

**Lynne Rogers, Karen M. Bottge, and Sara Haefeli,
Writing in Music: A Brief Guide. New York: Oxford
University Press, 2021. 288 pages. \$14.99. ISBN:
9780190872724 (Paper).**

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W*riting in Music: A Brief Guide*, by Lynne Rogers, Karen M. Bottge, and Sara Haefeli, is a valuable resource for music majors in college grappling with how to effectively write about topics ranging from program notes or music reviews to more formal research papers. As part of a series on writing in different fields, it also contributes to a larger project that expands knowledge about discipline-specific writing.¹ The compact size and affordable price of this book make it a practical choice for instructors of writing-intensive music courses and for the interested college student who wants to improve discipline-specific writing skills. A strength of the book is its detailed discussion of the diverse stages of the research process. It also contains a wealth of writing strategies and formulas. Numerous illustrative diagrams, tables, and images enliven the text.

The book is organized into five main sections that are further subdivided into eleven chapters. The sections cover an overview of the writing and research process, strategies for writing music history and analytical research papers, suggestions for writing about music for general audiences, and more basic tips related to writing style or citation methods. The book's contents are not necessarily intended to be read in consecutive order, as the authors encourage readers to move back and forth between chapters as needed.

Section 1, entitled "Musicians as Thinkers and Writers," contains two chapters, and seeks to demystify the research process. It includes an overview of genres of music writing and of the research process; it also provides information about assignments, revising, and editing. Additionally, the section delineates

1. The series, entitled "Brief Guides to Writing in the Disciplines," is published by Oxford University Press, accessed October 31, 2024, <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/s/brief-guides-to-writing-in-the-disciplines-sgwd/?cc=us&lang=en&>.

differences between music history papers and music analysis papers as well as between conducting analysis and performing analytical research. Students will likely benefit from the book's list of general topic categories, and from its step-by-step description of the writing process: from defining a topic, to delineating the context, to asking a research question, to collecting data, to studying the results, to analyzing and interpreting the material. The authors describe how to create thesis statements, how to craft an effective outline, and how to get started writing. If much of the book is specific to music (as a discipline), this section also considers more general writing practices and methods, including the use of concept maps and freewriting to generate ideas.

Sections 2 and 3 cover specific methods for writing historical and analytical research papers. These sections, comprised of five chapters, represent the core of the book. The authors acknowledge that professional writers usually combine methods of music analysis and historical research in their scholarship. Nevertheless, they chose to separate the approaches in order to make the text more useful for college students who are assigned one or the other type of research paper. Because of this separation, there is some redundancy in the text, including two separate discussions about introductions, topic selection, conclusions, and the formulation of titles.

Both sections (historical [chapters 3–5] and analytical [chapters 6–7]) offer practical ideas about how to choose a suitable topic, though the section on historical research provides greater focus on how to formulate a historical question. Both also provide advice about sources, with the history section focusing on techniques for locating historical material and scholarly articles, and the analytical section containing information about different types of scores. The history section also contains information about evaluating sources and deciding which information is relevant, while both contain ideas about creating evocative titles and adding finishing touches. Tips for introductions and conclusions are substantial, with the authors providing a formula for introductions consisting of the following: a “hook,” an introduction to the topic/context, a summary, a statement about what is unknown, an explanation of the author's personal contribution, and a thesis statement. The authors also take the vantage point that conclusions should primarily summarize main points without introducing new material.

Information about reading and creating abstracts is also detailed in this section, with the authors listing six important parts: (1) topic of investigation; (2) context in which the research takes place; (3) research question or objective; (4) methodology employed, or approach taken to collect data; (5) findings; and (6) significance and implications of the research.

The chapters covering music history research papers also discuss the kinds of questions music historians ask and offer guidance on formulating such

questions. The authors additionally propose ways to enhance searches by choosing keywords, and they provide ideas about selecting and working with reliable sources, which are classified as primary, secondary, or tertiary in a table. The section also includes a helpful list of common search engines. The information about defining questions and conducting research is quite extensive, but details about expanding the content in the core of the research paper are surprisingly brief.

Section 4, which is only one chapter long, by contrast, focuses on shorter types of writing assignments for non-(musically) literate or general audiences. The authors include ideas for writing program notes and concert and media reviews and for conducting interviews.

The final section, comprised of three chapters, provides practical information about how and when to use illustrations, music examples, figures, and tables. It also discusses different types of writing styles and how to properly cite sources. Helpful tips range from notes about using gender-neutral language, to a brief style guide for writing titles of compositions, to sample citation methods. The book also lists different types of plagiarism to help students avoid falling into those traps unintentionally.

The authors seek in their text to demystify the process of writing in music, and they do that admirably by sharing writing tricks and tools that most scholars had to learn on their own by trial and error. Yet even though the authors note that the writing process is not always linear and straightforward, the many formulas shared in the book could potentially give the reader a false impression that following the methods will necessarily lead to writing success. The tone of the writing could be seen as correspondingly simplistic or even prescriptive, at times. For instance, the authors give very specific practical recommendations, such as a word length of about 500–800 words for concert reviews, even though review lengths vary considerably in professional writing depending on the context and purpose. With respect to interviews, the authors not only offer advice about types of questions, but also include guidelines delineating how to schedule the interview, something that could seem self-evident. When discussing sources, the authors explicitly state how many sources would be appropriate. For instance, they maintain that ten to twelve sources might be the right amount for a five-to-seven-page research paper, and they even propose how many of each source type a student might need. In addition, the text provides instructions about how to interpret assignment directions, and how to boost one's grade by making sure to follow the grading criteria listed in a syllabus. Some of the rubrics about how to evaluate sources also seem overly prescriptive, such as a statement that publications more than twenty-five years old should be considered less reliable. While that might be true in some cases, the advice seems overly generalized. These practical and concrete suggestions

might be seen in a positive light by some, but other instructors might prefer to provide their own practical guidelines, or else have students figure out some of the details in a different way in relation to their particular topic.

While the practical aspects could be viewed as prescriptive at times, the book also tends to be somewhat vague about more abstract or complicated aspects of writing. For instance, although the authors state that the student should seek to write in a semiformal tone for certain assignments, less guidance is provided about differences between semiformal and formal tones of writing. Advice about crafting the core of each research paper—about how to develop and work out thesis statements and arguments in cogent ways—is also limited.

For its size, the text certainly covers a lot of material. Even so, given that more instructors are encouraging alternative writing assignments or hybrid genres of writing, it might have been useful for the text to address these types of assignments as well. Although the authors state that the discipline-specific writing techniques and formulas included in the text could also be applied to alternative types of projects, such as podcasts, blogs, or videos, those do require some special skill sets and often a different way of presenting ideas than in research papers.

This rather narrow focus on traditional writing in music in the text is mirrored in the subject matter of examples. The authors focus primarily on Western classical music, with an occasional mention of jazz. Yet in an age with an increasingly global approach to curriculum development, the authors might have presented a wider diversity of writing samples and an acknowledgement of alternative approaches to historical and theoretical topics. The analytical section, in particular, takes a narrow view of analysis that is primarily score-based and related to traditionally notated and canonic European classical music. Given the broadening of music analysis to other genres in recent decades, such as in the case of performance analysis or the analysis of musics beyond central Europe, discussion of sources and writing methods related to global music traditions and performance research might also be warranted in future editions of this text.

In addition, the book contains many examples from student work. While that decision might stem from practical copyright reasons, or also serve its own educational purpose, there is no substitute for teaching good writing by reading through professional writing samples. Any professor using this book could consider supplementing the text with numerous examples of professional scholarly writings about music. The relatively small number of sample excerpts from published sources in the book could be seen as a drawback compared to other publications about music texts, which include fewer formulas but more writing examples for critical appraisal.

Overall, this book is a valuable tool for those seeking to understand the scholarly writing process. But any student would do well to note that the formulas provided in the text are suggestions, not recipes for success. Moreover, instructors using the text would do well to foster higher-level critical and creative thinking based on the appraisal of examples of published and professional prose. Given its basic treatment of many writing issues, this book is probably more appropriate for college students with little writing and research experience. It is likely that many master's students would have already moved beyond much of the content even though the authors indicate that the book could be appropriate for both undergraduate and master's students.