



Writing about Music

A genre guide by Allie Donahue

"To write effectively about music is inevitably difficult, since by its nature music expresses its ideas nonverbally," writes Douglass Seaton in *Ideas and Styles in the Western Musical Tradition*. However, class assignments may require you to translate melody into words. Here is how you can do so effectively.

Not all writing about music is the same. Most likely you will be writing music history papers or analytical music papers. The most important thing to remember is that good music history papers include the same elements as good history papers and good analytical music papers include the same elements as any good analytical paper. You may also be asked to write papers expressing value opinions about music. These subjective value judgment papers are unique to writing about subjective, aesthetic subjects that carry no explicit meaning. For example, abstract paintings, interpretative dance, or music without lyrics.

Historical

Process

- Compile an annotated bibliography before working.
- Write a thesis or abstract.
- Create an outline tied to the specific page numbers of your recourses.

Tips

- Ensure that there is a cogent thread throughout the paper. Your paper should have a clear trajectory.
- If you are questioning whether to cite something, cite it.
- Use Chicago style citation.

Value Judgments

Words are sound symbols that carry communicative meaning. Absolute music carries only aesthetic meaning. To make value judgments you must define the parameters of what you think makes good music. You should learn specific terms and systems in class to help you do this. Use these parameters to back up your opinions.

Analytical

Process

- Be familiar with the analytical method you are going to use before you start. This is something you will learn in class.
- Analyze before writing.
- Use inductive reasoning: ask what, where and who, before asking how and why.

Tips

- Always explain why your analysis is important. Answer the question "so what?" Analysis is only so useful as it reveals something about the music.
- Begin with a strong thesis describing how your analytical methods will work.
- Couch specific analysis within a broader historical understanding.
- Use the citation method your professor assigns, probably MLA.

General Tips

Do

- Be as simple, direct, and precise as possible. Avoid technical jargon when ordinary language will do.
- However, when they are essential to your argument, make use of musical terms.
- Use explicit nouns and active verbs to capture the subjective and sensuous nature of the music.
- Use specific, precise vocabulary.
- Focus on specific examples and extrapolate from there.

Don't

- Don't get carried away with artistic language. Avoid wild and gratuitous metaphors and similes.
- Be careful with adjectives and adverbs, but don't avoid them altogether.
- Don't interpret musical pieces as direct reflections of the composer's life.
- Don't trust program notes and recording notes as reliable resources.



Helpful Resources

- *The Chicago Manual of Style*
- Irvine, Demar. *Irvine's Writing About Music*
- *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*
- *New Oxford History of Music*



Good luck writing about music!

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