

How to Write an Essay in Music

This guide is written to help you avoid common pitfalls and tackle some basic aspects of writing essays in music.

Planning, materials, analysis

Picking a topic

If you are picking the topic of your essay, consider a **question** about your area of interest. Your question should be **specific** and answerable in the scope of your essay. For example, instead of “why was Mozart a genius?” you can ask “what was Mozart’s contribution to the development of the symphony?” You may have a sense of how you might answer your question, but let this knowledge be a starting point to your research; it is best to start your research with an open mind about your essay’s conclusion.

When you are examining your topic, it can be hard to discern **interesting** musical information from **useful** material, often caused by a lack of examining the topic. As you peruse the materials, you will start to build your answer to the essay question, which will be made up of multiple reasons or **arguments**. If you can show a clear connection between the information and the **arguments** in your essay, it belongs there. If not, leave it out. For example, if you cannot show how Mozart’s childhood relates to his stylistic developments, you do not need to write about it.

Materials

Materials in music essays can be wide-ranging. Primary materials (musical scores, lyrics, recordings of performances, movie clips etc.) are often analysed to find techniques and applications of ideas. You use your observations of artistic features and your formal analysis (whether it is harmonic analysis, structural analysis or another kind) to build an argument about the subject of your essay. Secondary materials (reviews, articles, books, etc.) provide perspectives on primary sources. These sources can be used to put the primary material in context, or offer new theories about the subject. Ask yourself these questions when assessing your sources:

1. Is my material telling me interesting information about the work or the musicians or does it help to build a picture of my topic?

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2. Am I discussing my own tastes and impressions or does the writing connect to evidence from the material itself?

For example, instead of saying “this section of the song is hauntingly beautiful and shows Beyonce’s genius”, you could say “this section of the song uses a chromatic progression to create a contrast. It is combined with the instrumentation on strings, creating a haunting effect. This technique is rarely seen in this genre and is applied in an uncommon combination of styles; this song is a part of Beyonce’s production style and song writing skills, which have helped to cement her importance as a creative figure in this area” (Jones 2020, p.58).

Your argument is not derived from your description of the material but the analysis of it; this is true for both primary and secondary materials.

Analysis

In your analysis, you need clarity on three features: the material, the method of analysis, and the outcome. Listening to a piece of music and writing your impression of it is not a complete analysis. Ask yourself:

1. What aspect am I listening for? (or: what about this material am I analysing?)
2. How am I analysing it? (by listening? harmonic analysis? comparison with other contemporaries? Etc.)
3. What is the effect of the particular point of analysis (how is this technique applied in the piece?)
4. How does it affect the audience? (what does this technique achieve in the work? What impression does it leave on the audience as a result of this technique or feature?)

Argument

An argument is a specific point about the subject, which contributes to the overall conclusion of the essay. A common mistake is to describe various interesting points about the subject without showing a clear argument.

Each [paragraph](#) needs to start with a clear topic sentence that outlines the material of the paragraph and its argument. This argument is derived from your examination of the materials. Once you have researched and planned your essay, you will know its conclusion or answer. As

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you plan and draft each paragraph, think of the answer to the essay question and ensure every piece of information you present helps to get to this answer.

For example, if an essay asks you to discuss the significance of Mozart in the Classical era in 1500 words, can you identify 3-4 specific points on how Mozart shaped or influenced the period? Does each paragraph provide a specific reason as to why Mozart was significant to the Classical era? Does your evidence help the reader understand each point you make?

Clearly state the reasons behind your argument and refer to the materials (music or literature). Do not rely on the reader to fill in the blanks or connect your analysis to the subject of the essay. Your writing needs to be logical and concise, so that your reader understands each point you are making clearly.

A common mistake in music essays is to write a biography of a composer or a description of a piece instead of stating an argument. Minimise biographical content. Target aspects of biography that support your argument. **If the information does not directly relate to your argument, it does not belong in your essay.**

Writing Style

Explaining concepts

Concepts you use and refer to in your essay need to be defined and contextualised. Explain the concepts, artistic movements, musical styles, eras, etc. in your [introduction](#). You only need to define the concepts that are directly addressed in your essay.

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 any university educated person will know, you should explain the term. If you are unsure whether a term needs to be explained or not, err on the safe side and define the term.

Using Musical Examples

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Musical examples, figures, and tables need to be introduced and explained. Make sure to use a caption in the figure and include a reference to its source.

Using the first person perspective

You may be encouraged to describe an account of your practice, your impression of a piece, performance or an ethnography, in the first person. In these contexts, this voice is appropriate. However, if the focus of the essay is on observations that are not directly related to your personal tastes, skills or practice, it is better to use the third person.

Misuse of terms

If you are not sure of a word, what it means, or whether it is appropriate to describe the material you want to discuss, then check its meaning, or don't use it. You 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; it describes a certain effect on the listener and a certain quality which sounds as if it was played by an orchestra. This hybrid term needs defining within your essay. "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

It is hard to write about music, both in analysis and in description of a musical work. Describing the way something sounds is harder than defining Concert A. Try to use specific and descriptive language to describe sound in a way that your reader can imagine. You can use descriptive words such as 'harsh', 'rounded' or refer to specific features such as 'high-pitched overtones', or even combine them: 'the sul ponticello notes sound harsher because of the less pitch and more noise that is heard when they are played at this dynamic level'.

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Comparative essays

In comparative essays, you examine specific aspects of two or more works or artists to provide a comparison. In these essays, avoid merely describing the two works and expecting the reader to make the connections and comparisons. Similarly, you should avoid writing a paragraph about each and conclude that they are similar or different. Use each paragraph to compare the artists about one aspect of the topic. For example, you might compare the improvisational styles of Coltrane and Davis in two specific albums, using their solos. You could discuss their use of chromaticism in one paragraph, rhythmic complexity in the next paragraph, etc.

Referencing

Music essays are wide-ranging and the materials you use will be at times quite different from other essays. Music essays often use interviews, lectures, articles, biographies and letters as secondary sources to support our arguments and to give us points drawn from the material. It is important to be able to distinguish between these sources and to understand their aims, biases, and audience in using them in your essay. There are questions to ask yourself about the sources you use:

1. Is this a peer-reviewed scholarly work?
2. What are the author's aims?
3. What are the possible biases?
4. If it is not a scholarly source, is this person an expert on the subject?
5. What is the work achieving?
6. Who is its intended audience?
7. Are the opinions here reliable? How do I know that to be true?

You may be using blogs, liner notes, lyrics, interviews, and recordings along with articles and books in an essay. In music essays, there are many sources that are not scholarly but are still useful, given that their source is an expert on the subject. For example, an interview with Ennio Morricone about his music may be very useful, despite not being a scholarly work. If your essay topic demands using a source that is not scholarly, be aware of the credibility of your source and if needed, state that in your essay.

You should only use the lines of a song's lyrics that you are referring to within the essay. Cite the full lyrics and your source. Be clear whether you need to cite the recording or the lyrics. Be

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careful in using online lyrics as some of the entries found are transcribed by fans and are not necessarily reliable. Use any official lyrics available if you can.

Music magazines and their reviews

In all sources, you should think critically about whose writing you are using. Material from music magazines and review articles can be very useful in some essays but you may benefit from browsing their output history and checking the credibility of the author. How to cite these types of materials is addressed in the [Music Referencing Guide](#).