



WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Writing about Music

For many students, it may seem a difficult task to write about music. Unlike spoken word performances, such as poetry readings, musical performances do not necessarily use language to communicate. Even when a song or aria has written lyrics, its fundamental message is nonverbal. Therefore, writing about music requires careful listening, recognition of formal elements, and awareness that, in most cases, the experience of music constitutes two creative processes: a musical composition and a performance. Moreover, knowledge of music history and of the discipline's considerable technical vocabulary provides a critical context for your ideas and analyses about music.

In writing about music, you will often be asked to write a **summary** of a musical event or topic, a **critical response or reaction paper** on a particular piece of music or a concert, or a **research paper or documented essay** on a specific topic, assigned or chosen.

- A **summary** briefly outlines and describes the most significant features of the assigned material, whether it is a concert or an era in musical history.
- A **critical response or reaction paper**, while including a brief summary, should most importantly discuss how you *felt* and what you *thought* about a particular music event or composition. You should describe *what worked* and/or *what didn't work* and explain *why*. To do this, you will have to *analyze* the piece of music or performance, using the concepts and critical vocabulary you have learned in class. And always give specific examples.
- A **research paper or documented essay** is common in many courses but requires adaptation to the standards of the discipline, for example, use of the discipline's terminology, mode of inquiry, format, and documentation style. In regard to documentation, in the humanities MLA (Modern Language Association) is frequently used, but always check with your instructor first.

GUIDELINES FOR MUSIC PAPERS

Most academic essays seek to persuade readers to understand a specific issue in a specific way—the writer's way. The writer's thesis statement offers a substantial but concise assertion (usually in one to two sentences in the introduction or sometimes in the second paragraph), thereby providing an essay with its judgmental focus.

Perhaps, though, in writing about music, you might want to offer a focused and credible idea rather than an overt contention; for example, the statement, "Folk music around the world has been an important political form of expression throughout the twentieth century," certainly could function as the central idea of a paper. However, it is not one that necessarily calls upon an agreement/disagreement reaction.

The difference between presenting a central idea or a thesis statement is in their degree of contention. The above example of a central idea could be debatable, but possibly the disagreement would arise if the writer does not adequately explain and illustrate the idea through intelligent criticism, analysis, and research, and not because of the questionable nature of the idea itself.

However, in a more concise thesis statement, such as, "Folk music is a more political form of cultural expression than literature," it is more likely that readers will either disagree or agree, by the very nature of the claim itself. Moreover, even if the writer advances a stimulating argument with great evidence in development of the thesis, because the claim is confrontational, a reader may still oppose it.

Using Sources

A good research paper often includes evidence from both **primary** and **secondary sources**. Whether you are using primary or secondary sources, remember to explain and analyze the passages that you have chosen and what those passages mean in relation to your argument. You must also prepare your reader before using passages (direct or paraphrased) by providing at least a brief background.

- **Primary Sources**

Primary sources refer to the original materials (not what another author says about them). Therefore, in the case of music, primary sources are almost always the musical scores, performances, or recordings themselves.

- **Secondary Sources**

Interpreting and commenting on primary sources, secondary sources include books and articles. These texts are extremely helpful as they deepen our knowledge of music and inform us of the many critical approaches to it that scholars and other specialists in the field have taken. Even though these sources are of great value, an essay on music is usually not comprised entirely of secondary sources.

Documenting Your Paper

You will be required to document all of your sources, including ideas, paraphrases, quotations, and references to a complete text. Music papers generally require MLA documentation, and the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th Edition) provides guidelines for documentation, but be mindful that each academic discipline has its own preference. Always check with your instructor in a particular class to find out which style is preferred.

Analyzing Your Content

If your paper requires some form of analysis, there are many perspectives from which you can approach your subject matter. You may choose to analyze an entire piece of music, detailing all its formal elements and how they contribute to the composition and its effect, or you may address only those analytical points in the music relevant to your thesis, for example:

- relationships or patterns in the music
- changes in key
- theoretical principles
- historical performance standards

Where necessary, provide examples (usually passages from the score) to demonstrate, explain, or support your analysis.

Giving Examples from a Musical Score

All music examples given from a score must be numbered and referred to in your text as "see example 1" or "as seen in example 1." The examples must always have captions either above or below them, and should include the example number, the composer, the title of the piece of music, and the measure(s) you are using, for example:

Example 1. J. S. Bach, French Suite no. 3, *Menuet*, mm. 1-2.

If the source of information you use throughout your paper does not vary from the first example (such as the composer or piece of music), you need not repeat the information in subsequent captions. Also, all music examples should include clefs, key signatures, time signatures, and any indications of voices or instrumentation.

Music Terminology

The terms used in music may sound like a foreign language to some because many of the terms come from Latin. In addition, music scholars often use abbreviations for these Latin terms, for example, *cf.* = *cantus firmus*, meaning "fixed song." While you may wish to familiarize yourself with these abbreviations, you should try to avoid using them in your writing. If you must use them, make sure they are clearly defined. Common terms in music include the following:

Melody: **contour** or the shape of the melody (a particular succession of notes); **range** or the distance between the lowest and highest pitches; **motif** or the pattern of short musical notes (melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, or any combination of these) that is repetitive in a composition; **phrase** (a musical unit with a terminal point, or cadence).

Rhythm: **beat** or pulse of the composition; **measures or bars** (a metrical unit separated by lines in musical notation); **meter** or groups of beats in a recurring pattern with accentuation on strong beats; **non-metric (unmetrical)** or free rhythm with no discernable time.

Harmony: **chords** (a harmonic set of three or more notes sounding simultaneously); **triads** or three notes that can be arranged into superimposed thirds; **extended chords** or thirds added above the triad; **consonance** (a harmonic combination that is stable); **dissonance** (a harmonic combination that is unstable).

Tonality: **major tonality** (notes or chords related to a central pitch called the tonic with major scales; **minor tonality** or the same pitches with minor scales; **modulation** (moving from one key to another key); **atonality** or music that is not tonal or not based on any system of keys or modes; **bitonality** or the simultaneous use of two different keys at the same time; **polytonality** or the simultaneous use of more than one key.

Texture: **monophony:** (literally “one sound”; one melodic line, without harmony or any accompaniment, which can occur when one person or many people sing a melody simultaneously; **homophony** or one melodic line with a harmonic accompaniment that supports the melody; **polyphony** (two or more parts sung or played simultaneously); **heterophony** or multiple voices singing a single melodic line, but with simultaneous melodic variants between the singers; **counterpoint** (like polyphony in that it has two or more compatible melodies performed simultaneously).

Classification of instruments: **chordophone** or string instruments; **aerophones** (wind produces the sound: woodwinds and brass instruments); **membranophone** (a vibrating membrane produces the sound: drums); **idiophone** (sound is produced from materials: wood, glass, stone, metal).

Ensembles: **choir** or vocal ensemble; **voice ranges** (from lowest to highest: bass, tenor, alto, soprano); **choral** (music written for a choir); **a cappella** or choral music without instrumental accompaniment, literally “at the chapel”; **polychoral** (two or more choirs in a composition, usually with an antiphonal or echo effect); **orchestra** or large instrumental ensemble with strings; **band** (large instrumental ensemble without strings); **chamber ensembles** (trio, quartet, quintet, sextet, octet).

Standard ensemble combinations: **string trio** or three string instruments; **piano trio** (piano, violin, cello); **string quartet** (two violins, viola, cello); **piano quintet** (piano and a string quartet); **brass quintet** (2 trumpets, french horn, trombone, tuba); **wind quintet** (flute, clarinet, oboe, bassoon, french horn).

Related to text and music: **syllabic** or one syllable sung to each note; **melismatic** or one syllable sung to several notes; **sacred** (religious music, often for the church liturgy or services); **secular** or worldly, non-religious music, usually in the vernacular; **vernacular** (texts in the language of the people, e.g., English, French, Spanish).