

# Critical Thinking and Writing Strategies in the Music Bibliography Classroom

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## Introduction

Even if performance students are not required to write a thesis for their graduate degrees, writing skills are invaluable for their future success. In order to support themselves, twenty-first century performers often must supplement their careers by writing reviews and program notes, not to mention applications for fellowships and grants in which persuasive writing is necessary. A research and bibliography class may be students' only opportunity for garnering such writing skills. Historically, nearly every graduate program in music performance requires a research and bibliography class in music, generally taught by musicologists or librarians with backgrounds in music history. Not every one of these courses, however, requires students to write a research paper. Students enrolling in these classes come from a diversity of music concentrations: musicology, theory, performance, composition, and education. Students pursuing Ph.D. degrees are often placed into a different track than those seeking M.M and D.M.A. degrees in performance. The performance students often are given a diluted alternative, requiring only an annotated bibliography in the course. While a research and bibliography class has traditionally focused on finding research materials, citing sources properly, and producing an annotated bibliography, in many cases less attention has been devoted to critical thinking and to writing an article-length research paper, especially in sections devoted primarily to performance students. Some of my colleagues at other institutions incorporate exams, library scavenger hunts, and take-home assignments. While these exercises are no doubt useful for students, they do not alone teach students how to communicate effectively in prose. Even if performance students' culminating experience is a recital, a substantial paper is beneficial not only as a writing sample for further study, but also as a means to develop their writing skills for practical career purposes.

There has been little inquiry into how research and bibliography classes designed for music students have been taught in universities during the past

fifty years. The articles that have appeared, moreover, have been primarily geared towards librarians, not performers.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the research is grossly outdated, and comes from a time when musicians used card catalogues, not internet catalogues, databases, or other online resources. Although there are a few textbooks on how to conduct music research, these textbooks are almost a decade old, and the sources and citation styles that they describe are already somewhat outdated. Even though they contain many good research and writing tips, they are nevertheless geared towards a diversity of students, not strictly towards performers.<sup>2</sup>

A twenty- to twenty-five-page research paper may seem old-fashioned (or even punitive) for today's students. Performers are sometimes tasked with a culminating project of producing a thesis for the M.M. and D.M.A. degrees, but unlike students in the humanities, many have had few other avenues to develop their critical thinking and writing skills. Many students pursuing master's degrees in performance have completed a B.M. degree, of which the culminating project is a recital. It is rare for B.M. students, with the demands of an intense theory, history, and keyboard core, to have the same opportunities to develop their writing skills as liberal arts students. Because most universities and conservatories only require a two-semester writing sequence or advanced placement equivalent, these students may not have had ample opportunity to take classes that focus on developing writing skills. In large lecture classes, moreover, a professor (or often a teaching assistant who has had little writing experience him or herself) cannot devote ample time to working individually with students on their writing. Lastly, performance students have almost certainly not had a course solely on writing about music.

I currently teach at one of the largest music performance programs in California and have taught the graduate bibliography class over a dozen times. Based on my own experience and from conversations with my colleagues across the country, I will suggest an approach for a graduate bibliography class primarily geared towards master's students in performance. While many of the

1. Particularly during the 1960s-70s, the journal of the Music Library Association, *Notes*, devoted attention to bibliography classes. Paugh and Marco, for example, conducted a survey of over thirty instructors teaching music bibliography, however, these classes were limited to Ph.D. students and has no mention of teaching writing within these classes. Sharon L. Paugh and Guy A. Marco, "The Music Bibliography Course: Status and Quo," *Notes* Vol. 30, No. 2 (Dec., 1973): 260-62. See also Vincent Duckles, "The Teaching of Music Bibliography: A Consideration of Basic Text Materials," *Notes*, Second Series Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter, 1962 - Winter, 1963): 41-44.

2. See Kendra Preston Leonard's reviews of Bellman, Herbert, and Wingell as well as RILM's reference on musical terms and conventions. Kendra Preston Leonard, "Guides to Writing about Music," this journal, vol. 2, no. 1 (2011). Jonathan Bellman, *A Short Guide to Writing about Music* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007); Trevor Herbert, *Music in Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Richard J. Wingell and Silvia Herzog, *Introduction to Research in Music* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2001).

methods I present can be applied to teaching other groups, I specifically find them useful for teaching graduate students in performance. Because performers often lack confidence when it comes to writing, it is very important for the instructor to empower them. By breaking down the writing process into steps and giving careful feedback, writing a research paper comes within a student's grasp.

### **The Research Paper**

The first day of class can be wholly devoted to making explicit the reasons that students should learn how to write. Rather than painting a picture of a bleak job market, I choose to focus on the positive: more than ever, performers have the ability to have an exciting and varied career. In order to maintain this career, however, performers must be able to articulate and explain their art in prose. A research paper is an excellent exercise to acquire these skills. In order to engage students in writing, expectations of what makes a good research paper need to be explained early on in the class. I focus especially on the following features:<sup>3</sup>

1. The paper is written to a scholarly audience that is musically informed. The paper puts forth a critical and original perspective on a musicological, ethnomusicological, or theoretical issue.
2. The paper is well-researched, utilizing appropriate primary and secondary resources, including, but not limited to, scores, letters and writings in translation (and for the particularly ambitious student, manuscripts, sketches, and writings in their original language) as well as peer-reviewed books and articles.
3. The paper employs musical examples, tables, and figures, as needed.
4. The paper is well-organized, cited with proper footnotes, endnotes, or other rules for attribution (usually *Chicago Manual of Style*, 16<sup>th</sup> edition), and is written in academic prose.
5. There are no superfluous sections or information in the paper that are not directly related to the argument.

In addition, after presenting these points, the instructor may also choose to present the students a rubric with the breakdown of how each paper will be graded according to these criteria. A rubric not only makes expectations clear to students, but also makes the grading process for the instructor faster and easier.

3. Another list of successful music research paper attributes can be found in Herbert, *Music in Words*, pp. 37–8.

## Writing Through Reading

The syllabus for my research and bibliography class is both explicit and firm in order to reinforce the importance of deadlines to students. While the syllabus is intended for a fifteen-week semester, the first weeks of class can be condensed to suit instructors on the quarter system. The first half of the class focuses on thinking critically about scholarly article and book chapters. I teach students how to speed read, to identify a thesis and methodology, to evaluate sources, to understand context and significance, to recognize successful lines of argumentation, and to emulate effective writing styles.

Students learn to write, not only through practice, but also through reading. In doing so they learn how to deconstruct arguments and evaluate how (or if) these arguments are supported effectively. As Jonathan Bellman aptly points out, “Students too often look upon the musical scholarship they read in books and journals as something to be neither questioned nor used as a model, seeing it instead as the intimidating product of higher, perhaps more boring but certainly wholly alien, intellects.”<sup>4</sup> One should emphasize that all sources contain an element of subjectivity and no source is 100% dependable. As students read, it is essential that they evaluate the authority of the author, the author’s tone, and how convincing his or her argument is. Students should determine, for example, whether or not the article is peer-reviewed, or if the chapter within the book is published by a reputable university press. The more they read, the more students learn how to discern credibility in sources.

Each week at the beginning of the semester, I have students write a short, two- to three-page paper in response to the readings, requiring a summary of the main points, an explanation of the author’s position and the extent to which it is controversial, and an evaluation of the source’s credibility and strength of argument. Because students are reading as they begin to write their own papers, I often rotate assignments by requiring students to write responses to readings only every other week. I do not suggest instructors assign specific musicological or theoretical readings, but rather readings that the instructor deems well-written from a variety of topics and perspectives. It may be helpful to divide the readings into themes for each week. I always include one week devoted to readings on historiography; this is valuable so that students learn to dissect narratives and can observe potential author bias. I also devote one week to readings on musical analysis so that students can see how musical examples, figures, and tables are used to effectively communicate an argument. For other weeks, I find that readings on performance practice, opera, film music, and jazz are particularly appealing to graduate students in performance.

4. Jonathan Bellman, *A Short Guide to Writing about Music*, p. 92.

The second half of the class is devoted to students implementing skills garnered from these readings into their own writing. When discussing the undergraduate term paper, Carol Hess has suggested that the instructor request the paper in three steps: an outline and annotated bibliography; a rough draft and lastly, a final polished paper.<sup>5</sup> For a graduate bibliography class, I further divide the research paper into five steps: an annotated bibliography, an abstract proposal, a sentence outline, a rough draft, and a final paper. Separating the writing process into steps makes the process of writing an extended paper less overwhelming and helps students avoid procrastination. Moreover, the instructor is able to catch cheating, namely plagiarism and papers written by a paper-writing service, if there is a significant disparity in quality of the work from step to step.

## Research

During the first part of the course, students need to learn to identify and differentiate among primary sources (e.g. composers' writings, letters, as well as manuscripts), secondary sources (e.g. peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, *Urtext* editions), and tertiary sources (e.g. encyclopedias, textbooks, dictionaries, edited scores). Many undergraduate students in performance have simply relied on music dictionaries, encyclopedias, or their music history textbooks. It must be made clear that tertiary sources, while useful for procuring basic information, are not usually appropriate sources for a research paper. A difficulty lies in explaining to students that the function of the source makes it primary, secondary, or tertiary. In one class meeting early on in the semester, the students make a list of which kinds of materials are traditionally grouped into these three categories. Because of their class readings, students usually grasp the concept of a secondary source. However, identifying a primary source is more difficult for them, especially when primary and secondary (and even tertiary) sources could function as a primary source, and vice versa, depending on methodology and context. After classifying sources, we make Venn diagrams showing how these materials can function differently based on the research question. Students undertaking historiography projects may use textbooks and encyclopedias as primary resources, while students conducting reception histories may rely on newspaper and magazine reviews. For example, a student studying the change in how women composers are covered in textbooks during the twentieth century would use music history textbooks as primary sources.

The age of the internet comes with advantages and disadvantages. Online databases such as JSTOR, Music Index (EBSCO), and RILM make secondary

5. Carol Hess, "Score and Word: Writing about Music," in *Teaching Music History*, ed. Mary Natvig (London: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 200–201.

sources more easily available to students. Moreover, as K. Dawn Grapes has pointed out in her recent article in *College Music Symposium*, students can more easily procure primary sources such as manuscripts and newspaper articles online.<sup>6</sup> The primary drawback of the web, however, is that students rely too heavily on Wikipedia and other similar sites to procure information. That is not to say that these sources are not useful in the research process. While Wikipedia articles can help identify sources to get a student started on his or her project, they do not always provide reliable information for a college research paper. Classifying sources in this way provides a good opportunity to talk about the difference between self-publishing a blog entry or an online article and publishing in academic journal article. Because of the peer-review process, academic journal articles are vetted for accuracy and are generally more reliable. This lesson informs the student on how to be discriminating in choosing appropriate sources for his or her topic.

### Annotated Bibliography

The annotated bibliography assignment does not simply teach students how to format a citation correctly. It also helps them acquire a general idea of what each source communicates and how. This is also a useful time in the course to teach graduate students to cite as they go, taking careful notes on each resource and storing these notes succinctly. It is also important for students to note sources that they do not find useful, so as not to wind up inadvertently perusing these sources multiple times.

I find that the books in the Routledge Music Bibliographies series serve as useful models for annotated bibliographies. I put several of these on reserve for students, and copy a page or two from a selection of them to use as guides. Encouraging students to use these bibliographies as models, I require them to write a two to three-sentence overview of each source that summarizes the main point of each book or article, and also points out the strengths and limitations of each source. I require at least three-five primary sources, three-five secondary sources, and no more than one tertiary source in their bibliographies.<sup>7</sup>

6. K. Dawn Grapes, "What Would Beethoven Google? Primary Sources in the Twenty-First Century Classroom," *College Music Symposium* vol. 56 (2016).

7. Even though it is more than twenty-five years old, Emanuel Rubin's article on digital sharing in this context is still useful. See Emanuel Rubin, "Doing it on the Mainframe: Using an Interactive Database of Bibliographic Citations and Student-Centered Abstracts to Teach Graduate Research Methods and Bibliography," in *The "Music Information Explosion" and its Implications for Teachers and Students: Proceedings of the Session at the Thirty-Third Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., October 25, 1990* (CMS Report No. 9), edited by Thomas F. Heck (Missoula, MT: College Music Society, 1992), pp. 44-55..

Plagiarism should be brought up in class at this point. I often find that paraphrasing without proper citation is unintentional, particularly because in some cultures paraphrasing without attribution is perfectly acceptable, if not expected. I remind students that in the American academic system accurate citations are critical to stay active in scholarly conversation and are a way to give other scholars credit for their ideas. It is helpful to point out to students that citations are standardized in the same way that mailing addresses are.<sup>8</sup> Students would never give a vague address for a party invitation, but instead would give all the important details. In addition, the instructor must point out the difference between citation styles. In line with most scholarly journals in musicology and music theory, I teach students to employ Chicago citation style, but make them aware of other citation formats such as APA and MLA. Students often confuse footnote style and bibliographic style (for example, footnotes often appear with authors' last names first, periods instead of commas, etc.), so I perform drills in class so that they can master these differences. During one class I will bring in several books, articles, scores, and printouts of websites, and have the students make a both bibliographic and note citations of these sources. Because the students will produce the same citations, they can also correct each other's work in class. Designing an annotated bibliography introduces students to proper formatting for their final papers. By compelling them to peruse and select initial sources, moreover, the annotated bibliography assignment also prepares them to formulate abstracts of their topics.

### **The Abstract Proposal**

Ideally, an abstract should be written after the paper is completed, and in this sense, it is distinct from a proposal. It summarizes the main points, methodology, and conclusions that a paper argues, whereas the proposal is written to pitch an article or presentation before it is written. I prefer a hybrid of the two: a proposal written in abstract form, similar to how one would propose a presentation for a professional conference.

I teach students how to write 350-word abstracts involving four components: the context of the argument, the thesis, the methodology, and the significance of the project. The elements can be ordered in several different ways in the abstract. I prefer that they establish the context in the first paragraph, and follow this by stating the thesis at either the end of the first paragraph or the beginning of the second paragraph. The thesis is typically followed by a discussion of the methodology (either at the end of the second paragraph or the beginning of an optional third paragraph); and the abstract concludes with

8. I am thankful to Lindsay Hansen for pointing out this analogy to me.

a discussion of the significance of the project. There are many variants on this model. For example, the context and significance can be blended in the first paragraph and the thesis can come last. The advantage of my model is that it explains the project succinctly and convincingly. Abstracts written according to this model can be used not only for professional conferences in which students eventually may want to participate—regional chapters and the national meetings of the College Music Society, as well as individual instrumental or vocal societies, for example—but also for thesis and dissertation proposals.

The ability to write a convincing abstract comes largely from reading effective examples. One way for students to learn how to write a successful abstract, as well as a suitable topic, is to read entire articles and then discuss the abstract written after each article. Wingell and Herzog suggest having students sift through abstracts in musicological journals to get a sense of the proper scope for topics.<sup>9</sup> While I find this method useful, the student often selects a topic that is too broad; one that is more suited to an extended article rather than a term paper. Thus, I prefer to ask students to peruse abstracts for conference papers, which lead to a topic of a more suitable length for a one-semester or quarter-long class. Students review abstract booklets from recent professional music conferences such as those of the American Musicological Society, the College Music Society, the Society of Ethnomusicology, and the Society of Music Theory. I ask students to skim roughly fifty to one hundred abstracts within a week and then ask them to choose five abstracts that they find persuasive and five that they do not. We then discuss the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of these abstracts in class. (I present the abstracts in a pdf document of a conference program so that students can easily do a search and find with keywords on their laptops or iPads). In addition to learning how an abstract is constructed, students also learn how to choose a convincing topic.

### Choosing a Topic

Instead of assigning specific topics to students, I brainstorm with them and lead them to a topic of potential interest. This can prove one of the hardest aspects of the course for students. I have found that performance students generally gravitate towards topics related to a piece they are currently playing or a general history of their instrument. This is useful to help them to begin research for their theses. Many find it more rewarding, however, to select a topic peripheral to their areas. The professor might even require this to further challenge the students.

9. Wingell and Herzog, *Introduction to Research in Music*, p. 166.

Performance students in particular are often hesitant to take critical positions when writing research papers. Students often chose topics that simply recount histories of composers and their music, provide overviews of secondary literature, or simply walk through a piece chronologically without an overarching argument. Especially in an age where musicological discourse has shifted away from positivistic pursuits towards critical and cultural theory, an argument, be it broad or narrow, is central to a good research paper.

When undertaking a research project, the student can situate his or her topic into one of three paradigms:

1. Exploring a subject that very few people have studied before, and explaining (in a convincing manner) why the subject is worthy of being studied.
2. Exploring a subject that many people have studied, and showing how his or her approach to this subject is original.
3. The “Goldilocks” paradigm, which finds an ideal middle ground between the first and second paradigms.

By presenting this middle ground as ideal, I do not mean to imply that topics in the first and second paradigms are not fruitful (and, in fact, much of musicology has historically been in first two paradigms). However, graduate performers generally benefit from choosing topics in the third paradigm because they tend not to be too broad nor too narrow. Some examples of topics that graduate students have proposed concern lesser-known works by well-known composers (“The Mandolin Works of Beethoven” or “The Early Operas of Schubert”), works by understudied composers who were prolific in their time (“The Oboe Concerti of Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf” or “Michael Haydn’s Requiem”) or understudied composers who remain in the concert/operatic canon (Massenet or Delius).

## **Outlining**

I advise students to make multiple outlines throughout the writing process. At every step an outline is not only about clarity and organization, but also hierarchy. Like an abstract, the organization of the outline may be flexible, as long as each point relates directly back to the thesis. Students (and even advanced scholars for that matter), tend to digress in their papers. This is why making an outline is particularly important. While I prefer a complex sentence outline as opposed to a traditional broad outline, I do stress the importance of generating different types of outlines as part of the student’s own brainstorming and

writing process. Before writing the sentence outline, a topic outline comprised of words and simple phrases that sequentially lists topics and subtopics is helpful before forming a formal sentence outline. A sentence outline builds on the topic outline, introducing complete ideas and shaping them into sentence form. Lastly, a “post-writing outline,” written after the rough draft, can be used as a tool to identify digressions and superfluous information in the paper.

### **The Drafts**

Once the students have a sentence outline, writing a rough draft proves fairly easy. I must emphatically convey to them, however, that a rough draft is an intermediate point in the writing process and there are at least two or three more drafts leading to the finished project. (I often mention that I do five to ten drafts before one of my articles is ready for publication).

In classes upwards of twenty students, I find it difficult to read twenty rough drafts followed by twenty final papers in a semester. In order to accomplish this, I make required fifteen-minute appointments with each student during office hours to go over rough drafts individually. Just by reading the first three pages of the draft, I can ascertain the suitability of the thesis, check organization, and note stylistic inconsistencies or grammatical errors. I provide students with feedback on general problems in their papers, and give them specific areas to improve before the final paper is due. At this point, I can also advise them to seek out the college writing center or acquire a tutor or coach for the more technical aspects of their writing.

The final paper should be clear and carefully edited. I encourage students to read their papers out loud in order to catch clumsy language or grammatical errors. Obviously though, very few writers, if any, can catch all of their mistakes and inaccuracies. Between the due dates of the rough draft and final papers, one class is allotted to peer-review. Students come to class with two printouts of their papers, and exchange these papers with two other students. The first half of this class is devoted to reading the papers, and the second half is devoted to writing up reader’s reports. (This works in a two and a half to three-hour seminar; in shorter classes this process can also be divided over two class periods). While this activity helps the writer, it also helps the reader. As previously noted, reading aids writing, and students reading other students’ writing is no different. This process is especially helpful for students who might not speak English well.

### **Some Considerations for English Language Learners**

Non-native speakers will often be intimidated at the task of writing a substantial research paper. However, with reassurance and attention, they will be surprised at what they can achieve. While music instructors lead students to writing convincingly about music, we are not copyeditors. That is to say, while we are responsible for helping students to think critically, research carefully, and organize an argument, we cannot proofread grammar and word choices in every paper. Focusing on the substance of the paper and not the minutiae empowers these students. Still, the paper needs to be clear and small grammatical errors can obscure the substance of the paper. In addition to the college writing center, pairing non-native speakers with native English speakers in the class during the peer-review can also be very useful. While this seemingly would place an additional burden on students, the native-English-speaking students are generally eager to help. While English Language Learners chiefly benefit from copyediting, native-English speakers can learn when they are relying too much on jargon, colloquial phrases, or otherwise unclear language in their writing. Thus, this is an invaluable learning process for both groups.

### **Grading**

In courses such as this, it is often difficult to determine a proper way to weight grades for each step of the paper-writing process. One could make a case that each step should be weighted equally; however, I believe the final paper should carry the highest percentage of the grade—up to 30% or 40%. At the end of the day, performers are only evaluated on how they play or sing in recitals or juries, not what they do in the practice room. Therefore, I count each cumulative step as 5–10% of the grade. This also allows some room for small assignments like bibliography quizzes or library scavenger hunts, as well as leaving room for the evaluation of more subjective criteria such as class participation, effort, and improvement.

### **Conclusion**

Even though research and bibliography skills are necessary for graduate students in performance, the ability to write a strong, well-argued, cohesive paper is also important. It is a daunting task, not only for the student, but also for the professor. For this reason, many instructors have shied away from teaching writing comprehensively within this course. Breaking down the paper into steps not only makes the task manageable for students, but also for the professor.

The celebrated composition teacher Donald Murray has an eloquent way of describing the kind of step-by-step approach that I am recommending here. “What [writing] requires,” he says, “is a teacher who will respect and respond to his students, not for what they have done, but for what they may do; not for what they have produced, but for what they may produce, if they are given an opportunity to see writing as a process, not a product.”<sup>10</sup> One can draw analogies between Murray’s description of the writing process with preparing a piece of music.<sup>11</sup> This greatly resonates with performance students. The several drafts leading up to the final paper are like rehearsals, whereas the final paper is the concert. There are many steps between the initial sight-reading of a piece and the final live performance. Students spend many hours in practice rooms fine-tuning short passages and polishing the overall piece, all the while receiving feedback from their peers and instructors. Likewise, students in the classroom begin with a general outline of a topic, break down a paper into pieces, write and rewrite it many times, and receive comments from their professors and peers. In other words, the learning process in performance can be replicated in teaching writing. By presenting this familiar learning paradigm to graduate performance students, writing a paper becomes a manageable task instead of an insurmountable hurdle.

10. Donald Murray, “Teach Writing as Process Not Product,” in *The Essential Don Murray* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc. 2009), p. 5.

11. Hess and Bellman also have used this metaphor. Bellman, *A Short Guide*, p. 91; Hess, “Score and Word,” p. 201.