

Writing a Music Research Paper: A Primer

Like most other disciplines, research that you will do in the area of music can get interdisciplinary very quickly—after all, music is an inexorable component of most of our daily lives. Some examples include looking at music through: a historical, cultural studies, religious, or political lens. In like instances such as these, it will be important to research guidelines for writing in the field that your musical topic intersects with. If you are writing a music history paper, say, the overall form and structure of your paper should be that of a history paper. Nevertheless, no matter how interdisciplinary your topic becomes it will likely be inevitable to discuss actual musical examples to some degree. Here are some key considerations that will hopefully be of use to you when you are discussing music in your research paper.

1. Writing About Music

Even if your music paper has a focus which is interdisciplinary, it is likely you will have to write *about* (and thus describe) actual music at some point. Here are a couple suggestions to keep in mind:

- **The balance between technical and lay language:**

Music is an art form that is ubiquitous across many human cultures. Further, it is pervasive in our daily lives in a variety of forms. The point being that, for most people, discussing music is a very natural activity that is fostered early on. Thus, one can often make a much more visceral impact when describing music by using lay language as opposed to technical music terms. This is not to say that technical terms should be avoided entirely. When used correctly, technical music terminology allows an author to describe a component of music with great precision. But great care should be taken to ensure that technical music terminology is used exactly in that way: *correctly*. It is strongly advisable not to use technical music terms simply for the sake of sounding more erudite.

For example:

- Instead of saying: “The piercing G5 of the violin is a poignant appoggiatura against the far-spaced F major chord provided by the brass section.”
 - One could say: “The piercing, dissonant G5 of the violin is abruptly leapt up to, and gracefully stepped away from to a consonant F against the harmony provided by the rest of the orchestra.”
- **When technical language fails, metaphor succeeds**

Often, one will find that describing features of a piece of music with a metaphor will just as adequately (if not more so) convey meaning and description as utilizing technical language.

For example, compare the following:

- “At roughly two minutes and thirty seconds in, the lead electric guitar interjects against the steady chordal foundation provided by the rhythm guitar with a steady tremolo-picked line of 32nd notes.”
- “At roughly two minutes and thirty seconds in, the lead electric guitar interjects with a soaring melody, like a siren song against the steady, murky waves of chords chugged out by the rhythm guitar.”

- **The process of writing about music – listening actively**

Largely, the process of writing about a particular piece of music can be broken up into two main strategies: observation and analysis. Ensuring both processes have been conducted thoroughly will ensure an easier time when you are formulating your thesis and drafting your research paper.

- Observe:

At first, it will behoove you to have your “listener’s cap” on. What features strike you most about a particular piece of music? Are there abrupt changes in tempi or time signatures? Are instruments carrying the melody which are typically thought of as rhythm instruments? Whatever features that would strike you most as “merely” a listener are usually of note, and can easily serve as impetus for your research and arguments. Listen several times, take notes, and pay attention to different facets of the music each time.

- Analyze:

Your observations will serve as the framework for which to build your analysis, and move beyond mere passive listening. Such analysis will be the basis upon which you

argue for a particular understanding of a piece, posit a particular function of a piece, or offer a way in which the general practice of musicians or composers should be altered going forward. Is there a reason why the middle part of the song is in 7/4? Do the melodic lines used in a particular piece contradict the typical themes used by a composer? Is there a hidden irony in the lyrics of a piece which hint at political or social issues at the time the piece was composed?

2. General Tips

Though as listeners we often do, do not allow yourself (and therefore your paper) to get “lost” in the music. Do not forget that, as you are writing a research paper, your paper needs an *argument*. This can sound strange at first: after all, in a paper relying heavily on musical analysis what are you arguing for, exactly? Perhaps an argument of a successful musical research paper will contain an action item for the audience (as discussed above, perhaps a consequence of your paper is that composers should follow suit in adapting a particular sort of musical technique). However, for the most part, papers relying heavily on musical analysis will likely take the form of *conceptual* arguments. That is, you are arguing that listeners should understand or view a piece of music (or techniques utilized within a piece of music) in a certain way. Your analysis will provide the foundation for this argument.

Constructing and defending the argument in your paper will depend heavily on your ability to form a defensible thesis of appropriate scope, consider and respond to counterexamples, reference existing literature, and effectively engage the audience. When we think of an argument as defensible, it means it can be contested. For example, you might think The Beatles is the best band ever. Can you argue that? Not really. But if you assert their

popularity was due to an ability to tap into an unknown, yet growing counterculture—this does seem to be able to “backed up” with evidence. By referencing what others have said related to your topic, it should be clear where your thesis fits into the conversation and what you have to contribute. Though a research paper of any kind or discipline requires much careful thought and planning, picking a topic you are passionate about will facilitate the ease of which you defend your argument sufficiently *and* engage the audience while doing so. Thankfully, music is a subject that most of us are passionate about.¹²

¹ http://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/ai_24_guide_to_print.pdf

² <https://www.library.uni.edu/collections/fine-performing-arts/fpac-research-help/writing-research-papers-in-music>