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# Writing Research Papers within the University Music Curriculum

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## **Teaching Writing to Music Majors at the Undergraduate and Graduate Level**

Incorporating writing skills into both the undergraduate and graduate music history sequence has myriad challenges. Still, there are some subtle advantages in working with focused and motivated students who generally love their chosen profession. A typical music student has clear and often profound interest in his or her repertoire, thus providing a springboard for opinion, response, report, and eventually, scholarly research. She may also bring important skills to the table thanks to years of practice; skills that often include tenacious methodical application and problem solving. Yet these same music students and sometimes even their teachers may presume that writing is tangential to a musician's skill set. In a world where the aspiring musician perceives each moment as potential practice time, any and all diversions are seen as noise. Therefore, the first order of business is to make a case for writing, both as a means of expression, and as a means of organized critical thinking.

Typical of most university campuses, the undergraduate music history courses here at Southern Illinois University Carbondale are often perceived as a kind of bulimic frenzy of historical factoids, charged with the study of Greek, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque music, all explored in a single semester. Students must become familiar with a more general timeline that is, by necessity, an overlay of political and art history, and many students lack even a rudimentary

historical background.<sup>1</sup> The development of written musical notation requires careful investigation and is yet another thread to the musical story. Score analysis and listening tests are a regular and time-consuming part of this curriculum. Coordinating these topics with the undergraduate theory and ear training courses can share some of the burden, but there is still much theory and listening to be done in the music history classroom. Organology and instrument construction also generates great interest. Our students benefit from hands-on experiences, trying to actually play some of the instrument reproductions we have in collection. All this means that teachers of undergraduate history WAC courses have the opportunity to assign papers that report, elucidate and integrate a student's understanding of these aforementioned activities, while developing writing skills that answer more general standards of education.

The types of writing required for the WAC undergraduate music history courses include two kinds of expression. Jean Sheridan's 1992 editorial has a useful summary of these two general types of writing:

**Informative writing.** Interpreting Britton, Fulwiler says that some forms of written language have developed to accomplish very specific tasks. Intended primarily to "inform, instruct, or persuade," these writings have often taken the form of "essays, reports, term papers in school settings--what we call expository or transactional writing." Writers in this mode are at all times concerned with their audience, and set their tone and language accordingly.(n7)

**Expressive writing.** A second type of writing, expressive writing, is characterized by journaling, process writing, peer review, and collaboration. Radically different from transactional writing, this form represents the

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<sup>1</sup> The National Assessment for Educational Progress has planned testing of world history proficiency for 12<sup>th</sup> graders beginning in 2018 (see: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/worldhistory>).

efforts of writers to (1) find their own voices (rather than respond to the perceived demands of the audience) and (2) integrate new knowledge with old. It is a social act because it is shared with others from the point of conception, through drafts and revisions, to the finished product.(n8) It makes use of livelier language, and does not discourage, as do formal styles of transactional writing, a personal involvement with the subject.(n9)<sup>2</sup>

Following this paradigm, the WAC undergraduates have opportunities to write both formally and expressively, while the graduate students focus on formal writing. In order to avoid confusion, the undergraduates need to be clear that a performance response paper is primarily expressive writing, whereas music analysis and research papers are more of the formal, transactional type. In class, emphasis on technical vocabulary, topic organization, and timelines help the student develop precise language for more formal writing.

Writing models for undergraduates can inspire and inform students about the substance of professional performances as well as newly premiered works. The *New York Times* provides a good source of music reviews and is an easily searchable database. Because it reviews music in all genera, students can find excellent reviews in everything from Opera to Heavy Metal. These reviews vary in substance, and I encourage comparison of a number of articles when class time allows. Concert review assignments encourage the student to attend performances both on and off campus and learn to listen critically, something that may be new and challenging to many.

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<sup>2</sup> Sheridan, Jean. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*. May 1992, Vol. 18 Issue 2, p90. 5p.

The short research paper assignment introduces the undergraduate to expository or transactional writing. This is often more difficult for artists who are used to expressing their opinion rather than constructing a more scientific argument.

Students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels seem to respond to the idea of documentation as entering into a conversation with other researchers in their field. By footnotes and bibliographical entry, the students can come back to salient references and enter into a sort of dialogue with other authors, agreeing with, or refuting their arguments. They can also check their work for inadvertent plagiarism by returning to their references.

Graduate students in our Music Research and Bibliography course have no real limits on subject matter, other than some connection to music. This freedom itself is daunting, as the student is confronted with the task of choosing a topic. Reading in both Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations*, as well as Booth, Wayne, Colomb and Williams' *The Craft of Research*, helps the student choose and refine their topic choice by framing hypotheses that are of appropriate and manageable scope. Their essays are expected to explore the depth of their chosen topic in detail, requiring a thorough grounding in the vast array of resources and materials available to today's researcher. For this component, we read and discuss Laurie Sampsel's *Music Research, A Handbook*. First year graduate students are generally hungry for a more profound understanding of their chosen topic. This can provide an effective springboard to

reading scholarly articles, and then using these articles as models in their own expository writing.

Students are particularly interested in the professional outcomes of these authors, and how they incorporate themes and ideas into performance. Next, using concepts and terms that are familiar, we investigate the subject paper's formal structure. Was this a rondo or perhaps a sonata design? Did the author have a refrain or perhaps a strong teleology? Students are particularly inspired by the stories of successful authors who were also successful musicians. We expand the discussion to include the writings by composers and performers, including Schubert, Ives, and Cage. Highlighting the common positive features of these articles begins to generate a rubric for evaluating their own papers and research.

Motivating graduate students to engage in truly creative and original research is often a major challenge. As more authors vie for scant space in peer-reviewed journals, we must appeal to the graduate student's intrinsic motivation, hoping that she will want to learn and write either to inform her performance and teaching, or to clarify abstract or theoretical quandaries. In my class, clear and convincing arguments have been made in everything from baroque quotation in Heavy Metal to side effects of asthma medication on singers. Semiotic analysis and gestural theory have helped students to develop an understanding of the interconnections among composers, compositions, performances and audiences. To whom is the composer or performer communicating? How has that audience changed over time, and how has their *a priori* knowledge altered the context of music that was created centuries ago? Questions of interpretation, etiology,

provenance, ornamentation, and other musicological topics prompt the student to research, organize and evaluate source material. Many students are familiar with only books, journals, and scores, but discover new source material in iconographies, video and audio recordings, chronologies, thematic catalogues, festschriften and other relevant source material.

But a bit of extrinsic motivation can also be advantageous in creating a culture of healthy competition on campus. At the graduate level, students are informed that, after peer review, the best research papers will have the privilege of a spot on the Southern Illinois University Morris Library's OpenSIUC website., thereby presenting their work an audience that is indeed global. Short of being accepted by a peer-reviewed journal, this opportunity gives the student an immediate and more easily attainable goal.

Undergraduates are asked to write music reviews and shorter papers on topics relevant to the historical period being studied. The study of poetic forms opens a conversation about the relationship between poetic and musical structures. Guillaume de Machaut's viralai, *Douce Dame Jolie*, can be analyzed by either poetic or musical form, and Machaut (1300-1377) is revered as both a poet and musician. Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), though not working in poetic form, offers an example of a more narrative form in her well-known opus, *Ordo Virtutum*. As well as being examples of musicians who write, they offer examples of writing within a formal structure.

Classes are assigned a short research paper at the beginning of the semester. This gives me an opportunity to assess the class's overall writing baseline, and make

adjustments to the curriculum utilizing a clear rubric for assessment. As with music, daily practice in writing becomes an objective. When framed in this way, music students access the logic of their familiar craft as they venture into the less familiar genre of writing. Early in the semester, we have a lecture and presentation on how to pick and narrow or broaden research topics, and an overview of resources specific to music research, and establish a clear understanding between a report and a research paper. Students submit proposed topics along with a rough bibliography. At this point we can discuss bibliographical formatting along with an assessment of the viability of their topic of choice, including a working title for the larger research project.

Students will be asked to do some sort of oral presentation in the course of their professional lives, and the popular medium of Powerpoint presentation has become almost standard. Music students are by nature performers, and they seem to look forward to presenting their papers in this format. The weakness with Powerpoint as an outline format is in the view given to the student during the creative process. Each slide becomes too much of a microcosm to see the larger picture. By printing out the slides and organizing them on the table or floor, the student can have a better idea of where the paper is going, and how the components flow from one idea to the next.

At this stage, the students are working collaboratively and often are excited about their process of investigation and discovery. The feeling is not unlike preparing a recital or concert at the point where the program and schedule have been set, yet the performer is aware of the difficulty and potential accomplishment



of the performance itself. This is also the moment when the scope of the project may need modification because it is too narrow or too broad. This can be viewed as analogous to changing a program for reasons of length or unreasonable difficulty. Students produce their best work when they have chosen a topic that knits together other aspects of their music curriculum. This often includes theoretical analysis, historical background of composers and compositions, or contemporary extended techniques. Drawing on the established strengths and interests of these music students, our academic courses can empower them to embrace and excel in written forms of expression.

Basic concepts of semiotic analysis can help music students when considering the relationship between their written text and their intended reader or listener. Charles Saunders Peirce's concept of the tripartite sign vehicle, object, and interpretant, goes a long way in helping the student understand his or her performance as a stimulus to the listener's response.<sup>3</sup> Likewise in written expression, the reader plays an active role when he or she is engaged by the prose. Choice of vocabulary can maximize the writer's intent and create sharper imagery. Opening a discussion of the relationship between a composer's idea and that idea's written expression can help define the roles of the both performer and listener in relation to the manuscript. Analogy to written prose and the reader's interpretation of that writing creates a bridge for a clearer understanding of semiotic concepts in musical composition, writing, and performance. Taken together, these musical and

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intellectual tools can go a long way in helping today's musician find her voice as a writer as well.