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The Power of Prose: Writing in the Undergraduate Music Theory Curriculum

Deron L. McGee

Introuction

We often regard writing as a tool for evaluating our students' knowledge of a subject and their ability to produce information in one of several prescribed forms. This communication-based use of writing permeates the history of education and is still useful in this capacity today. Recent studies, however, reveal clear links between writing, thinking, and learning and suggest several ways that writing projects can enhance students' acquisition and comprehension of course materials. These projects provide an active way to manipulate and synthesize new information and frequently require a deep level of thought and understanding. Since writing is closely linked with cognitive development, it can help our students develop critical thinking skills and can improve the depth and breadth of their musical knowledge. When writing becomes a part of the learning process, students gain needed practice in written communication while they assimilate course content.

Busy professors don't have time to be writing instructors, and no one should expect them to be. Often they do spend time 'correcting' papers, however. That time could be better used in planning assignments and devising strategies for students to improve their work in progress, rather than dealing with writing disasters after they have occurred.¹

¹Lois Berry, *The Busy Professors's Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum*, quoted in Brad Hughes, *Suggestions for Designing Effective Formal Writing Assignments* (Madison, WI: Program for Writing Across the Curriculum, College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin, 1992), 1.

Initial Interest

Twenty such writing disasters initiated my interest in creating additional opportunities for students to improve their skills. My sophomore theory students are required to write a significant analytical paper each semester in lieu of a final exam. Subject to my approval, the students select a movement from a work they are currently preparing to perform. After creating a formal and harmonic analysis of the work, the students write a paper about the movement, drawing on their analyses for support and examples. The original final project assignment is shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Original Final Project Assignment

Select a movement from a piece you are currently preparing to perform or a series of shorter pieces such that the total number of measures is at least 250. The piece should be from the Classical period if possible, and must be approved by your instructor. Create a complete harmonic and formal analysis of the music. You may include charts or diagrams as necessary. After completing the analysis, write an analytical paper of at least 1000 words about the movement. Use your analysis to support your assertions and to illustrate your points. The paper should be well written and documented if sources are used. It is due at noon on the Wednesday of finals week, no exceptions.

The project requires students to demonstrate proficiency with the technical language of music by labelling various formal divisions and by describing the harmonic structure through Roman numeral analysis. The assignment enhances student interest since at the same time they are intimately involved with performing the music, a connection that makes the project more relevant and personal. The project encourages students to observe patterns, identify abstract relationships, and think actively about the organization and coherence of the music and why such properties exist. It also encourages speculation—why are certain constructions present and others excluded? The project is also designed to move the students from working with the “laboratory rats” of textbook examples toward investigating what Michael Rogers calls “the rich messiness of music.”²

²Michael Rogers, “The Rich Messiness of Music: Teaching Theory in Music with Contradiction and Paradox,” *College Music Symposium* 30/1 (1990): 131-141.

The results of the initial project were mixed in terms of paper quality and student outcomes. The students were quite adept at labelling formal divisions and describing the harmonic structure of the music, abilities that were expected since these aspects closely paralleled exercises previously prepared by the students on a smaller scale. Unfortunately, after completing the analyses, nearly all of the students complained that they had nothing to say about the music because their analytical charts said it all. The students were unable to use their findings to observe trends or tendencies, to identify recurring patterns, or to relate their harmonic descriptions to other musical parameters such as melody or rhythm. In addition, they had tremendous difficulty generating assertions about the music based on their analyses. If the students expressed opinions about "how the music works," they had trouble logically supporting their positions and even more difficulty using their analyses and musical examples to illustrate their points.

The writing in these papers was generally acceptable in terms of mechanics; it was comprised primarily of grammatically correct complete sentences with proper spelling and punctuation. How the class organized, developed, and presented ideas, however, was often not acceptable; the writing frequently was muddled, confused, and in some cases impenetrable. This project represented the first analytical paper encountered by the students and many found it challenging to develop their own interpretations of the music. Instead of absolute right or wrong answers, the students had to rely on their own creativity and ingenuity. Many employed strategies for which they had been rewarded in the past, approaches such as making broad generalizations, restating their analytical process "step-by-step," and focusing on the history of the work or composer. These strategies led to papers that made general claims not supported by the analyses, papers that repeated information in the analytical charts without additional insights, and papers that read like poorly written "assembly instructions."

The incoherent organization presented in the theory students' final projects can be attributed to "an underlying thinking crisis."³ John Bean contends that the problem with most undergraduate writing is not that the students lack the requisite mechanical skills, but rather that they have not reached a sufficient level of cognitive development to perform complicated writing tasks. Bean's students had consider-

³John C. Bean, "Involving Non-English Faculty in the Teaching of Writing and Thinking Skills," *International Journal of Instructional Media* 9/1 (1982): 51.

able difficulty finding something to say; they had trouble organizing their thoughts, as evidenced by their incoherent papers; they had trouble analyzing and synthesizing data; and they had difficulty creating and supporting logical arguments.⁴

Even though the organization of ideas and the style of their presentation were not successful in many cases, the analysis project proved to be the most valuable experience of the semester for the majority of the class because it provided a creative approach to applying the theoretical concepts presented throughout the semester. Students grasped more abstract relationships and gained greater insight into musical processes. The project required the students to become actively involved in the learning process and gave them the freedom that accompanies interpretation, making theory relevant to a particular piece of music. The assignment also demonstrated that traditional harmonic theory could not adequately explain many aspects of their pieces, such as rhythmic or melodic processes. The realization that a theory informs some aspects of music at the exclusion of others represented a giant step toward breaking down their fixation with right and wrong answers. The project even motivated many students to begin asking about alternative perspectives of musical analysis.

Theories of Writing, Thinking, and Learning

Theories that explain the relationships between writing, thinking, and learning provide insights into the success of the final project, in terms of the students' learning. Janet Emig states that writing is a successful tool for learning precisely because writing as a process parallels many powerful learning strategies.⁵ It provides a means for immediate feedback and self-analysis, while leaving a product that is available for long-term scrutiny and criticism from oneself and others. In addition, writing supplies a framework for connecting new information with previously learned material, often requiring a synthesis of such information into a new whole. Finally, writing is an active and personal activity that encourages one to become engaged with the subject material.

Another theory concerning the relationship of writing to thinking and learning is the "theory of reflection." Martin Nystrand ex-

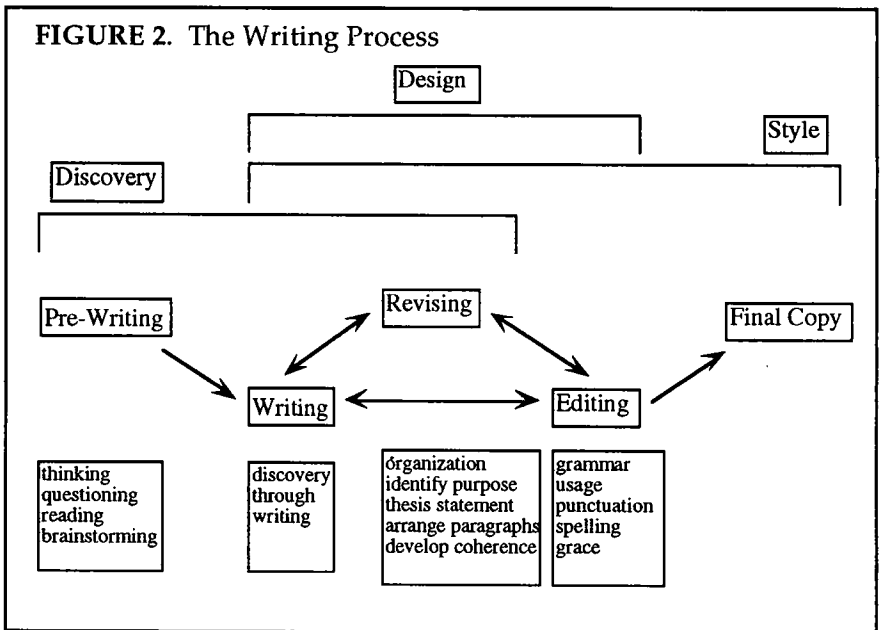
⁴Bean, 52-3.

⁵Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *College Composition and Communication* 28 (1977): 128.

plains that writing is a deliberate process of concentration followed by moments of reflection.⁶ Writing slows down our thoughts, fostering a more deliberate thinking process than say, speech. Often when we write, we make statements that beg for a response or that force us to continue writing in an effort to explain our position. Through this effort, we reflect on what we have written and in turn clarify our convictions to ourselves.

The Writing Process

John Bean proposes attacking writing problems by designing assignments that challenge the students to develop reasoning skills and offer them opportunities to practice the process of writing. Figure 2 shows a diagram of the writing process that I currently use with my students.⁷ The writing process is divided into four separate stages:



⁶Martin Nystrand, *Using Informal Writing to Teach Thinking* (Madison, WI: Program for Writing Across the Curriculum, College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin, 1992).

⁷This diagram is adapted from Bean, 53 and includes ideas from Hughes, *Suggestions*.

pre-writing, which includes finding a usable topic, defining an audience, discovering ideas, and developing a rough plan for the paper; drafting or writing, characterized by developing and organizing ideas into sentences and paragraphs; revising, which includes adding, deleting, rearranging, and substituting materials; and editing, characterized by smoothing out sentences, improving word choices, and cleaning up mechanics. The chart also shows three overlapping operations that occur during the process of writing. The discovery phase occurs early in the process when students are grappling with new material, relating new ideas to previously mastered concepts, and thinking about what to write. The design phase emerges during the "writing-revising-editing" cycle, and reflects the improved understanding of the material under consideration. Elements of style and design improve throughout the process, although much of the final polish emerges during the last stages of editing.

Proponents of Writing Across the Curriculum programs frequently classify writing projects as either *formal* or *informal*. A formal writing assignment requires students to submit polished pieces of writing to be evaluated in some manner, usually in the form of a grade. Informal writing is generally ungraded (although not unrewarded) and encourages exploratory engagement with course materials. Formal writing assignments, such as research and term papers, traditionally have been associated with the final product as a means of evaluating students. By contrast, informal writing, such as keeping journals, summarizing articles and lectures, and writing micro-themes (one- or two-page papers on a specific topic), generally emphasize the process of writing illustrated in Figure 2. I prefer to think of formal and informal assignments as representing opposite poles on a continuum. The goals of both types of writing exercises can emphasize the process over the final product.

Writing as a Way of Learning and Knowing

Several available studies provide information about how specific kinds of writing affect learning.⁸ These studies show that writing im-

⁸These studies include Judith Langer and Arthur N. Applebee, *How Writing Shapes Thinking: A Study of Teaching and Learning* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1987); J. A. Glover et al., "Distinctiveness of encoding: The effects of paraphrasing and drawing inferences on memory from prose," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 73/5 (1981): 736-744; and Francis J. diVesta and G. Susan Gray, "Listening and notetaking," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 63 (1972): 8-14.

proves both short- and long-term recall, overall comprehension, and retention of specific details when compared to reading or listening alone. Different types of writing assignments have specific effects on learning, as each emphasizes a particular kind of understanding. Five styles may be relevant to the music theory curriculum; arranged from the most informal to the most formal type of assignment, they are free-writing, note-taking, short answers, summaries, and analytical essays.

Free-writing is a general term that encompasses several kinds of informal writing assignments. A typical one asks students to write continuously for five minutes on a prescribed subject—writing everything they know until the time expires. Langer and Applebee found that this type of writing allows students to actively engage the subject material, to generate questions and discussions, and to highlight gaps in their knowledge. It also focuses on the exploration and discovery aspects of the writing process. Free-writing provides an opportunity for the student to make connections with previous knowledge in a risk-free environment, since these assignments are not collected or graded. These connections often result in superior recall when compared with only note-taking activities (see Glover et al.).

Di Vesta and Gray demonstrate that note-taking when listening to a lecture or while reading is more effective than reading or listening alone in terms of content recall and comprehension. Note-taking provides a broad assimilation of information, although specific details and relationships among more circumscribed concepts within the subject are not emphasized. Langer and Applebee mention that this type of writing requires little thought, leading to a lack of depth in understanding.

Writing tasks requiring short answer responses produce greater gains in recall and comprehension than note-taking. Preparing written answers to study questions helps students to focus on specific knowledge, since they often answer such questions with considerable detail. This type of writing, however, produces little connection among the specific questions or between the questions and larger-scale concepts.

On the other hand, summaries of articles, chapters, or units provide an opportunity for students to review material they have encountered by emphasizing broad topics and relationships without addressing specific detail. Although the level of thought is often superficial, summaries and paraphrases are superior to mere copying and quoting. Finally, analytical essays require students to synthesize concepts, to relate details to larger issues, and to think on a level different from the other writing tasks described. This level of thought is often deeper,

more focused, and more involved than the superficial thought employed to take notes or answer study questions.

These studies clearly show the positive effects of writing on the student's understanding and recall of new information. Even more important, they demonstrate the pedagogical importance of writing tasks that allow writers to manipulate new material in terms of their existing understanding. The specific effects on learning and thinking of each type of writing are summarized in Figure 3. By understanding these principles, we can design writing assignments that effectively achieve specific goals in the music theory curriculum.

FIGURE 3. Writing Assignments and Benefits

<u>Writing Type</u>	<u>Learning Benefit</u>
Free-writing	Focuses students on previous knowledge, allowing old and new material to be synthesized, enhancing learning.
Note-taking	Improves recall and comprehension compared with reading or listening alone.
Study Questions	Improves recall of information required to answer specific questions.
Summaries	Requires students to reformulate information into a clear concise form. This often involves more mental manipulation than note-taking or answering study questions, thereby improving learning.
Essays	Requires more extensive manipulation of information than other types of writing. This type of assignment generally involves more work than the others and demands the most complex thinking and reasoning skills.

Incorporating Writing in the Theory Curriculum

Learning from previous mistakes in terms of designing the final project and preparing the students for it, I developed a series of smaller-scale writing assignments that fostered discussion, helped students think critically about music and/or theory, improved their ability to logically support assertions, helped them examine alternative perspectives and theories, and improved the style of their presentations. These short assignments helped the students grow cognitively and musically, and improved their writing skills by providing additional opportunities for practice. The focus of the short assignments and the longer final project was on the *process* of writing, including revising and editing, rather than on the final *product*.

Over the past three years, I have implemented writing assignments that correspond roughly to free-writing, summaries, and analytical essays. Figure 4 shows a transcript of a typical free-writing exercise that I use early in the course.

I have asked a variety of questions, such as: How is theory related to performance? What fields outside of music influence music theoretical thought? Can music theory influence fields outside of music? and, Is music analysis interpretation? Although many of us may be hard pressed to answer such questions definitively, in the context of a brainstorming session and subsequent discussion undergraduate students can begin to address these issues. There are no right or wrong answers and they are not graded on their prose. The goal of this exercise is to prompt thinking about music theory and to bring out past

FIGURE 4. Transcript of Free-Writing Assignment

Please take out a piece of paper. I would like you to write continuously for five minutes answering the question: What is music theory? Please write everything that comes into your head even if it doesn't pertain to music or theory. When you begin, write continuously without lifting the pencil from the paper (except to start a new page). This will not be turned in or graded, so please feel free to write whatever enters your mind. I would like you to write everything you know about music theory. You may also ask questions about what music theory is, suggest what music theory could be or perhaps should be, even tell me what music theory isn't. Whatever enters your mind. Any questions? OK...you may begin.

experiences and knowledge of the subject. The material generated in five minutes often leads to a lively discussion concerning what constitutes music theory—its scope, purposes, associated fields, and its relationship to the other sub-disciplines of music, such as conducting, musicology, performance, and education. This assignment generates a variety of responses, but most importantly it focuses the students' thinking on music theory and requires them to become actively engaged in the learning process.

Short papers, one or two pages, require students to be concise in terms of their thoughts as well as their writing. It is difficult to make clear, well structured points in a small amount of space. By using short assignments, the teacher can gradually increase the difficulty level throughout the year. It is relatively easy to create specific assignments to correspond with new material. John Bean goes even farther when he states that "except for advanced students, the traditional term paper should be abandoned in favor of a sequence of shorter writing assignments specifically designed to develop creative, independent thought."⁹ While I agree with Bean's ideas concerning the use of short assignments, I also believe that working with complete pieces of music or at least entire movements is important for music students at all levels of theory instruction, and projects of this magnitude cannot be adequately addressed in two-page assignments. Short assignments, however, can set the stage for the larger, more involved projects.

Figure 5 shows a short assignment requiring students to create a brief abstract of a textbook chapter. Anyone who has attempted to write such an abstract knows that this is a challenging task. It forces

FIGURE 5. Summary Assignment

Summarize the important points from chapter I (16th century polyphony) of your textbook. Write a short paper that accurately and fairly represents the information found in that chapter. The paper should be well written and clearly organized. Summarize the information in Your Own Words. Do not copy from the book. Your intended audience is a high school music class. You are limited to a maximum of two typed pages, excluding examples. A draft is due one week from today with the final version due two weeks from today.

⁹Bean, "Involving Non-English Faculty," 52.

students to consolidate their understanding of the material in order to present it in a concise and coherent manner. It also forces students to represent the material they encounter fairly and accurately.

Andrea Lunsford demonstrates that basic writers have difficulty presenting the views and opinions of others fairly, especially if they disagree with the premises or arguments.¹⁰ She finds that students tend to relate personal experience and beliefs rather than ideas of others that they find objectionable. By having students accurately summarize the opinions of others, the teacher forces them to see things from an alternative perspective and thus grow cognitively. The assignment in Figure 5 works well early in the semester because it starts students thinking and writing while not forcing them to deal with some of the more problematic aspects of writing about music, such as writing about musical examples. This assignment provides a good means for introducing students to the writing process and it represents a relatively well-defined project requiring no speculation.

A typical sequence of assignments might begin with a summary similar to Figure 5 and continue with a more difficult assignment such as the “compare and contrast” example in Figure 6. This assignment requires the students to examine critically the musical excerpts and to deduce similarities and differences. It also requires them to use the examples to clarify and support their assertions. This assignment is still quite well defined since it does not demand speculation on the part of the student and the excerpts are short enough for the students to analyze them thoroughly.

The “compare and contrast” assignment could be followed by a more speculative or philosophical assignment such the “analytical symbols” assignment shown in Figure 7. This assignment requires students to think critically about the theory they are applying to generate their analyses and the limitations of such a theory. It also encourages them to think about the types of relationships and patterns that emerge as a result of the analytical process. This assignment is considerably more difficult for the students, since they are asked to examine the assumptions of the theory they have been taught. The approach is uncomfortable for many students who like the security of clear solutions to problems. If the writing assignments are sequenced and prepared carefully, however, this type of assignment is a natural culmination of a process that unfolds throughout a semester or year.

¹⁰Andrea A. Lunsford, “Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer,” *College English* 41 (1979): 38-46.

FIGURE 6. Compare and Contrast Assignment

Prepare a complete harmonic analysis of the opening eight measures of Mozart's Sonata in A Major and Schumann's Soldiers March (the music has been provided). Once the analysis is complete, write a brief paper comparing these two excerpts. You may discuss similarities or differences in harmony, form, melody, rhythm, texture, timbre, etc. When discussing the music, use examples from your analysis to support your assertions. The paper should be well written using clear and concise prose with a maximum length of two typed pages, excluding examples. The theory faculty is your intended audience. A draft is due one week from today with the final version due two weeks from today.

FIGURE 7. Analytical Symbols Assignment

What do the analytical symbols tell us about the music? What don't they tell us? Write a short paper using your analysis of Mendelssohn's *Song Without Words* as an example. What do the analytical symbols tell us about harmony, melody, rhythm, etc.? Write this in a formal style using clear, concise prose. The theory, history, and composition faculty represent your intended audience. The paper is not to exceed two pages excluding examples. A draft is due one week from today and the final version is due two weeks from today.

When I assign a longer paper, I now divide it into smaller parts that students can work on over a larger portion of the semester. Students submit a prospectus for comments relatively early in the semester and prepare several drafts of the project for review. The paper can then be revised based on the questions and advice offered by the instructor. This schedule encourages students to make revisions and work on the process of writing, reinforcing musical concepts and enhancing learning. Figure 8 shows a revised version of the final project illustrating the concept of subdividing large projects. The students begin this project at least six weeks prior to its due date and I give credit for completing each task on time, although not necessarily with traditional grades. Developing the prospectus allows the students to explore ideas generated from their analyses, while helping them mold the basic shape of their papers. Generally, the students' interest level

FIGURE 8. Revised Final Project Assignment

For the final project, select a movement from a piece you are currently preparing to perform. Bring it to your instructor for approval by April 1. A complete formal and harmonic analysis of the movement is due on April 15. Next write a brief (one page) prospectus outlining the issue(s) you will discuss in the paper. Then write an analytical paper based on your analysis. A draft is due at the first conference and a revision is due at the second conference.

You should make a statement about “how the piece works” and support your assertions with examples from your analysis. You do not need to address the movement as a whole in the written portion of the paper. Rather you may decide to address a specific aspect of the movement’s organization, tonal relationships, the use of a specific type of harmony, rhythmic motives, melodic construction, etc.; the possibilities are limitless.

The paper is to be well written using clear, concise prose and is not to exceed ten typed pages. You will submit the paper, all of the analysis, and any additional charts, graphs, etc. that you believe are necessary to clarify and support your assertions. I am your intended audience.

Everyone is required to sign up for two individual conferences; times are available on my office door. The following schedule will be adhered to:

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 4/1 | All music for the final project must be approved |
| 4/15 | Analysis complete—draft turned in |
| 4/22 | Brief prospectus due |
| 4/29-30 | Individual conferences—Draft due |
| 5/6-7 | Individual conferences—Revision due |
| 5/13 | Final project due—Noon! (No Exceptions) |

I will be available for additional assistance during my normal office hours or by appointment. I strongly encourage you to begin early and stay on schedule.

grows as they become more actively involved with the project, resulting in both a better final product and, more importantly, a positive learning experience.

In addition to improving the understanding of concepts, fostering cognitive development, and enhancing the students’ writing skills, these assignments frequently generate valuable discussion opportunities and raise important theoretical issues that may otherwise be omitted. By the fourth semester of the theory sequence, the students

have been introduced to the traditional musical forms. When discussing organization in music, I introduce an alternative concept of form as a process that evolves and develops over time as opposed to a rigid system into which we attempt to "pigeon-hole" musical works. The perfect textbook example of sonata form, if it exists at all, happens so rarely that we spend more time discussing how individual pieces vary from the traditional definition than we do discussing the textbook model. I challenged the students to create a new theory of musical organization that happens "in-time," during the initial hearing of the piece. Their assignment appears here as Figure 9.

FIGURE 9. "In-Time" Theory Assignment

We have discussed several "fixed" musical forms such as binary and ternary song forms, sonata-allegro form, rondos, variations, and contrapuntal forms. We have also discussed form as a musical process. Your task is to construct a new, "in-time" theory of musical organization. You must speculate, use your imagination, and be creative. Describe and discuss your idea or ideas and demonstrate the principle with a brief analytical example. The paper should be written for your peers and should be no more than two pages, excluding examples. A draft is due one week from today and the final version is due two weeks from today.

The results of the "in-time" theory paper were exciting. I did not help the students by pointing them to any other research or writings on the subject. They could use any principle they desired to describe how they "understood" the music while it was being experienced. Most found the exercise challenging and liberating; it was a chance to be completely creative. The vast majority of the students presented ideas that they believed were quite strange and outside the mainstream of theoretical thought, while a few students still adhered to the security of fixed forms. Most of the students related musical organization to emotional states, while some discussed music as narrative. Others believed music was organized through expectation or according to sound color.

Each of these ideas has received considerable attention in the theoretical community during the past twenty or thirty years!¹¹ I in-

¹¹Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956) and *Explaining Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Fred Maus, "Music as Drama," *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (1988):

roduced the writings of Leonard Meyer to address emotions and the affective qualities of music and to discuss the concept of expectation in the implication-realization theory of melodies. The writings of Fred Maus address the issues of music as narrative and drama, and Wayne Slawson has studied sound color. Several prominent theoretical systems, of course, were not suggested by this class, such as the transformational theories of Schenker and Ler Dahl and Jackendoff and theories based on literary criticism and semiotics.

Each concept presented by the students was considered in turn and through the discussion generated we were able to address issues that are not often raised in undergraduate theory courses. The students were particularly interested in the topics because they developed the theories, in a sense, on their own. Many of the students pursued readings in these areas after the discussions and all of these concepts reappeared in the final projects!

Designing Writing Assignments

When designing a series of assignments, try to establish a logical sequence, beginning with easier kinds of thinking about course materials and then progressing toward more difficult assignments. I like to begin with summaries of readings or lectures and then move gradually to projects that involve presenting and supporting arguments, speculation, evaluation, and the application of concepts in new settings. Another way to think about this progression is starting with narrowly focused questions and moving toward more ill-defined questions or problems, those without absolute answers.¹² A series of short assignments given throughout a semester continuously develops the cognitive skills of the students.

To clarify expectations in terms of the scope, depth, format, length, and resources to be used, provide students with a written model for a formal assignment. I also try to present questions that will guide the students' thinking and offer advice about shaping and presenting ideas. Since some people consider assignments to be only possibilities to get students thinking, I often tell the class how closely to fol-

56-73 and "Music as Narrative," *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991): 1-34; Wayne Slawson, *Sound Color* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

¹²Several of the ideas in this section are discussed in Nystrand, *Using Informal Writing* and Hughes, *Suggestions*.

low the instructions. In addition, I identify the evaluation criteria for the assignment, especially those linked to the important musical or theoretical concepts. By explaining to students that I emphasize organization, logic, and clarity of expression as the primary criteria for evaluation (of course, embodied in clear expression is coherent sentence-level structure and proper mechanics such as correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation), students feel less intimidated by the interpretive aspects of their writing. I also give students credit for creativity, ingenuity, and grace in their presentations.

If an assignment involves the use of sources, tell students which documentation system to use. These guidelines provide an opportunity to introduce students to a particular style of writing, including the documentation conventions employed, and can lead to a discussion of plagiarism. While most of the assignments described here leave few opportunities for integrating outside sources, plagiarism is a common problem.¹³ It is actually quite interesting to make musical connections to plagiarism by asking students to consider musical practices such as quotation, parody, and arranging. This discussion can be used as a springboard into the exploration of several musical concepts, while driving home the point that certain academic standards must be observed when using material from outside sources.

Any type of writing is easier to focus if the intended audience is known. If the audience changes, students must adjust their writing to readers with different levels of music experience. I specify an audience for each assignment and change that audience throughout the semester. Sometimes students write for their classmates—people who have read many of the same materials but have not thought specifically about the author's topic. On other occasions, I select a particular group of musicians, such as historians or composers, as the audience. Finally, I have students explain musical concepts to an audience of non-musicians. When writing for them, the students must thoroughly understand the concept since they cannot use technical terminology to describe it and must translate the idea into non-technical terms.

¹³Bean reports that in an informal survey of randomly selected term papers from across all departments at the College of Great Falls (Montana), researchers recorded a 70% plagiarism rate (Bean, 63-64). The majority of these incidents appeared to be unintentional (the result of "cutting and pasting" information from sources). Most students, however, must believe that these practices are an academically acceptable method of "research."

Responding to Assignments

Perhaps the most important aspect of writing assignments, besides assigning them in the first place, is the type of feedback the students receive during the process. I set high standards for writing assignments and let them be known in advance. In my experience, students generally live up to my expectations if the evaluation criteria are explicitly defined and examples of quality projects are made available to the class. When sharing these examples, I try to present ones that are quite different in their approaches so that students don't automatically mimic one successful format. Sharing examples of student work publicly rewards the selected students even if the examples are displayed anonymously.

Responding to writing assignments not as a judge but as a reader genuinely interested in what the writer has to say may help break a cycle that has been established throughout the students' educational careers, where they write papers that they don't want to write for teachers who don't want to read them.¹⁴ Incorporating individual interests into the project design increases the relevance to the students. By not grading drafts, but giving credit for their completion and returning them with comments, I try to make the students realize that I am interested in what they have to say.

I never take a position in which a student's presentation is criticized severely because it doesn't fit with currently accepted theoretical thought. Rather, I frequently present counterarguments, alternative perspectives, and additional source materials if necessary when responding to student assertions. In my experience, when students take a dogmatic position on a specific topic, they do not realize that alternative perspectives exist. By providing another view, I encourage students to confront these alternatives and account for them in their revisions. Eventually the students learn to integrate other ideas with their own.

When responding to student papers, read for different purposes at different stages in the process, suggesting only one or two goals for students in the revision or in the next paper. I concentrate on specific questions such as: Is the writer addressing all parts of the assignment? Are the ideas presented in the paper interesting, thoughtful, and thought-provoking? Does the writer demonstrate adequate understanding of theoretical terms and concepts?¹⁵ By directing comments

¹⁴Bean, 63.

¹⁵Several of the suggestions in this section are discussed in Hughes, *Suggestions*.

at specific problems that the student can address, I reduce the amount of time necessary for writing comments.

Try to be as specific as possible with responses, since students often misinterpret vague comments of praise and criticism because they don't know what specifically was strong or weak in their work. Instead of marking a paper with a generic comment such as "good," I often explain what is specifically good about it: organization, logic, support, and use of examples. The same principle applies to criticism; instead of saying the paragraph or sentence is awkward, I tell the student why the flow of the paragraph is awkward or how transitions from one idea to the next can be improved. If a paper has many problems related to editing tasks, such as grammar, word choice, and punctuation, concentrate on one section and identify those problems that interfere with meaning. After marking these problems, perhaps rewriting a few sentences as examples, I ask the student to revise the remainder of the paper and resubmit it. I am careful not to create a polished paper, since the student will often mimic the format instead of developing individual writing skills. If there are persistent problems, I encourage the student to get help from the campus writing center or to come for editing advice. This kind of session will be more beneficial in the long run than simply correcting the paper.

I like to provide opportunities for students to talk about their writing while it is in progress. These opportunities take many forms such as individual conferences, student presentations, or brief amounts of class time set aside for students to discuss their topics in pairs or small groups. In addition, I have students read and comment on their peers' writing, thereby receiving feedback on their own. Students learn by doing; allowing students to comment on each other's writing benefits both the author and the student performing the criticism. I provide guidelines for constructive criticism to assist students in this task. As they begin editing and criticizing the work of their peers, they actually become more critical of their own writing, often correcting many problems before they turn in their original draft.

Time Commitment

The most common reservation expressed when teachers discuss the implementation of writing in an established course is that it will take an inordinate amount of time to grade all of these papers. While it is true that some additional time is required to prepare good, thought-provoking assignments, evaluating the assignments doesn't have to add any appreciable time commitments to the course. There

are several ways to reduce the amount of time spent grading or responding to written assignments.

First, use short assignments of no more than two pages. The time required to grade and/or respond to a two-page written assignment is no longer than it takes to grade a typical analysis or part-writing exercise. Second, don't attempt to mark all errors; instead mark only specific types of errors and suggest revisions. Third, incorporate peer review into the writing process and allow students to generate their own criticism. Fourth, by breaking longer assignments into smaller parts, I observe the project in progress. This familiarity with the work greatly reduces the time required to grade and respond to large-scale papers such as the final analytical project detailed earlier. Fifth, when scheduling conferences, make time during normal office hours; for final projects, schedule appointments during lecture and discussion times during the last two weeks of class. These are times already committed to the course and the students are scheduled to be there. Finally, we don't need a vast quantity of these assignments to observe positive results. I have typically given three to six in-class free-writing assignments (that are not collected or graded), three short assignments, and the final project each semester.

Closing Remarks

The principles discussed here are equally applicable to history classes, performance studios, education, conducting, and composition classes. I have given only theory examples because of the focus of my teaching. The concepts presented, however, are sufficiently general to be applied in any of the sub-disciplines of music while being specific enough to generate good, thought-provoking assignments. I believe the benefits of writing assignments are such that they should be implemented in all undergraduate courses.

The purpose of integrating writing tasks into pedagogy is not merely to teach proper forms of expression, such as how to write, but rather to increase the effectiveness of what instructors already do. For writing assignments to have a positive effect on learning and reasoning, they must be initiated and sustained as a regular activity and they must be meaningfully integrated into the existing syllabi.¹⁶

¹⁶Nystrand, *Using Informal Writing to Teach Thinking*, 4.

If writing assignments can be implemented across the music curriculum, we will greatly enhance the breadth and depth of our students' understanding of course content, the relationships among the various sub-disciplines of music, and the relationships of music to other disciplines. In addition, we can help our students grow intellectually by improving critical thinking and writing skills, while enhancing their assimilation of course content.
