

Monash School of Music—Conservatorium Research and Writing Guide

Introduction

This Guide has been produced to help you research and write essays at university level.

In particular, it provides you with basic information about the School of Music's expectations about what you read in the process of doing research and how you write about it. The Guide covers:

1. How to Read
2. Thinking Critically
3. Getting Started
4. Writing a Quality Essay
5. Where to get Help

1. How to Read

There are a number of key differences between what was expected of your reading and writing at secondary school and what is required at university. For example, at university:

1. The essays are longer

This means you will need to schedule more time to research and write your essays. Good organisational and time-management skills will help you achieve this: your lecturers will assist by providing bibliographies and there are many workshops you can attend at the Matheson Library to help organise your time, your mind, and your writing.

2. We use different resources

In the past you may have used general encyclopedias or dictionaries of music as well as Wikipedia and answers.com for information. While general encyclopedias and dictionaries are good for the basics, they usually lack detail and are often out of date. Generalist websites can also be useful for basics, but they tend not to be written by experts. Some websites even contain plagiarized material! At university, our tools of trade are journal articles and academic books written by professional

scholars. We also use *Grove Music Online* a lot, too. It's *the* online resource written by expert music researchers that is reliable and authoritative.

3. We read differently

Reading academic articles and books is not like reading reference works, magazines, thriller-novels or material on the web. It requires a different mind-set and it's usually a slower and more reflective process. For many of us, the first set of readings we encounter can be long, be printed in small type and use words and terms with which we are not familiar. The trick is to read slowly and to tackle a section of a book or article at a time. This can be a boring process, but it's well worth the effort. Many students photocopy materials and make summary notes in the margins to aid learning, while others like to type, or write out by hand, key quotes to help them look at key points at a glance.

4. We have different conventions and expectations

You will need to know how to use footnotes, how to set up a reference list, and how to cite from online sources such as *Grove Music Online*. If you keep up with your reading you will see how this is done in the articles and books that you read—and some examples are given below. We also expect essays to be free of spelling errors and to be edited and proofread so that typographical and grammatical errors are avoided.

At university level, marks are deducted from essays that contain spelling and typographical errors, for incorrectly formatted footnotes and references lists, and for ungrammatical prose. No essay should need editing by your lecturer.

5. It is up to you to get it right

In secondary school your teachers might have given you all the resources you needed, read over your drafts and helped you re-work material. They may have even let you resubmit an essay if it was not up to par. But at university, the onus is on you to:

- Locate, borrow and copy (legally) materials you need for essays. Your lecturers will supply you with a bibliography, but you will have to go to the library to find them, or log on to your laptop and download articles—you may even have to use another library if the book you want has been borrowed by someone else.
- Complete the essay by yourself. Sure, if you don't quite understand the question or need help in approaching the essay, you must not hesitate to ask your lecturer for advice. But your lecturer will neither read and edit drafts nor allow you to resubmit work that does not get a good grade. And it's up to you to get your essay in on time, even if the dog ate it.

2. Thinking Critically

One of the key aims of a university education is to inspire critical thinking.

The first stage of thinking critically is to make informed judgements about what to read. For example, a one-paragraph survey on jazz in a general dictionary does not hold the same authority as the content in *Grove Music Online* or in a specialist book on the subject written by a professional scholar. When choosing what to read you should always ask, 'Which source is the most authoritative?' Your lecturers will give you guidance, but you will learn to develop the skills to identify critical works, for example, journal articles without footnotes and references are generally not as reliable as scholarly sources that contain these apparatus.

Books and journals published by academic and university presses and learned societies are generally going to be much more authoritative than general books self-published by authors or by unknown publishers. Websites run by fan-clubs and amateur enthusiasts must be avoided.

The second stage of thinking critically is to interrogate what you read. Always ask yourself if you agree with a writer's point of view. For example, you may think conclusions drawn by an ethnomusicologist on the community they study might be too general given the modest amount of fieldwork they undertook. Alternatively, in an historical essay you might want to get online to find more archives that could be used to broaden the topic and thus find your own research topic or to see other evidence that the author could have, or should have, consulted.

One of the best places to see critical thinking at work is in book reviews. The journal *Musicology Australia* tends to have a large and interesting book reviews section (and review-articles section) where you can see—and read—critical thinking in action.

3. Getting Started

Even though your lecturers will supply you with a specialist bibliography for each subject you take, we suggest the following publications as good general texts for the scholarly study of music.

- *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, by Nicholas Cook, Oxford University Press, 1998. This book challenges conventional ways of thinking about music and draws on examples ranging from Beethoven to the Spice Girls.
- *World Music: A Very Short Introduction*, by Philip V. Bohlman, Oxford University Press, 2002. Discusses the problem of the term 'world music' and situates it in local, national and global contexts. Examples include the Eurovision Song Contest and the Grammy Awards.

- *Musical Performance: A Guide to Understanding*, edited by John Rink, Cambridge University Press, 2002. Covers issues in historical performance practice, using the body in performance, performance anxiety and approaches to ensemble playing and pedagogy.
- *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts*, by Bruno Nettl, University of Illinois Press, 1983. A classic and best-selling book that examines theoretical, practical and methodological problems in fieldwork.
- *Introduction to Music Studies*, edited by J.P.E. Harper Scott and Jim Samson, Cambridge University Press, 2009. Buy this book if you can! It introduces you to the basics in music history, film music, music in tv and film and much more. The book contains discussion questions and comprehensive bibliographies.
- *Your Career as a Composer*, by Richard Letts, Allen & Unwin, 1994. Find out how to market your work, find audiences, navigate copyright and maybe even earn some money.
- *A Concise History of Western Music*, by Paul Griffiths, Cambridge University Press, 2007. An excellent overview of the forces that shaped western classical music, from pre-history to the present. It's written in lively prose and has a useful discography.
- *Music Research: A Handbook*, by Laurie J. Sampsel, Oxford University Press, 2000. Your road map to all good music resources.
- *Writing about Music: An Introductory Guide* by Richard J. Wingell, Fourth edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 2007. Gives you tips on how to write good music essays—it even includes an example of an essay that gets top marks.
- *A Student's Writing Guide: How to Plan and Write Successful Essays*, by Gordon Taylor, Cambridge University Press, 2009. This book is particularly good if you're disorganised or scared of writing. It will save you hours of frustration and anxiety with the practical tips it gives in approaching written work.

The above-mentioned books are introductory in scope, while the following list contain books that are more topical:

- *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert and Richard Middleton, Routledge, 2003. This is a good follow-on from *Introduction to Music Studies*, above.

- Any books in the *Cambridge Companions to Music* series, and there are many including: the Beatles, Berlioz, Bruckner, Elgar Haydn, Wagner, the Piano, Recorder, Singing, String Quartet, Symphony, medieval music, pop and rock, the Musical . . . and the list goes on! A Google search will help you find more.
- The Cambridge Histories of Music: *Seventeenth-Century Music*; *Eighteenth-Century Music*, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, *Twentieth-Century Music*, *Western Music Theory* and *American Music*. They have comprehensive bibliographies to direct you to even more literature.

Sometimes it is your lecturer or School of Music Research Staff who have published the best music research in their field. Look them up on the School's website to learn about their research interests.

4. Writing a Quality Essay

Once you have finished the research, making notes and planning your essay it's time to start writing the first draft. Writing a perfect essay usually takes many drafts—it's like giving a perfect performance: it's hard to achieve and requires a lot of practice and perseverance. We suggest you read some of the essay-writing books mentioned above to detailed guidance on approaching essays, but for the moment here's a summary of what makes for a successful—and unsuccessful—essays!

Weak essays:

1. don't answer the question
2. waffle and pad out the text with long quotations or irrelevant material
3. don't have footnotes and musical examples, if they are required by the essay topic
4. cite generalist websites and other non-critical texts
5. contain spelling errors
6. are badly written or are incomprehensible.

(Generally speaking, essays that do two or more of the above are likely to fail.)

Good to really good essays:

1. have an introduction in which the argument or point of view is clearly articulated
2. end with a conclusion summing up the argument
3. have descriptive captions, if musical examples are included, and the references are used well and cited properly
4. use a mixture of journal articles and scholarly books as primary reference materials
5. contain no spelling errors and are easy to read.

Outstanding essays:

1. have a clear aim and say something new or offer a fresh perspective beyond what is read in the literature
2. cite sources beyond those prescribed or discussed by the lecturer, demonstrating an ability to research and think independently
3. have detailed, but relevant, discussions of musical examples, where appropriate
4. use correct citation methods
5. have been thoroughly edited and proofread to achieve a smooth reading style, free of spelling and grammatical errors.

5. Where to get Help

Adapting to the demands of written work at university level can be scary for many students, especially if you have had bad experiences in the past or if you are not a confident writer. But with practice comes perfection (just like practising a musical instrument) and confidence.

So, if you are worried or need advice, here's what you can do:

1. See your lecturer. Make a time to have a chat.
2. Read a book on essay-writing techniques (see the above list)
3. Attend a workshop at the Louis Matheson Library. These are informal and fun sessions to get you on the right track:
<http://www.lib.monash.edu.au/learning-skills/>

The library offers drop-in sessions for giving advice, or you can stay at home in the luxury of your lounge-room and swot up on learning and language online:

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/>

Here are offered self-paced learning in the areas of Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, Study Skills, Grammar and 'Quick References'.

Our experience shows that students who attend and actively participate in reading and writing workshops get better grades than students who do not.