

HUNTER COLLEGE WRITING CENTER

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 non-verbal. Therefore, writing about music certainly 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.

Popular Assignments in Writing about Music

Oftentimes, you will 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** 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*.
- **Research papers**, or documented essays, are common in many courses but require 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.

For online access to the Writing Center handouts on Writing the Research Paper, Note-taking, Writing a Summary, Asking Questions About Performances, Developing a Thesis Statement, Documentation Styles, Writing a Reaction Paper, or any other handout, click on these headings or go to the Hunter Reading Writing Center website at <http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu>. Of course, you are also welcome to visit the Writing Center at 416 Thomas Hunter to pick up handouts and to meet with a tutor.

This handout provides guidelines; always check with your instructor regarding specifications of assignments.

The Thesis Statement

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 this 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 (see the Writing Center handout on [Developing a Thesis Statement](#)).

Perhaps, though, in writing about music, you might want to offer a focused, well thought-out 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 a central idea and 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 thesis statement, such as, “Folk music is a more political form of cultural expression than literature,” it is certainly obvious 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.

Documentation

You will be required to document all of your sources, including ideas, paraphrases, quotations, and references to a complete text. There are style manuals, such as the *MLA (Modern Language Association) Handbook* and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, which provide guidelines for documentation, but each academic discipline has its own preference. Always check with your instructor to find out which style is preferred (see the Writing Center handouts on Quotation, Paraphrase, and Plagiarism, MLA Documentation Style, and Chicago Manual Documentation Style).

Analysis

If your paper requires analysis (and most do), there are many perspectives from which you can approach your subject matter. For example, 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 particular analytical points in the music that are 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.

There are many abbreviations that music scholars use for these Latin terms, for example, *c.f.* = *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, clearly define them.

For additional music information:

<http://satellite-one.net/musicology/>

<http://web!.hamilton.edu/javamusic/default>

<http://www.library.ucsb.edu/guides/ethno.html>