

# How to Write an Essay in Music

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## Introduction

This guide has been created to help you avoid common pitfalls and tackle some basic aspects of writing essays in music. Here are some key points:

## Style

### Using jargon

Do not assume that your reader will know every style-specific term you use. If you are not sure whether the term is something a university educated person will know, you should explain the term briefly. It is safe to assume the terms sonata, swing, and delay pedal, are not necessary to explain, but terms such as bariolage and monitor output will need to be explained. If you are unsure whether a term needs to be explained or not, err on the safe side and define the term.

Some of these terms will need to be explained when you are not writing an essay in the main subject of the material. For example, if you are analyzing music in a video game, you won't need to define what reverb, delay and flange are (unless they are applied in an unusual way). But if you are writing about the effect of new technologies on compositional choices and musical artefacts, the new technologies employed and each of their specific effects need to be defined and explained. It is worth thinking about the hypothetical audience of your paper. Are they all from your specialisation within music, or are they from other areas? Is your essay directly discussing the material within your specialisation or is it considering the material in a wider or different context? Asking these questions will help you decide what tone to write in and what terminology needs to be defined.

### Using Musical Examples

Whenever you use an image of a section of a work, as an example or point you are referring to, you should give some introductory comments on it before you add the figure, and some follow up explanation after the image. Beginning your explanation with something like, 'Figure X illustrates' will often help you to express why this figure is important to your point.

### Using first person

It is often not appropriate to use first person in essays. However, there are some instances where you may be allowed to use 'I'. If you're writing an account of something, or an ethnography, it may be more appropriate to discuss your own experiences in first person. In this context, think about the main point of the essay, and if your experience is important in that context. If so, you can draw attention to your experience with the use of first person.

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## Misuse of terms

If you are not sure of a word, what it means, or whether it is appropriate to describe the thing you want to describe, then check its meaning, or don't use it. You can always benefit from using words you know and can explain far more than you will benefit from using words you don't know and may use incorrectly.

This problem is made worse if you are misusing technical words. For instance, if a piece of music is not written for or played by an orchestra, it is not an orchestral work. An "orchestral sound" and "the orchestral section of the song" are two different things. An "orchestral sound" is not necessarily played by an orchestra, but describes a certain effect on the listener and a certain quality which sounds as if it was played by an orchestra. "The orchestral section" refers to the part that the orchestra plays, and so if it is not played by an orchestra, this is not the appropriate term to use. Be careful to write exactly what you mean, especially when using technical words.

## Description

A lot of students struggle with saying exactly what they are trying to describe, both in their analysis and in their description of a musical work. It does not help that describing what something sounds like, or the tone quality of a note in context, is not as easy as explaining what middle C is. In each discipline, there are common ways of referring to a sound's texture, such as harsh or rounded. Try to see if you can use these specific and common ways of describing sound in your discipline. Also, you should not use your description of sound as an opportunity to tell your reader whether you like the song or not. In these situations, you want your reader to have a rough idea of what the sound is like, if they were listening to it, and not give your judgment on the sound.

## Comparison

When writing a comparative essay, your aim is different from descriptive writing. The point is not to describe two things and allow the reader to make the connection. Avoid writing a paragraph about each and concluding that they are similar or different. Use points of comparison and focus each paragraph on how the focus point is seen in the two subjects you are comparing.

For example, if you are comparing Bach and Shostakovic, do not spend a paragraph writing about Bach and his life, and another about Shostakovic. Think about what specific aspects of their music you are comparing. For example, a paragraph can be about the way the counter subjects are developed in fugues from each composer, and the next paragraph about the different modulation techniques each composer used.

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Minimise biographical content. Target aspects of biography that help you make the points you need in your essay. Any comparisons you want to make have to be explicitly stated, and not assumed by the reader.

## Citation

### Plagiarism

Any use of ideas, information, and other content from someone that is not you, without acknowledgment of the source, is plagiarism. Students often accidentally plagiarise, forgetting to quote the author, or not realising that it is necessary to mention the source. Commonly this happens with sources like lyrics, liner notes, interviews, or quotes from famous artists. Even though these mistakes are understandable, that doesn't mean they're excusable.

### What is the point of citation?

We use referencing for a number of reasons in writing:

1. Similar to dialogue, it is inappropriate to restate someone else's words without giving them due credit. Imagine you're speaking in a circle, and someone makes a point before you that you want to follow on from. You would not repeat what they said without acknowledging them.
2. This way, you make clear what is your idea and what is someone else's, giving both sides the credit for their work. Remember, your ideas are important, and if you don't acknowledge others', it's unclear which ideas come from you and what sources have shaped your ideas.
3. If you agree, disagree, or want to expand on a point made by someone else, it is possible to show where their thoughts stop and where yours start.
4. Referencing allows the reader to follow up on the information you have gathered and find the main source. Your lecturer may wish to find the passage you are quoting to check it. Or a reader of your work may be interested in the main material you have included and want to find out more from the main source. Proper referencing allows for this follow up.

This is partly the reason references include a variety of details. They help the reader to find the exact source you have used, and not a different version, or something with the same name. Some of these details become very important in music. Different editions of a score may include different markings, or details in the music. Your lecturer and other potential readers want to be able to find the exact source you are discussing in your work.

Knowing what counts as plagiarism and how it happens can often be tricky. Do you reference the lyrics? The liner notes of an album? How do you reference them? This guide will go through the unconventional sources used in music writing and how to reference them. The Music Referencing Guide, found [here](#), includes a wide range of examples of the main types of sources.

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Harvard and MLA style are both commonly used within music essays. Use whichever feels comfortable to you. The Music Referencing Guide has both styles listed for main types of sources. Below, you'll find other sources not detailed in the Music Referencing Guide, and will be given further explanation on common areas of confusion.

## Missing In-text referencing

Often students include all of the sources they used at the end of the essay, but they do not include the necessary in-text references where they use the information in the essay. It is important to show where you have found the information you are using when you use it within your essay. Otherwise the reader cannot tell which part belongs to each reference. If you don't include all in text references, this will also count as plagiarism. Whether you have paraphrased or used a direct quote from someone, you must include the in-text/footnote reference right after the quote or paraphrase.

## Liner notes

Liner notes carry a lot of information about the work that you can use and refer to. If you're referring to names and dates of performers and works, look to the liner notes for this information. Depending on which style of referencing you're using, the arrangement of the information will be different, but a Harvard style reference would look like this:

Author, name. *Album*. "NAME OF SECTION IN THE NOTES." In accompanying booklet, ARTIST, *NAME OF ALBUM*. Recorded DATE. PUBLISHER, RELEASE DATE. Compact Disc.

Richards, Spencer. "Cecil Taylor Unit." Essay in accompanying booklet, Cecil Taylor, *Live in Vienna*. Recorded November 7, 1987. Leo LR 174, 1988. Compact disc.

## Referencing Blogs

There is a lot of useful information in music that is made available on blogs. Technical tutorials, the accounts of an artist's work or life, and the experiences of people playing, listening to, or being involved in all stages of music making, are all commonly stated on blogs. However, citing blogs is sometimes difficult, because entries may not show dates, or the author's name.

If the specific entry you are using doesn't have an author stated, try to find the original blog that it is from, or the homepage of the blog. A lot of blog hosts have an option of selecting dates and/or period of time for entries so you can find the publishing date. If you go up to the main page of the blog, e.g. [musician-writingcentreguide.blogspot.com](http://musician-writingcentreguide.blogspot.com), you can often find the author's blurb and name.

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A reposted blog post may be traced back to its original writer. But if the name is truly not present, use their blog's name instead.

For example this blog post would be referenced as:

Carlos Writes. 2016. "Mother Monster" is gone, call her Joanne" In *Carlos Writes*. <https://writtenbycarlos.tumblr.com/post/152622973994/mother-monster-is-gone-call-her-joanne-joanne#notes>

However, if you do a bit of searching you will find that there is a link to original post on a different website, revealing the author's full name. Therefore, it would be better to reference this source in this way:

Bilan, Carlos. 2016. "Mother Monster" is gone, call her Joanne". *The Other Press*. Accessed 27 March 2018. <http://theotherpress.ca/mother-monster-is-gone-call-her-joanne/>

This may not work all the time, but a bit of investigative clicking can help a great deal.

## Real Name or Pseudonym?

It is appropriate to write the pseudonym of the musician when you are referencing their CD or record. You are allowed to use a well-known pseudonym instead of their birth name. However, if you are citing an article written in their own name as the author, you must cite the artist's name instead of their pseudonym. If you are using their official social media account, then refer to that artist using their artist handle. The same principle applies with bands. In that case, there are multiple names, but if one member of the band has made a statement or wrote a blog post, you must only refer to that one person. If you are using the pseudonym, you can use their own name in brackets following if you wish, and vice versa.

Here's an example:

Beyoncé [Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter]. 2016. *CFDA Awards Fashion Icon Acceptance Speech*. Accessed 27 March, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKCQHgkPKxU>

## Using lyrics

You should only use the lines of the song's lyrics that you are referring to within the essay. Cite the full lyrics and where you got them from. Be clear whether you need to cite the recording or the lyrics. This depends on what you are using as material in your essay, and what the point of the example is. If you are discussing the words in the song, and the lyrics have changed in the performance, cite the original and in the body of the text acknowledge the differences from the original lyrics.

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This applies even if you are using an example of someone singing a cover or a new performance of a standard.

If referencing a performance or recording itself in-text:  
(performer, date)

In the bibliography, the recording can be cited as the directions on the Music Referencing Guide.

If referencing the lyrics in-text:  
(songwriter, original date of distribution of song)

Consider where the lyrics are coming from. Are they the published ones by the songwriters in a book or as a part of the liner notes? Or are they from a third party?  
If it is a third party, it may be unclear how they got it. Is it a transcription of the lyrics from the song?

If it is from a third party, you still attribute the lyrics to the songwriter. However, you use the site you found it on as well.

Example:

In-text:

(Germanotta and Khayat, 2009)

Bibliography:

Germanotta, Stefani, and Nadir Khayat. 2009. "Bad Romance," *Genius.com*. Accessed April 11, 2018. <https://genius.com/Lady-gaga-bad-romance-lyrics>

If the lyrics are from the sheet music, cite the publisher.

If you looked at the liner notes, you must cite it as liner notes. If the lyrics are from what you listened to and remembered, include a 'list of musical works referred to' and state the name of the piece and the artist. Within the list, cite them using the MLA or Harvard style. Details on how to format this list can be found on the Music Referencing Guide.

## Music magazines and their reviews

Using material from music magazines and review articles of albums or performances can be very useful in some essays. However, make sure to consider which magazines or articles you are using as sources. While there are a large number of reputable sources, such as *Rolling Stone*

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and *DownBeat*, not all magazines or articles will have accurate or credible information. This is not to say that smaller magazines or newer ones are not useful, but that you should think critically about whose writing you are using. Ask yourself: does this writer know enough to be writing about this? Do I think their writing is valuable and worth including in this discussion?

Of course, you may be in a situation where you are critiquing a work and want to distinguish a good piece of writing about music from a bad one, in which case you may need to refer to an unsuccessful piece.

Look at the Harvard or MLA guides on how to cite magazines and reviews. Online or print, you can use the same template as other magazines and articles.

**For example:**

Hermes, Will. 2018. "Review: David Byrne Throws a Weird Party in His Mind on 'American Utopia'" *Rolling Stone*. Accessed March 27, 2018.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/review-david-byrnes-american-utopia-w517679>