

# The Beeps

*Josh Freed*

Josh Freed is an award-winning journalist and documentary film writer. In the following example of an illustration essay, also look for elements of comparison and contrast and cause and effect.

Uh-oh. Something in the house is beeping—but what? Is it the stove announcing that dinner is cooked? Or is the dryer proclaiming my clothes are ready? Is the fridge defrosting, the thermostat adjusting, the smoke alarm dying, or is my cell phone dead? I'm living in an electronic jungle, trained to leap at every beep—if I could just figure out which beep it is.



I grew up in a time of easier-to-identify sounds, when telephones ding-a-linged, cash registers ka-chinged, and typewriters clacked; when school

bells clanged, fire alarms rang, and ambulance sirens wailed—instead of today’s digital whooping. Now they are all being replaced by the beep-beeps and bing-bings that are the frantic soundtrack of the twenty-first century.

Many of these high-pitched beeps are strangely hard to locate, even when they are right beside me. I usually fumble around for my cell phone when it rings because I can’t figure out which pants pocket it’s in—or which pants. Maybe it’s lost under the armchair again? Several times a week, a mystery beeping goes off somewhere in our house, and I run around like a lunatic trying to find whatever it is. I listen to our bookshelves, to our laundry piles, and even to the inside of the fridge. But the beeping always stops long before I crack the mystery.

Meanwhile, I am bombarded on every side by other urgent electronic sounds. My car beeps constantly, nagging me to put on my seat belt, or turn off the lights, or lock the trunk, or whatever else it’s trying to tell me—probably: “Wipe your shoes before you mess up my floor, mister!” My printer beeps identically when it’s out of paper, or out of toner, or when something is jammed—but which is it? My microwave beeps all the time, just for fun.

Out in the world, elevators and ATM machines beep constantly. TV shows beep when they bleep out swear words. Store machines beep when they swipe your groceries, or you try to swipe theirs without paying. Then there are security beeps: the loud BEEEEEP . . . BEEEEEP . . . BEEEEEP that says you’re about to be run down by a city street cleaner that’s backing up; the shrill beep-beep-beep-beep that says you have 15 seconds to punch in the house alarm code or an old-fashioned siren will go off alerting a security firm that you are an intruder in your own home. The simple but dreaded beep of an airline security wand means it’s time to start your striptease act.

Even life itself is measured in beeps. Hospitals are full of machines whose soft beeps indicate you are still alive. “I beep, therefore I am.” We are born into the world in a noisy jungle of beeping medical monitors and wires. We will probably leave it the same way—for most of us, the world will end with a beep, not a bang.

Who would have guessed the sound of the twenty-first century would be the cry of the cartoon Road Runner, the fast-stepping bird that was always pursued by Wile E. Coyote, crying beep-beep as it ran? Today we are all Road Runners, frantically beeping as we run for our lives, chased by our own high-speed machines and hectic lifestyles.

Beep-beep! Fasten your seat belt. Beep-beep! You have another new e-mail . . . NOW. “BEEP! BEEP! Hello, we value your call, but we can’t be bothered to take it now, so please don’t speak until the beep.” Electronic sounds have become so widespread, ornithologists report many birds are now mimicking our beeps, buzzes, and chirps as part of their mating songs. There are parrots that sound like cell phones, mockingbirds that mimic microwaves, and white-bellied caiques that do perfect car alarms.



9 Will the entire animal kingdom eventually chirp, roar, and growl electronically? Or will a new generation of humans choose more soothing sounds, like a phone ring that sounds exactly like birdsong, instead of

vice-versa? Or an alarm clock that sounds like a rooster? Or a cash register that once again makes a genuine ka-ching? Perhaps we will all have truly personalized ring tones made by gentle New Age mechanical voices that show some respect for our space: “Jossshhh . . . This is your sto-o-ove speaking. Dinner is ready whenever you are, but don’t rush—I’ll keep it warm. Sorry if I disturbed you.” “Suu-ssan . . . This is your phone ringing. Suu-ssan. I’m in your brown purse, under your make-up and your dirty gym socks. Will you take the call . . . or should I?” To beep or not to beep? That is the question future generations must face. But for now, I’ve got to run. That beeping just started again, and I’ve just figured out what it is: my computer.

## Vocabulary and Comprehension

Find a word in paragraph 8 that means “imitating.”

Freed states that he is “living in an electronic jungle.” What does he mean?

The author discusses three main locations where he is bombarded with electronic beeps. List at least three locations and give examples of some noise-making machines in each category.

How has new office technology affected nature?

## Critical Thinking

Why is the author frustrated with the new technology? Give at least two reasons.

What is the tone of the essay? Circle the best answer.

serious

angry

humorous

neutral

The author is indirectly comparing two worlds. What are they?