others, despite having the same decibel level as measured by a

sound level meter. In particular, human hearing is much more sensitive to medium pitches (from about 500 Hz to about 4,000 Hz) than to very low or very high pitches. For example, a tone measuring 80 dB at 500 Hz (a medium pitch) sounds quite a bit louder than a tone measuring 80 dB at 60 Hz (a very low pitch). The frequency response of normal human hearing ranges from 20 Hz to 20,000 Hz. Below 20 Hz, sound pressure fluctuations are not “heard”, but sometimes can be “felt”. This is known as “infrasound”. Likewise, above 20,000 Hz, sound can no longer be heard by humans; this is known as “ultrasound”. As humans age, they tend to lose the ability to hear higher frequencies first; many adults do not hear very well above about 16,000 Hz. Most natural and man-made sound occurs in the range from about 40 Hz to about 4,000 Hz. Some insects and birdsongs reach to about 8,000 Hz.

To adjust measured sound pressure levels so that they mimic human hearing response, sound level meters apply filters, known as “frequency weightings”, to the signals. There are several defined weighting scales, including “A”, “B”, “C”, “D”, “G”, and “Z”. The most common weighting scale used in environmental noise analysis and regulation is A-weighting. This weighting represents the sensitivity of the human ear to sounds of low to moderate level. It attenuates sounds with frequencies below 1000 Hz and above 4000 Hz; it amplifies very slightly sounds between 1000 Hz and 4000 Hz, where the human ear is particularly sensitive. The C-weighting scale is sometimes used to describe louder sounds. The B- and D-scales are seldom used. All of these frequency weighting scales are normalized to the average human hearing response at 1000 Hz: at this frequency, the filters neither attenuate nor amplify. When a reported sound level has been filtered using a frequency weighting, the letter is appended to “dB”. For example, sound with A-weighting is usually denoted “dBA”. When no filtering is applied, the level is denoted “dB” or “dBZ”. The letter is also appended as a subscript to the level indicator “L”, for example “L_A” for A-weighted levels.

Time Response of Sound Level Meters

Because sound levels can vary greatly from one moment to the next, the time over which sound is measured can influence the value of the levels reported. Often, sound is measured in real time, as it fluctuates. In this case, acousticians apply a so-called “time response” to the sound level meter, and this time response is often part of regulations for measuring sound. If the sound level is varying slowly, over a few seconds, “Slow” time response is applied, with a time constant of one second. If the sound level is varying quickly (for example, if brief events are mixed into the overall sound), “Fast” time response can be applied, with a time constant of one-eighth of a second.³ The time response setting for a sound level measurement is indicated with the subscript “S” for Slow and “F” for Fast: L_S or L_F. A sound level meter set to Fast time response will indicate higher sound levels than one set to Slow time response when brief events are mixed into the overall sound, because it can respond more quickly.

³ There is a third time response defined by standards, the “Impulse” response. This response was defined to enable use of older, analog meters when measuring very brief sounds; it is no longer in common use.

In some cases, the maximum sound level that can be generated by a source is of concern. Likewise, the minimum sound level occurring during a monitoring period may be required. To measure these, the sound level meter can be set to capture and hold the highest and lowest levels measured during a given monitoring period. This is represented by the subscript “max”, denoted as “ L_{max} ”. One can define a “max” level with Fast response L_{Fmax} (1/8-second time constant), Slow time response L_{Smax} (1-second time constant), or Continuous Equivalent level over a specified time period L_{EQmax} .

Accounting for Changes in Sound Over Time

A sound level meter’s time response settings are useful for continuous monitoring. However, they are less useful in summarizing sound levels over longer periods. To do so, acousticians apply simple statistics to the measured sound levels, resulting in a set of defined types of sound level related to averages over time. An example is shown in Figure 23. The sound level at each instant of time is the grey trace going from left to right. Over the total time it was measured (1 hour in the figure), the sound energy spends certain fractions of time near various levels, ranging from the minimum (about 27 dB in the figure) to the maximum (about 65 dB in the figure). The simplest descriptor is the average sound level, known as the Equivalent Continuous Sound Level. Statistical levels are used to determine for what percentage of time the sound is louder than any given level. These levels are described in the following sections.

Equivalent Continuous Sound Level - LEQ

One straightforward, common way of describing sound levels is in terms of the Continuous Equivalent Sound Level, or L_{EQ} . The L_{EQ} is the average sound pressure level over a defined period of time, such as one hour or one day. L_{EQ} is the most commonly used descriptor in noise standards and regulations. L_{EQ} is representative of the overall sound to which a person is exposed. Because of the logarithmic calculation of decibels, L_{EQ} tends to favor higher sound levels: loud and infrequent sources have a larger impact on the resulting average sound level than quieter but more frequent sounds. For example, in Figure 23, even though the sound levels spends most of the time near about 34 dBA, the L_{EQ} is 41 dBA, having been “inflated” by the maximum level of 65 dBA and other occasional spikes over the course of the hour.

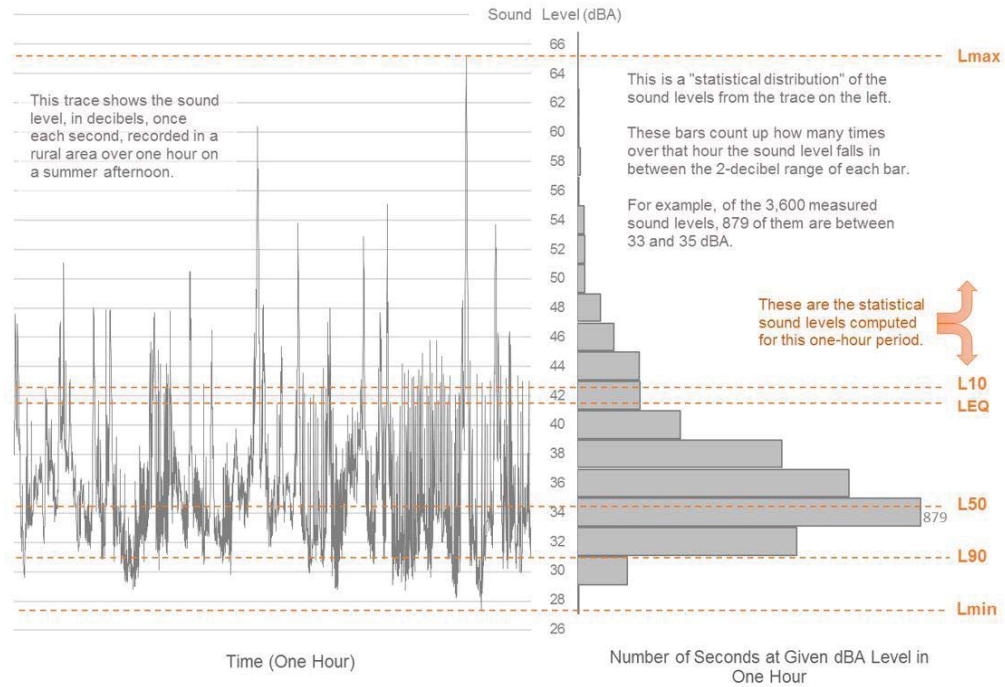


FIGURE 23: EXAMPLE OF DESCRIPTIVE TERMS OF SOUND MEASUREMENT OVER TIME

Percentile Sound Levels – L_N

Percentile sound levels describe the statistical distribution of sound levels over time. “ L_N ” is the level above which the sound spends “ N ” percent of the time. For example, L_{90} (sometimes called the “residual base level”) is the sound level exceeded 90% of the time: the sound is louder than L_{90} most of the time. L_{10} is the sound level that is exceeded only 10% of the time. L_{50} (the “median level”) is exceeded 50% of the time: half of the time the sound is louder than L_{50} , and half the time it is quieter than L_{50} . Note that L_{50} (median) and L_{EQ} (mean) are not always the same, for reasons described in the previous section.

L_{90} is often a good representation of the “ambient sound” in an area. This is the sound that persists for longer periods, and below which the overall sound level seldom falls. It tends to filter out other short-term environmental sounds that aren’t part of the source being investigated. L_{10} represents the higher, but less frequent, sound levels. These could include such events as barking dogs, vehicles driving by and aircraft flying overhead, gusts of wind, and work operations. L_{90} represents the background sound that is present when these event sounds are excluded.

Note that if one sound source is very constant and dominates the soundscape in an area, all of the descriptive sound levels mentioned here tend toward the same value. It is when the sound is varying widely from one moment to the next that the statistical descriptors are useful.