Southwestern University

Guide for Writing in Music

About Writing in Music

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Performers often quip (usually with attribution to Elvis Costello) that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture." Nevertheless, just as mathematicians, scientists, and sociologists need to explain their work to others, musicians need to be able to develop and present ideas about music in a professional manner to fellow musicians and to non-musicians alike. In this sense, writing about music is not a futile exercise, as the familiar saying suggests, but rather an essential tool for discovering the joys of music and sharing them with others. It is a metaphor not for dance and architecture, but for musical performance itself.

Types of Writing in Music

Personal and Professional Documents

Cover Letters

Cover letters may be among the most challenging documents musicians have to write, for two reasons. First, we have to talk about ourselves without sounding selfish or self-centered (this is a challenge of all cover letters). At the same time, the cover letter needs to prepare readers for the main document that will follow it: usually either music, a musical performance, or a descriptive or research-centered document about music. The cover letter must therefore demonstrate the author's professionalism without duplicating the content of the main document. Its function is to introduce or frame the main document, not to summarize or reproduce its content. For general information about cover letters, you can visit Purdue's Online Writing Labs (OWL) site "Cover Letters 1: Quick Tips."

About this guide

This guide contains the following sections:

The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.

Résumés or Curricula Vitae

Along with professional applications, musicians generally submit either a résumé or a *curriculum vitae* (sometimes called simply "CV" or "vita"). These documents provide essential information concerning your education, professional activities and achievements, etc., and both classify professional activities (for example, having sections on formal presentations, publications, awards and honors, etc.) The main differences between these two documents are that résumés tend to be very brief (one or two pages) and proceed in chronological order, whereas *curricula vitae* are lengthier/ more detailed and proceed in reverse chronological order, giving a detailed overview of the writer's professional life from the recent past backwards. For more information on these documents, Career Services has a "Resume and Cover Letter Writing Guide" available online that can be helpful.

Descriptive and Research-Centered Documents

For Amateur Readerships

Liner Notes and Program Notes

Liner notes and program notes are short documents directed primarily at readers who have little or no formal musical education. As such, they do not make use of musical examples or detailed professional vocabulary. For this reason, the most effective material for discussion in these documents is cultural context, musical style, and biographical information. (Always remember, however, that teaching readers about a composer's life is not the same as teaching them about the music.)

Press Releases

These documents are also short and directed at general audiences, but they must dispense almost entirely with any sort of musical evidence. Instead, the point of the press release is (1) to announce an event or recent achievement in a way that catches readers' interest; (2) to do so without exaggerating the event's significance; and (3) to provide contact details for more information.

Blogs and Blog Entries

Blogs and blog entries are one of the newest (and in some ways most exciting) genres of writing about music: there are effectively no restrictions on length; the author has complete control determining the target audience; documenting, cross-referencing, and adding music examples can be as simple as including hyperlinks; and in principle blogs can be revised and updated *ad infinitum*.

Blog entries are also public—a fact that may be at once appealing and intimidating. The downsides to these documents are that they never leave the screen, and that their comparatively miniscule presence in the ever-expanding blogosphere dooms them to ephemerality and probable obscurity.

As descendants of the Opinion/Editorial pages of print journalism, blogs tend to be journalistic in character and typically foreground the author's opinion on a matter of contemporary relevance. They can therefore be considered online, informal counterparts to the Critical Response/Reaction papers discussed later in this guide.

For Professional Readerships

Abstracts

Abstracts are succinct distillations of a larger project into a paragraph or two (usually 250-500 words). They are designed to give potential readers an overview of the project, the author's methodology, and projected or final findings—in brief, a presentation of the larger project in miniature. Abstracts resemble the press release in that they are intended to generate interest in the project, but because they are geared toward professional rather than amateur audiences, they are an appropriate venue for the sort of professional vocabulary that all music majors possess.

Critical Response or Reaction Papers

These documents may engage a range of topics, including a particular musical composition, a performance or recording, or another piece of writing about music (primary sources and scholarly articles are especially effective for this last). While they require a certain amount of summary so that the reader is informed about the subject of the critique, the main objective of these documents is to **think critically in writing** about their subject—therefore, critical papers usually also require historical context and stylistic or theoretical analysis. One of the major challenges of this genre is organizing the paper so that the summary and critique read as two parts of a single document, rather than two separate documents joined at the middle. One useful strategy for accomplishing this is to organize your document as a whole around a central idea or a thesis–the main goal is to make certain that the reader hears **your** voice throughout, including the portion that summarizes the object of your paper.

Research Papers

Research papers are typically the longest and most complex genre of writing about music; undergraduate research papers in music typically range from 8-10 pages to 20-25 pages (not including music examples and other illustrative material). They require not only rigorous documentation, but also extensive preparatory work in the form of stylistic and theoretical analysis historical and contextual research. The specific analytical and methodological framework you employ will vary according to the discipline of the course for which you are writing (for example, conducting, music education, music literature, or music theory).

Your instructor will provide you with specific guidelines concerning the mechanics and submission format of your paper. Some instructors will assign your topic, while others will allow you to choose a topic within certain parameters—a certain historical style-period; analytical, biographical, contextual, historical, or methodological emphasis; and so on. In any case, it is useful to approach research papers in music as more than just summary of others' ideas. Instead, your writing should give your own unique insights into a musical subject and also take account other people, both historical and contemporary, who have considered that same subject.

Evidence in Music Writing

Writing about music often entails one special difficulty: the **evidence** that supports musical theses is often expressed in musical notation, a highly symbolic language that (unlike the symbols of math and science) cannot be translated into words. Because musical notation is extremely space-inefficient, part of the task of writing about music is not only choosing **what** to include as evidence—an entire score is rarely feasible or desirable—but also **how** to include and frame it. Many genres of writing about music (such as liner notes and program notes) require discussion of music but do not permit the inclusion of actual musical examples. In these instances, the author must describe the relevant aspects of the score without lapsing into play-by-play narration of what readers can already see or hear by themselves. Keep in mind that your musical evidence, like everything else in your paper, must **directly** support the thesis or central idea of the paragraph(s) where it occurs. Other material (such as measures, voices, or instrumental parts that are not part of your discussion) is extraneous and should be excised. Scanner technology and music-notation software make such focused and professional music examples easy to produce.

When music examples are included in your paper, each must be clearly labeled and identified. Examples must also include all essential information such as clefs, key signatures, and any indications of voices or instrumentation. Your instructor will provide specific guidelines as to whether your music examples should be included in the main body of the paper or appended to it.

Conventions of Writing in Music

- The second-person "**you**" is best avoided.
- Except in cover letters and—with rare exceptions—response papers, it is also preferable to avoid the first-person **"I."**
- Generic titles and epithets are not italicized; proper titles are.

Example: Symphony No. 6 in F Major, Op. 68 ("Pastoral"), but *The Art of Fugue*.

- Proper movement titles of larger works are placed in quotation marks.

Example: "Merry Gathering of Country Folk" from the "Pastoral" Symphony, "Der Leiermann" from *Winterreise*.

- Liturgical titles (e.g., Mass in C Minor, Kyrie) are not italicized but are capitalized.
- In diagrams, use upper-case letters for minor-mode pitch names and upper-case ones for major-mode pitch names. In prose, however, always capitalize pitch names

Example: D minor, D major

- For accidentals, either write out the word or use the proper diacritical symbol; do not use a lower-case b for "flat" or a pound sign (#) for "sharp."

Citation and Formatting

Whatever type of paper you are writing, **it is essential that you give others credit whenever you draw on their work**–regardless of whether you're recounting some bit of information you found in their work or quoting their actual words. In personal and relatively informal documents, this may usually be accomplished via an introductory phrase or a short parenthetical reference; in other, more formal writing **the preferred method in all disciplines of writing about music is the notes-bibliography style explained by Kate L. Turabian in *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*** (see "Sources and Style Guides" below). You can find links to Turabian citation guidelines and models in the "Student Resources" section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website. Bear in mind that quotations must follow the wording and punctuation of the original source exactly. In the event you omit anything from your quoted matter, use ellipses (. . .) to indicate the omission; if you add or alter anything, enclose that material in brackets ([ ]). Your instructor will tell you whether endnotes or footnotes are preferred in the paper.

You also need to know when it is appropriate to quote. **In music, the general rule is that while quotations from primary sources are valuable, you should not use others' words to make your points for you.** Secondary sources should be quoted **only** when you comment directly on those sources' words (e.g., to contest them or suggest a revision). The reasoning is partly one of the learning process (you learn little about writing when the words are already written by someone else), but mostly about your authorial presence. Anyone who has ever thought that a piece by a given composer sounds too stylistically indebted to another piece or another composer's voice, or who has ever heard a recording that sounded too much like another, understands the disruptive effects of such needless recourse to pre-existing material; better to maintain your own distinctive voice.

A Few Last Tips for Writing in Music

Musicians know well the importance of the dress rehearsal, so it is easy for us to understand the importance of proofreading: any musicians who have discovered at a late date that they have learned a passage wrong–a mispronounced word, a poor fingering, a misplaced dynamic, a wrong or dropped note–can recognize the parallel between this exigency of musical preparation and the writing process itself. In practice, the rush of creativity that comes over us as we write makes it all too easy to type *form* when we mean *from*, to accidentally drop a crucial *not*, to omit verbs or other words, or to create "monster paragraphs" that run on for screen after screen (or page after page), and in the process alienate or confuse our readers. Careful proofreading is the author's last and best defense against such problems.

The final tip that this handout has to offer for successfully negotiating the art of writing about music is simple: **read good writing about music!** Over the last century especially the disciplines of musical scholarship have developed outstanding models for discussing virtually every aspect of music, musical life, music history, and the performance of music. The SU Libraries have an excellent collection of journals, both in hard copy and online, that place these models at your fingertips. Journals such as *The Musical Quarterly* and *Nineteenth-Century Music* offer a wealth of writing that you can access as you search for strategies for addressing your own repertoire in writing.

A Writer's Checklist

(adapted from Jonathan Bellman, *A Short Guide to Writing about Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson Education, 2007), [194].)

1. Have I correctly understood the assignment and identified my target readership, its abilities, and its expectations?
2. Have I identified my motive in writing, developed a central idea, and made sure that this idea is developed or supported by the theses of the individual paragraphs and sections of my paper?
3. Have the documentation, music examples, and other supporting materials been completely verified and correctly formatted?
4. Have I printed and proofread at least two thoroughly corrected printed versions of my paper? If there is a rubric, have I self-assessed my paper in each of the categories for evaluation?
5. Have I written, signed, and dated the Honor Pledge?
6. *(For documents submitted in hard copy:)* Have I made a copy of the document for my own records? *(For documents submitted electronically:)* When I submitted the document, did I e-mail a copy to myself for my own records?

Further Resources for Writing in Music

Preferred Sources

Bellman, Jonathan. *A Short Guide to Writing about Music*. 2nd ed. New York: Pearson Education, 2007.

The Chicago Manual of Style. 16th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Turabian, Kate L., revised by Wayne C. Booth *et al. A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*. 8th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Other Sources Concerning Researching and Writing about Music (and Other Subjects)

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *"They Say / I Say": The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010.

Harvey, Gordon. *Writing with Sources: A Guide for Harvard Students*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008.

Herbert, Trevor. *Music in Words: A Guide to Researching and Writing about Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.