

One Bite at a Time: Writing in the Theory Classroom

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Prose writing in the music theory classroom is often a daunting task for both instructors and students. For instructors, the very thought of the heavy grading load associated with writing assignments combined with the difficulty that we know students encounter when writing about music (especially if students' general written communication skills are still developing) can be overwhelming, even if we personally believe that our students would benefit from engaging in written communication about music. For many students, communication in written form is a skill that they are still developing, and writing about music only adds an additional challenge—especially when they are still immersed in learning the music theory concepts that they are now being asked to write about.

This article joins a developing tradition of seeking to develop ways and means to make this skill more manageable, palatable, *and* effective for both students and teachers. I first present a detailed literature review discussing methods and projects used by music theory instructors; these approaches feature a variety of learning outcomes, and projects range from “simple” content summary to analytical papers to metacognitive writing and other applications. These projects vary greatly in size and scope, presenting a wealth of ideas for implementation and providing feedback to students. I then present the design and implementation of two writing assignments I have used in my own classrooms: A series of small-scale analytical papers and a series of weekly journal entries which cover both content/fact-based approaches and reflective writing.



Writing about music, especially through an analytical lens, is correctly viewed as a challenging task. For an undergraduate who may already be struggling to apply music theory concepts in analysis, or even to understand those concepts in the first place, the thought of describing these concepts and their implications in writing can be especially daunting. This article describes the motivation, process, and results of two different implementations of small-scale writing assignments used to introduce students in a freshman-level harmony class to the skill of writing about music. The first implementation asks students to write a series of short analytical papers, and the second asks students to write short weekly journals summarizing and/or reflecting on content and activities from the course. Although the two sets of projects differ significantly in their content and scope, both projects aim to build students' experience with writing about music through a series of small, short, “bite-size”

N.B. The appendices are available at the following [link](#).

projects, seeking to capitalize on the improvement that comes with repeated practice. Some of the challenges in the practice of completing these projects are also described here, as well as revisions and improvements made along the way. After first discussing motivations for these curricular decisions, I will examine other recent publications on the implementation of writing in the music theory classroom, summarize the overall design of each project, discuss grading and feedback procedures, discuss student responses to the projects, and briefly include further improvements or alterations which could be considered. Example assignments for each project are included in the appendices.

Motivations

When I was presented with an opportunity to design a new curriculum for a Theory II course, inclusion of writing assignments was an element I set as a high priority. Two reasons fueled my initial desire to include regular writing assignments in the course: First, during my time as an undergraduate, I had become aware of my own minimal exposure to prose writing during my core theory curriculum, which made writing assignments in upper-level courses (particularly music history courses) much more daunting—simply because I had never attempted the task before. Second, while serving as a graduate teaching associate, I had been quite enthusiastic at the thought of conducting a writing assignment which was already included in the required curriculum for the class. But though I was keenly excited at the design of the project, in the end I was disappointed at the inconsistency of the results.¹

These two past experiences with prose writing in theory classrooms ultimately inspired two key design elements for my own writing assignments: First, quite simply, the act of including these assignments in the first place; daunting as the task may be for instructors *and* students, the only way to acquire communication skills about music is actually to practice communicating about it. In this case, the word “practice” is particularly key, and leads to the second design element: A one-and-done setup for an assignment simply cannot encourage development of skills in the same way that multiple assignments can, so any inclusion of writing assignments had to include assigning multiple assignments over the course of the semester.

If these practical idealisms were insufficient, larger-scale expectations from the college or university level may also support incorporating writing assignments

¹ This is neither a critique of the students in the course, nor of the design of this particular assignment, which in fact inspired much of my own first series of writing projects.

(though not necessarily making it a strict requirement, of course). Departmental-level and university-level learning goals/objectives often reference some form of writing and communication skills for their students, regardless of their major or program. Additionally, NASM standards,² which require that undergraduate students have “the ability to think, speak, and write clearly and effectively,” would also support the inclusion of prose writing assignments in a music theory classroom, though of course the music theory classroom cannot be the only place we teach our students these skills. Though my personal motivations were more than sufficient for my own decision to incorporate writing assignments, the broader sense of benefit to my students supported this decision and my own rationalization of the time that would consequently be removed from other potential curricular elements that I would also wish to include if both my students and I had unlimited time and resources.

However, these somewhat superficial administrative motivations and slightly deeper practical motivations played a lesser role than my own personal goals for my theory students. Too often, especially in first-year courses, I find that students can become focused on the best way to find the “right” answer and following all of the “rules” to get there. For many of my undergraduate students, “analysis” may mean simply labelling all of the cadences, circling non-chord tones, and figuring out Roman numerals. Theory itself is taken as a series of rules and regulations instead of as a way of seeking to better understand, question, and engage with music. Writing assignments offer one way to help students work on developing critical thinking skills and to encourage them to move past the tendency to limit themselves—and the study of music—to (somewhat) objective labels. The ability to write clear and coherent sentences, paragraphs, and papers that report on the “facts” of analysis is a skill that needs to be developed, certainly, but this is also not all that we really want our students to learn. Writing projects are an excellent tool to ask students to think deeper, past the labels and minutiae of detail, so that they can get at the heart of the music itself and engage with it at a much more personal level.

Prose writing in the classroom: Recent ideas and models

Although the literature on prose writing in music theory classrooms has expanded significantly in recent years, many articles focus primarily on a particular methodology

2 In section VIII.A.6.a, the 2021-2022 NASM handbook states that “Normally, students holding a professional undergraduate degree in music are expected to have:

(1) The ability to think, speak, and write clearly and effectively.”

[National Association of Schools of Music, Handbook 2021-2022, 100.](#)

or an innovative way to tackle prose writing assignments. As a result, most articles do not include detailed reviews of other literature, and this means that there currently exists no “one-stop shop” for an instructor who might wish to get a broad sense of the ideas that have been implemented to date. In order to attempt to fill this gap, the literature review presented here is intentionally detailed and, as a result, rather lengthy. If the reader prefers a brief summary of the articles discussed here and the types of projects contained in those articles, they may want to move ahead to the section entitled “Summary and contextualization,” which synthesizes this information into a table format and briefly explains how the projects presented in this paper fit in amongst other innovations and projects proposed in the literature.³

As the (formerly) quintessential prose writing assignment for music theory classes, the traditional analysis paper is a project that, if included in the undergraduate curriculum at all, tends to have a reputation as a source of frustration for both instructor and students.⁴ The students may not see the value of writing the paper and often do not have the tools they need in order to do so successfully. Instructors therefore either must sacrifice significant amounts of in-class and out-of-class time to the projects or be faced with large stacks of low-quality papers to grade. And if these papers are assigned at the end of the term, many students may never read through or otherwise utilize the instructor’s feedback—and thus the time invested by both students and instructor reaps little reward in the long run. Faced with this dilemma, many instructors have considered ways to make this process more successful for all involved. Alternatives that have been used to integrate prose writing in the classroom include revised approaches to high-stakes writing assignments (such as the traditional term paper) which address many of the issues discussed above, as well as other alternatives such as low-stakes writing assignments and metacognitive/reflective assignments.

3 Although the literature review presented here attempts to be fairly comprehensive on the topic of prose writing assignments in music theory curricula, it is not comprehensive with regard to more general “writing across the curriculum”-type literature or even music curriculum that is not strictly music theory. One project is included from the arena of music history pedagogy, for instance, but the representation is by no means comprehensive.

4 This reputation (from the instructor point of view, at least) is well documented in the music theory literature on this topic, and student difficulties (as reflected in their submitted assignments) are also frequently discussed (see, for example, Rogers (2018, 299), Rogers (2017, 93), and Inman (2017, 43); Inman also cites McGee (1993, 87) on this topic).

High(er)-stakes assignments

Approaches to high-stakes assignments vary, but generally suggest that instructors are keen to consider ways to increase student success and engagement with these analytical projects.⁵ For instance, Robin Attas has created a semester-long “miniconference” assignment as the culmination of the theory core. Although this assignment contains a written paper as part of the project, the paper itself is a conversion of a previous in-class presentation.⁶ Attas utilizes a scaffolded approach across the entire theory core to help students build writing skills, and also breaks down the high-stakes miniconference assignment as a series of lower-stakes assignments spread throughout the semester. These smaller assignments included guided analysis, peer discussion, individual meetings, creation of thesis statements and presentation outlines, and a draft of an abstract. In the musicology arena, Scott Strovas similarly substitutes other assignments for the traditional paper, such as a set of program notes and a letter to the editor of their textbook/anthology with a recommendation for a score that should be included.⁷ Anna Ferenc has created analogous projects for her sophomore-level theory course, with an emphasis on asking the students to act as “disciplinary practitioners” and thus giving the students the opportunity to engage with their theory courses in a sort of “real life” way, similar to the engagement that they have (somewhat more naturally) in their ensemble and studio courses.⁸

Other authors utilize a more “traditional” analysis paper but have engineered scaffolded approaches to increase student success. In an upper-level form course, Samantha Inman uses a short essay with a detailed prompt on a pre-selected piece to help students learn techniques of analytical writing before assigning a longer essay on a student-selected piece and with student-selected research questions.⁹ Inman further breaks down each of these essays into smaller sub-tasks. In the assignments that lead up to each essay, Inman guides her students through the process of laying an analytical foundation, considering or developing questions that will lead to strong analytical

5 For the purposes of this discussion, I use the terms “high-stakes” and “low-stakes” somewhat loosely. Only the instructor in each course can decide the level of high/low in terms of the weight of the assignment in a student’s grade, but it is reasonable to generally assume that any lengthy final product and/or multi-step process to achieve the final product will be weighted accordingly in the grading scheme, making these types of assignments “high-stakes.”

6 Attas (2016, 5–22).

7 Strovas (2014).

8 Ferenc (2015).

9 Inman (2017, 44).

interpretations, and working through drafts and revisions.¹⁰ Inman also advocates for providing students with good models of analytic writing¹¹ (something Attas does as well¹²) and she provides detailed feedback on the shorter essay. When students move on to the final longer paper, they will already have the process of the previous essay in their toolbox as well as the extensive feedback from their previous work.

Lynne Rogers utilizes a mix of low-stakes and high(er)-stakes writing through a series of assignments spread throughout the theory core, building from 1-2 sentences in second-semester courses to 1-3 pages in the second year.¹³ Similar to both Attas and Inman, Rogers advocates for making sure that students have a solid analytical foundation as a preparatory step before they begin writing, and utilizes in-class analysis activities to assist students in this endeavor for projects that are reasonable in scope.¹⁴ Rogers notes that the essays submitted after this type of in-class preparation typically feature far fewer analytical errors than an essay assigned without this type of preparation, but that student responses still vary as they wrestle with the questions in the given prompt.¹⁵ For larger-scale projects, Rogers also has a tested method to help students develop solid analytical foundations and ask good questions, which then serve as a launching point for an essay.¹⁶ This method is particularly appropriate for upper-level or master's-level courses.¹⁷ Similar to Inman, Rogers coaches her students on the finer points of analytic writing and also provides models; she also advocates for writing to a specific audience.¹⁸

Gordon Sly's approach to encouraging students to develop a particular point of view by contextualizing their analysis through a particular musical "agent" (defined as "the capacity of some musical element or idea to influence the course of events") was also partially developed as a method to help students "develop a 'way in' to a

¹⁰ Inman (2017, 45–51).

¹¹ Inman (2017, 46–48).

¹² Attas (2016, 13).

¹³ Rogers (2018, 302).

¹⁴ Rogers (2018, 302–3).

¹⁵ Rogers (2018, 303).

¹⁶ Rogers (2017, 94–112).

¹⁷ Since this article is not as directly focused on prose writing assignments, it is not included in the summary table.

¹⁸ Rogers (2018, 307–8).

piece that is both manageable and likely to provide a measure of success.”¹⁹ After establishing a specific musical agent—for example, the ambiguity of function of the F2-A5 dyad in Schumann’s “Walzer,” *Albumblätter*, Op. 124, No. 4—the remainder of the analysis then views this agent as the guiding force behind the music, and the student’s task is to focus on creating a convincing case for this analytical lens.²⁰ In order to balance helping students to choose a musical agent that will yield success without being overly prescriptive in this process, Sly utilizes class discussion in small groups to evaluate and refine ideas for possible musical agents, and then asks students to complete the rest of the assignment on their own. Students write a one-paragraph description of the piece that acts as an overall summary of the piece’s form and “characteristic features,” a 1-2 sentence summary describing their agent for their point of view, and complete the assignment with a full written analysis.²¹ Sly notes that the length of the actual assignments could vary significantly and explains that this allows this type of project to be scaled to classes of various sizes.²² He does not specify which courses he has used this method in, but the two examples given in the article suggest sophomore or upper-level courses.

Angela Ripley’s post-tonal postcard assignments also strike a middle ground between high-stakes and low-stakes writing, and they also highlight audience as an important part of the writing process.²³ Because the assignments are characterized as short, informal “letters” to a specific person, students must be both succinct and creative in their writing. These assignments employ elements of Self-Determination Theory to give students choice in completion of the assignments and also within the assignments themselves.²⁴ Ripley’s approach does not necessarily involve as much in-class preparation as do Attas, Inman, and Rogers, but the size (and complexity) of the project is similarly small in scale and is relative to the size of the essay that students are creating.

Though written primarily for students rather than for instructors, *Writing in Music: A Brief Guide* by Lynne Rogers, Karen Bottge, and Sara Haefeli is an invaluable resource with a wealth of information and advice for students who are approaching

¹⁹ Sly (2005, 52).

²⁰ Sly (2005, 61).

²¹ Sly (2005, 53).

²² Sly (2005, 63).

²³ Ripley (2020, 199–226).

²⁴ Ripley (2020, 201).

many different types of prose writing work.²⁵ Instructors will undoubtedly find this useful as a resource to recommend to their students, and may also find inspiration in it for ways to frame writing assignments for their students.²⁶

Low(er)-stakes assignments

High-stakes writing assignments have taken on a variety of different forms and have also been cast as a series of lower-stakes assignments which build to the larger assignment. However, true low-stakes writing assignments may serve another purpose entirely. Peter Elbow and Mary Deane Sorcinelli state that this type of assignment is intended to “increase how much students think about, understand, and learn what we teach.”²⁷ Elbow and Sorcinelli advocate for frequent use of low-stakes writing,²⁸ noting that it not only helps students to focus on course content and sort through finding “their own language,” but also helps prepare students for high-stakes writing, as well as assisting us in knowing how the students are grappling with the material—what they do or do not understand, and how they feel about what they are trying to understand.²⁹ Writing specifically about undergraduate music theory classes, Deron L. McGee discussed some similar motivations for use of writing in undergraduate theory courses, specifically links to cognitive development and development of critical thinking skills.³⁰ McGee also supports use of smaller-scale projects, listing a total of five different types of writing assignments and explaining how small-scale assignments can lead to larger-scale ones.

Jan Miyake’s approach to low-stakes writing focuses on writing regularly, with concomitant adjustments to assignment type and grading methods to make it manageable for both instructor and student. She utilizes a +/P/NP rubric, which allows better focus on the content and ideas rather than getting bogged down in grammar and mechanics. This method also opens up the possibility of re-dos and motivates students to opt to revise their work. Working in a cumulative Google doc (or

25 Rogers, Bottge, Haefeli (2020).

26 Since this book is written to students and therefore is not as directly focused on the writing assignments themselves, but rather how to approach an existing writing assignment as a student, it is not included in the summary table below.

27 Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006, 214).

28 Rogers (2018, 301) also references this suggestion, and it appears to be part of her motivation to use frequent but shorter essays.

29 Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006, 215).

30 McGee (1993, 85–104).

something similar) allows for an ongoing conversation between student and instructor throughout the semester. Miyake uses a variety of prompts, ranging from summaries of content to more open-ended questions, and she also suggests allowing students to ask and answer their own questions.³¹

Sara Bakker and Tim Chenette similarly suggest that instructors should carefully consider the purpose of the writing assignment and adjust the assignment accordingly. They suggest that effective communication, student engagement, and critical thinking are all separable goals/benefits of writing, and, because they are separable, we can tailor writing assignments to focus specifically on only one of these goals. Assignments can be scaled to occur in class or in nontraditional settings (such as Twitter), or can be conceived of as larger projects. Clear definition of the assignment goals allows students to focus their efforts and also encourages instructors to provide better and more efficient feedback, even with larger or more open-ended assignments.³²

Jennifer Salamone's approach to low-stakes writing utilizes focused freewriting to support classroom discourse. Students are asked to listen to specific pieces outside of class and write free responses to what they are hearing. This type of focused listening (sometimes with a prompt/question to address for part of the exercise) allows students to engage with the music in a more intuitive and visceral way. It gives students "agency over their classroom learning" in the class discussion which follows, and creates a more student-centered curriculum by drawing out more student voices.³³

Self-reflection and metacognition assignments

Clearly, the content and intention of writing assignments in the music theory classroom can serve a variety of purposes. Although some of the previous methods may be used for self-reflective purposes at times (especially some of the low-stakes approaches), there is also an argument to be made that regular use of self-reflection, or even metacognitive reflection, can be invaluable to a student's learning experience. For example, Davidson, Scripp, and Fletcher ask students in their entry-level aural skills course to read and respond to "articles on cognitive development, skill acquisition, and reading theory."³⁴ The students reflect on the assigned readings and also reflect on their own learning and how they are acquiring the new skills learned in the course.

³¹ Miyake (2014).

³² Bakker and Chenette (2014).

³³ Salamone (2018).

³⁴ Davidson, Scripp, and Fletcher (1995, 2).

In a recent article, Anna Ferenc's case for metacognition in the music theory classroom³⁵ argues that metacognition is the missing step that should be included in the theory curriculum in order to guide students from basic musicianship skills to the music theory that is truly meaningful (as identified by Rogers³⁶). She explains principles of metacognition and metacognitive reflection and provides sample prompts and example responses. Elsewhere Ferenc treats this topic in more detail, explaining that metacognition requires not only "knowledge of cognition" but also "monitoring and regulating such knowledge."³⁷ The element of "regulation" is one that is particularly key for classroom applications, since metacognition encourages self-regulatory behavior. This type of behavior has been shown to help with effective learning and with the all-important ability to transfer learned knowledge to other contexts; self-regulation has also been linked to intrinsic motivations.³⁸ Reflection and metacognition overlap in definition and sometimes in practice, but Ferenc clarifies that metacognition means "assessing what you know as well as how and why you know it."³⁹ Although reflection can take place in a number of different ways, reflective writing engages students more actively in the learning process and encourages them to connect new knowledge to previously learned contexts.⁴⁰ In short, "purposeful reflective writing has the potential to be a very useful tool for music theory instruction, because learners are required to continuously integrate new disciplinary information into previous knowledge that may not have been adequately retained if it did not initially undergo deep processing."⁴¹ The inclusion of *how/why* in reflective writing rather than simply *what* differentiates these two principles, and is a required element of metacognition. This transition from self-reflection to metacognition can be assisted by well-constructed instructor prompts.⁴²

35 Ferenc (2017).

36 Rogers (2004). Ferenc (2017) cites excerpts from p. 4 and p. 7 of Rogers (2004).

37 Ferenc (2016, 27).

38 Ferenc (2016, 30–31).

39 Ferenc (2016, 30).

40 Although not promoting reflective writing as the sole method by which connections are made, the chapters on "Connecting" in *Small Teaching* (James M. Lang) and "Making Connections" in *Small Teaching Online* (Flower Darby and James M. Lang) make an excellent case for why helping students to build these networks of connections is so crucial.

41 Ferenc (2016, 34).

42 Ferenc (2016, 35).

Summary and contextualization

The articles presented in the literature review to this point represent a wealth of ideas and motivations for inclusion of prose writing in the theory classroom. For the convenience of the reader (or for the reader who prefers a shorter summative format), all of the main articles discussed above are summarized in Table 1.⁴³ Articles are included in the original order in which they were presented, moving from larger, higher-stakes approaches to lower-stakes approaches and finally to self-reflective and metacognitive approaches.

As demonstrated by the wealth of articles and approaches to writing presented in this literature review, re-casting prose writing in the theory classroom in an attempt to make it more meaningful to our students, more reasonable for us as instructors, and more rewarding for everyone involved is a worthwhile endeavor. The benefits of inclusion of writing, and the flexibility with which we can approach writing assignments, makes it more plausible to be able to design prose writing assignments which would benefit any curriculum. The rest of this paper details two writing projects that I have used in second-semester theory courses; there are some similarities to the projects described in the writings referenced above, but the projects are not identical.⁴⁴ Both projects tend towards the low-stakes side of the spectrum, with the intention of keeping both instructor and student workload lighter. These two projects are included in the fourth section of the table and are analyzed with the same categories as the other projects in order to demonstrate both the similarities and differences to previous literature on the topic.

43 The categories in the table correspond to some of the more distinguishing features of the group of articles as a whole. The table is not intended to be fully descriptive of all content of these articles, but rather act as a large-scale summary, and one that can offer comparison/contrast to other articles. Blank columns indicate that the column was not directly addressed in the article or was less applicable to the article.

44 In my initial attempts to design both projects, the *Engaging Students* articles by Miyake and Bakker/Chenette were particularly helpful when considering prompts and grading systems.

Section 1: High(er)-stakes assignments									
Author	Project "Size"	Structure/content	Repertoire selected by...	Primarily in-class or out-of-class	Guided analysis	Specific/variable audience	Scaffolding	Other "aids" or unique design features	Special grading procedures
Atlas 2016	Large	"Mini-conference" presentation, abstract, paper	Instructor (4 pre-selected pieces)	Both	Yes		Yes (through the entire semester, and previous assignments within the core)	Peer and draft feedback, models of both presenting and writing	
Strovas 2014 (musicology)	Large	Program notes, letter to anthology editor	Student			Yes	Yes (series of "pre-writing assignments")	Feedback provided on at least some portions of the project(s)	
Ferenc 2015	Large	"simulated professional activity," e.g., essay (with examples) on a specific topic for inclusion in a textbook	Student (topic selected by instructor)	Out-of-class		Yes	Yes, through author-editor scenario (draft, feedback, discussion & collaboration)	Extensive peer review and collaboration (author/editor roles in pairs)	
Inman 2017	Large	Two essays: Short essay, detailed prompt provided; large essay, student-designed research question	Instructor (short essay), student (long essay)	Both	Yes		Yes; both assignments are scaffolded as a series of 5 steps.	Marvin 2005 used as an introduction, model writing, peer and draft feedback, individual consultations.	3 areas (analytic claims, mechanics/style, overall organization). Each area given different priority/methods of feedback.
Rogers 2018	Variable (expand in length later in the core)	Analytic essays (varying length/complexity) addressing specific questions/issues in a selected piece/excerpt	Instructor	Both	Yes	Yes	Yes (through in-class preparation and carefully designed prompts/questions)	Coaching on "essential elements" of an essay; provide examples or models	Grading rubric and advice for effective use of instructor comments
Sly 2005	Variable	Analytic essays describing music from the viewpoint of an agent	Instructor	Both			Yes; in-class discussions of agents	Encourages development of multiple viewpoints	
Ripley 2020	Medium	"Postcard": Short, informal essay in the form of a letter	Variable (usually instructor)	Out-of-class	Yes (specific analytical lens/question)	Yes		Student selection of assignments (3 out of 4)	Grading rubric (criteria provided to students in advance)

Table 1
Summary of literature review.

Section 2: Low(er)-stakes assignments									
Author	Project "size"	Structure/content	Repertoire selected by...	Primarily in-class or out-of-class	Guided analysis	Specific/variable audience	Scaffolding	Other "aids" or unique design features	Special grading procedures
McGee 1993	Variable	Wide variety of projects: freewriting/reflection, summary/abstract, compare/contrast excerpts, longer analytical paper, etc.	Variable	Out-of-class	Variable	Yes (varies)	Yes, particularly for larger projects; also across the course from smaller/well-defined projects & questions to larger and less defined	Writing models, prompts/questions	Use of peer review and limited feedback (mark specific types of errors) and use scaffolded parts to reduce final work
Miyake 2014	Small	Weekly journals (responding to prompts)	Instructor (primarily)	Out-of-class	Yes, (specific analytical lens/question, could be either instructor or student-designed)			Use of methods such as Google doc allow for dynamic discussion throughout the semester	+ /P/NP rubric: focus on content over mechanics, and encourage revision
Bakker & Chenette 2014	Variable	Variable; authors advocate for consideration of varied assignment types	Variable	Either		Variable		Emphasize flexibility in format; focus on purpose of assignment, which can often be achieved in multiple formats	State goal of assignment in advance; self-review or peer-review; encourage creativity via completion grading, creative prompts, etc.
Salamone 2018	Small	Freewriting on a specific excerpt/example	Instructor	Out-of-class	Variable (may provide a more focused/specific prompt in addition to free reflection)				Freewriting used as pre-class homework; graded purely on completion.

Section 3: Self-reflection and metacognition assignments									
Author	Project "size"	Structure/content	Repertoire selected by...	Primarily in-class or out-of-class	Guided analysis	Specific/ variable audience	Scaffolding	Other "aids" or unique design features	Special grading procedures
Davidson, Scripp, Fletcher 1995	Variable	Variable: questionnaires, reflective journals, reading reflections	Readings selected by instructor (primarily)	Out-of-class (with in-class discussion)					
Ferenc 2017	Small	Metacognitive, reflective responses to prompts	Prompts provided by instructor	Out-of-class					
Ferenc 2016	Small	Reflective essays responding to provided prompts	Prompts provided by instructor	Out-of-class			Carefully structured prompts to place focus on learning experience rather than content.	Essay format ensures students present thoughts coherently.	Rubric streamlines grading and communicates value system
Section 4: Projects presented in this paper									
	Project "size"	Structure/content	Repertoire selected by...	Primarily in-class or out-of-class	Guided analysis	Specific/ variable audience	Scaffolding	Other "aids" or unique design features	Special grading procedures
Project 1	Medium	Analytical papers in response to prompts	Instructor	Both	Yes		In-class analysis (guided by instructor), prompts to guide writing, peer feedback and revisions		Rubric using standards-based grading; submission via Google docs
Project 2	Small	Journals (mixture of different content and approaches)	Instructor (multiple topics provided each week)	Out-of-class				Student selection of prompts and some choice of which journals to complete	P/NP, with opportunity for revision

Project #1: Short analytical papers

Overview

My first project, a series of short analytical papers, was designed to give second-semester students a relatively safe environment for their first attempts at analytical writing, and to particularly emphasize *practicing* this skill via multiple assignments. This structure situates this series of projects between the most typical low-stakes and high-stakes designs. Low-stakes designs (such as Miyake 2014) often feature use of multiple or frequent assignments, but are not always as focused on formal or analytical writing. High-stakes designs (such as Inman 2017 and Rogers 2018) are often focused on more formal writing, but are most often designed to scale towards a larger project (whether within a single semester or across several semesters). My project captures elements of both approaches by utilizing similar assignments multiple times within a single semester, allowing students to practice their analytical writing in an environment that grows increasingly familiar. This project also operates slightly earlier in the theory core than most analysis-focused projects.⁴⁵ The design of repeated practice would lead well to more advanced projects in upper-level courses.

Design

3–4 writing assignments are assigned across a typical semester. Each writing assignment is preceded by an “analysis day,” a single 50-minute class period devoted to guided analysis work. Students work individually and in groups to complete specified analysis tasks, which provide them with the necessary information to respond to writing prompts for a short paper (usually 2 pages), due the following week.⁴⁶ This scaffolded design allows students to gain experience writing about music in an environment that guides the content of their papers through carefully crafted prompts.⁴⁷ The prompts are specifically created to encourage critical thinking and engagement with issues of performance and musically informed decision-making (thinking back to the learning goals stated at the outset of this article). Thus, the act

⁴⁵ Rogers (2018) includes short 1-2 sentence responses in second-semester theory, and builds to 1-3 page essays in the third semester. Attas uses assignments throughout the core, but they culminate in the fourth semester, and Inman (2017) operates in an upper-level form class.

⁴⁶ Word-count requirements could easily be substituted for number-of-pages requirements.

⁴⁷ The prompts can be used to also shorten/lengthen the paper. I usually ask students to write a two-page (minimum) paper as a response to two prompts. However, students could be asked to only respond to one prompt (resulting in a one-page paper) on their first assignment. (And, of course, other options/lengths are possible.)

of writing becomes the primary task, since content is already learned.

This design allows me to adjust expectations relative to the material accomplished in class, or to provide altered prompts or additional materials. For instance, I have sometimes provided a “key” of sorts for some analysis components if I saw that some groups had struggled to finish all components of the analysis within the constraints of the class period. In spite of the fact that I want all groups to complete the analysis work independently, the design of the project requires that they have all of the “facts” at their fingertips when working on the writing portion. Once that initial preparatory class period is complete, it is more important that students work from “correct” analytical information so that their papers are not weighed down by weak analysis work.

Before beginning the first project, students study example papers and grade them using the rubric which is later used to grade their work. With their own papers, students receive peer feedback (discussed in more detail below) before their final submission.⁴⁸ They are invited to edit their papers after receiving a grade and feedback, which decreases concerns over assessment and encourages focus on the final product. Additionally, students work on writing in small but frequent assignments, allowing them the chance to learn from feedback and improve their skills for future papers.⁴⁹

Writing preparation and peer feedback

In addition to making sure students have all of the necessary “facts” at their fingertips by working the analysis together in class, I also use a set of preparatory materials to help students approach their first writing assignment with clear expectations. Students are provided with a rubric (Example 1) and a series of instructor-written mock papers (Appendix 1) to grade. This set of papers allows students to both see and evaluate models of prose analytical writing before attempting it themselves. Each mock paper was specifically designed to model particular types of errors that I had seen in previous student writing (such as the infamous “play-by-play” paper). Students found this activity quite engaging, and their criticisms of the weak points of the papers were excellent. It also provided an opportunity to criticize common weaknesses in each area of the rubric. Since the students knew that the papers were only mock papers, everyone was equally ready to criticize them openly and this allowed a deep discussion to evolve in a relatively short amount of class time.

48 Both the mock paper grading assignment and the peer review process were additions that I made after an initial year of using this project. Because they were not part of the original design, I was able to see how these two additions increased the students’ success with the project as a whole.

49 Although arrived at independently, this notion of a short-but-frequent instead of “eggs in one basket” approach is very similar to that advocated for in Rogers (2018).

	4	3	2	1
Mechanics and style	Paper “readability” is very high: Very few or no errors with respect to grammar, spelling, punctuation, syntax, etc. All guidelines are followed (margins, font, spacing, length, etc.).	Occasional errors with respect to syntax, grammar, spelling, etc. All guidelines are followed (margins, font, spacing, length, etc.).	Numerous errors with respect to syntax, grammar, spelling, etc. All guidelines are followed (margins, font, spacing, length, etc.).	Frequent errors in syntax, grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. Paper is difficult to read due to run-on sentences, incomplete sentences and fragments, etc.
Accuracy of information	Information conveyed is complete, accurate, and forms a coherent picture of the work in question. Avoids a play-by-play explanation as much as possible. Refers to correct keys, measure numbers, and uses language and terms learned in class.	Minor errors which do not significantly detract from the overall value of the paper in conveying information about the piece. Minimal use of language and terms used in class.	Approximately 50% of information conveyed is accurate. Avoids or misuses language and terms used in class.	Significant errors and/or incorrect information. Avoids or misuses language and terms used in class.
Completeness/ thoroughness of response to prompts or questions	Writing provides a thorough, detailed, and comprehensive response to all elements of the provided prompts or questions, with creative thinking and innovative ways of approaching the question. Responses are thoughtful and detailed, considering all implications of the prompts or questions, and reflect critical thinking and the ability to clearly articulate information about music in a written form. Any “tangential” information that is included has been clearly related to the topic at hand.	Responses address prompts or questions completely but lack innovation in the approach to the question or response, and do not consider all implications in detail. Critical thinking is still evident, although to a slightly lesser extent.	Minor details are omitted from the responses, and additional implications are overlooked or omitted. Responses are not sufficiently detailed and do not articulate a clear response. “Tangential” information is included which is not then tied to the topic at hand.	Significant details are omitted from the responses, or the responses are incomplete or not quite coherent. A significant amount of “tangential” or irrelevant information is included.

Example 1

Grading rubric (used for mock papers and for students’ papers also).

In addition, students were provided with a page of “Writing Guidelines” which discussed “dos and don’ts” of very basic writing mechanics and a few guidelines specific to writing about music (such as correct ways to reference a specific measure). Although the mock paper assignment and writing guidelines certainly did not eliminate poor writing mechanics and other basic errors, the quality of the papers did improve noticeably on these points when I employed these preparatory steps, resulting in significantly decreased grading time.⁵⁰

Peer review also helps students strengthen their papers before their final submission. Students are required to submit their papers to their peers one week before they are due to the instructor. They then have a few days to give each other

50 For the two years that I used this project, I had approximately 55 students (total) in the course each year, which means that any noticeable decrease in grading time added up significantly across the course as a whole.

feedback (i.e., submit paper to peers on a Wednesday, peer review due by Saturday, final version due to me by the following Wednesday). I assign students into groups for each peer review period. These group assignments are more-or-less random for the first set of reviews, and then strategically structured to mix students of various strengths and weaknesses on the subsequent assignments. Students were given the guidelines shown in Example 2 to complete their peer reviews.

Peer Review Guidelines

The feedback that you give your peers will largely determine your Peer Review outcome for each unit. In general I will look for the following things:

1. 3-5 numbered suggestions for improvement: I do want you to praise your peers and give them positive feedback, but you need to additionally encourage and inspire them to produce even better work. As such, you should give them three to five suggestions on how they could improve their projects. "High fives," flattery, and also overly negative comments do not count as a suggestion for improvement; your peer review work should be constructive criticism.
2. Please do not go through and edit your peers' work in sentence-by-sentence detail. Such detailed editing should be done by the author before the original submission, and the "editing" time that this would require is beyond the scope of the peer review process. If you find that there are pervasive errors (especially with respect to grammar, structure, etc.), this can be a comment that you make, supported with 1-2 specific examples.
3. Specificity: Do not just discuss vague ideas in relation to your peers' work. Give them specific suggestions about specific moments of their compositions/writing (e.g. "you haven't fully addressed this question from the prompt", "the 2nd sentence in your 3rd paragraph is awkward to read-I think it's missing a word").
4. Appropriate vocabulary: We are developing ways to discuss musical phenomena in this course, and I would like to see you use those terms when applicable.
5. **The comments you give and receive through the Canvas Discussion forum should be the only aspect of the projects that you discuss among your peers or with anyone else.** If you have additional questions, please contact me. Since it is time-dependent, peer feedback will not be assessed if it is more than 24 hours late. **Similarly, if you do not submit drafts and comments to your group by the due dates you will receive a 0 on your Peer Review outcome for the unit.**

Example 2

Peer review guidelines provided to students.⁵¹

Although this process was not without its flaws (students turning in assignments for peer review late or not at all, submitting peer feedback late, etc.), the overall result was worthwhile. On an anonymous in-class survey, students reported that

⁵¹ These guidelines were developed from a model used by my colleague, Phil Duker.

they generally found the peer feedback useful when the process was completed by everyone.⁵² Students even commented that they felt less stressed when submitting their papers to me when it had already been read by other students, and that they benefited from reading their peers' works and being exposed to different perspectives. Not surprisingly (and not unreasonably), some students noted that they had not been given exceptionally good feedback by their peers, and thus were less positive about the process. But even in these cases, students were not opposed to the process itself, only to the feedback they received.

From an instructor standpoint, even though the implementation of peer feedback needed improvement, the results in the students' papers were worth the extra effort (when compared to previous projects which did not include peer feedback). Grading time was significantly reduced, especially since I could review what their peers had advised and see what changes had been made (using the Google doc history review). An additional benefit of using Google docs for this project is that the ability to review the history of the document helps alleviate at least some concerns about plagiarism, since the instructor can see what changes were made, by whom, and when. If using an LMS that permits grading by "groups," instructors can also easily grade papers in order of the peer review groups, which would help to highlight any marked similarities between papers that I knew were "shared" with their peers.⁵³ The quality of papers in general was better from the outset, especially with respect to basic writing mechanics (possibly because students wanted to produce good work for their peers to read), and when students took their peers' advice this usually improved their results as well. These improvements were also reflected in their grades, with peer-reviewed assignments tending to average 1/3 of a letter grade higher than those with no peer review requirement.⁵⁴

⁵² In order to garner as much information as I could about this process when it was first implemented, I asked the following question on an in-class evaluation: "Did you find the peer review process on writing assignments useful? Why or why not?"

⁵³ I have not experienced issues with plagiarism in these projects. Though I sincerely believe that my students tended to be invested in their learning experience enough to do their own work, I also think that the shared "facts" of the analysis that they already had at hand also helped to discourage feeling the need to copy from someone else. Additionally, since students selected from a variety of prompts, they rarely wrote about exactly the same content in their papers.

⁵⁴ Since I used four assignments when I taught the course without peer review and only three after I added the peer review, it is difficult to draw a fair comparison for all assignments. The letter grade improvement cited above is for those assignments that correlated most closely from one year to the next.

Student responses⁵⁵

Student feedback on this project indicates that although the assignments were difficult to do initially, they became easier with practice, and that they “were a great learning experience and put me out of my comfort zone, which [was] really appreciated.” In reference to analysis assignments/analysis days, students commented that although they were “longer and difficult, [they] also were beneficial in synthesizing many different topics we had covered into one thing” and that “the application to real life helped me understand the topics we were learning more.” The first time this project was taught, a few students indicated that edits such as a rough draft review or a workshop on writing an analytical paper would be helpful. Since these types of suggestions did not reappear the second time I used this project, the peer review structure and the mock paper assignment seem to have addressed these concerns.

Grading

Use of the rubric presented in Example 1 has been a powerful tool to decrease grading time while still providing good feedback to students. The three categories on the rubric serve to draw attention to three areas which are all necessary to create good analytic writing, and although I may place more intrinsic value on the completeness/thoroughness category—and the critical thinking which is inherent in my conception of this category, as evidenced by my internal descriptions within the rubric—the rubric places equal value on all three categories. Thus, students who are skilled at writing mechanics but are struggling to attain good levels of critical thinking are going to fare just as well as students who can think critically and creatively even if they struggle to follow conventions of good writing. And, more importantly, all students will see which categories they are doing well in, and which areas need improvement. Additionally, the “accuracy” category allows me to assess whether or not students actually synthesized the information from their in-class analysis work; even when students are assisted in finding the “answers” in advance, they are not always able to transform that information successfully in prose. In these cases, students usually learn to correct these types of mistakes quite quickly for future assignments.

As others have suggested, I prefer to use Google docs or something similar in order to facilitate feedback. This allows multiple types of feedback to be employed, depending on the content of the paper and the student’s skill level. For instance, if students are making significant errors with writing mechanics, I will likely comment on some of the

⁵⁵ These comments are freely made by students on end-of-term evaluations, without a specific prompt on an evaluation to ask about the analysis or writing assignments.

early errors and then simply highlight additional errors (or the sentences containing additional errors). This means that students will receive coaching on the initial errors but will have to find the remaining errors on their own. Comments can be made and specifically linked to a particular sentence or block of text; alternatively, an edit “suggestion” can be made in order to assist with wording or sentence structure on a local level. Comments on the Google docs can be particularly useful, as they can serve as a way to engage the student in a “conversation” if further clarification is needed.

Further revisions

In future, I would like to explore a model where students are required to revise one or more of their papers. Ideally, this would be in a setting where students have freedom to choose which paper to revise but are encouraged or incentivized to choose to revise their first paper.⁵⁶ I also plan to include a self-reflective statement discussing the revisions and grade the resubmission primarily on their own discussion of their writing. As will be discussed shortly with Project #2, I find the value in self-assessment and self-reflection to be significant and would like to incorporate that into these projects.

I also plan to explore ways to achieve better peer review. One possibility would be to keep students in the same groups throughout the semester and ask them to set their own standards for acceptable peer review content. This design would allow them to, in a sense, “review” each other’s peer review work once or twice per semester. Alternatively, implementing anonymous peer review through an online learning management system could help students to more objectively view their peers’ work and make suggestions accordingly. Coordination with the writing center on campus for tutoring and other resources could also be valuable.

Since the intention of the short-but-frequent design component was to help students engage with writing over the course of the semester, instead of in one or two large projects, I am also interested in exploring the idea of making assignments shorter (1 page) but having the assignments be more frequent (bi-weekly or even weekly). This would necessarily require revisions to the feedback and grading systems, but it would also help students develop more fluent and natural writing skills due to frequent practice. Additionally, if writing assignments were regularly scheduled into the course, students would be less likely to feel (correctly or incorrectly) that their

⁵⁶ Typically, only a few students take advantage of the option to revise and resubmit a paper. By requiring revision on at least one paper, I would be able to ensure that students read and understand feedback, which is likely to increase their success on future papers.

homework load significantly increased in the weeks when papers were due (since the schedule would be more predictable from the student perspective).

This short-but-frequent design would also allow greater flexibility in the content of the assignments. Students could be provided with “extra” assignments, allowing them to choose which assignments to complete based on their interest in the topic/piece being studied *or* based on the rhythms of their own schedule for the semester. For instance, out of twelve assignments for the semester, the student might only be required to complete any eight assignments of their choice. This model necessarily becomes slightly more complicated when it comes to peer review considerations, but use of a learning management system could help to mediate these difficulties.

Designing small-scale assignments that allow students to select any repertoire of their choice is another key goal for the future. In addition to increasing relevance (and, consequently, engagement) for students, this type of design would also encourage better diversity and inclusion of wider repertoire into the classroom, especially as the peer review process would allow students to learn from one another’s repertoire selections. One drawback, practically speaking, is that it necessarily becomes more complicated for assessment and even for the preparatory analysis stages assuming a moderate-to-large class size.⁵⁷ However, a blended approach could help to balance these two issues: Students might first work through a couple of papers on instructor-selected examples to learn the process and receive feedback on their writing, and then be asked to complete a final analysis and short paper on an individually selected piece. Alternatively, a curated list of pre-approved pieces could help to mediate between the two extremes of instructor-selected vs. student-selected repertoire while still prioritizing relevance and engagement—particularly if the curated list were to be drawn from current ensemble repertoire that the students were performing at the time, or a similar body of work that would allow students to be engaging with music that they were currently learning or performing.

Teaching materials

Six sample assignments (both the preparatory analysis lessons and the actual writing prompts) are included as Appendix 2, and the rubric used for assessment is available as Appendix 1.

⁵⁷ As noted above, I originally assigned these projects to classes with about 55 students in total, which made grading of multiple writing assignments throughout the semester somewhat challenging even when students were all analyzing and writing about the same pieces. Smaller class sizes will not exactly make the task easy, but would make it more practical to handle individualized assignments.

Project #2: Weekly journals

Overview

The design of my second project, a series of short weekly journals, was motivated by a desire to increase the “frequency” in the “frequent-but-short” design element, and to *also* include regular opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking, self-reflection, and metacognitive activities.⁵⁸ Placing this series of assignments in a second-semester theory course should help to target a time in their college career where students are tending to become more independent and self-regulated in their learning. Additionally, in traditional music theory curricula, the second semester is often the point where students who came in with some theory background will begin encountering more and more material that is new to them. The combination of these two elements provides an excellent motivation to include a project that features a “frequent-but-short” design and focuses on helping students to synthesize and reflect on their learning, building their networks of connected knowledge.

This project falls squarely on the low-stakes side of the writing spectrum, and also in the “small” size category. Similar to project #1, the journal project also takes somewhat of a middle ground in its components, relative to other prior designs. Reflective prompts are included alongside content-based questions, rather than operating primarily in one area or the other, as the “small” projects cited above tend to do. The writing style is informal (similar to Miyake 2014, and contrasting somewhat with Ferenc 2016), and students choose which writing prompt to respond to, providing a small element of choice and agency, which is also less common in typical “small” projects (though it is utilized in a slightly larger-scale project in Ripley 2020).

Design

2-3 topics or questions for journal entries were posted each week, and students could choose the topic/question that they preferred to engage with. Students also had some flexibility in deciding which journals to complete: The semester is divided into three units and students could skip one journal for each unit and still earn a perfect grade for their journal grade. If a student chose to complete all of the journals for a unit, they could earn a small amount of extra credit.

Journal topics ranged from “summaries” of recent content, which tended to

⁵⁸ In my current implementation of these projects, I removed analytical papers and substituted journals in their place in order to observe and evaluate the usage of the journals. In future (as discussed in the “Conclusions” section of the paper), a possible revision may integrate both types of writing.

necessarily be more fact-based and objective, to reflective exercises on in-class activities and larger projects, which tended to ask students to think more carefully about applications and their own approaches to the activities. The samples in Example 3, which represent the options given to students for a single week towards the end of the term, highlight both content-based and reflection-based questions. A full sampling of journal prompts is included as Appendix 3.

1. Define the basic concept of a sequence, including all requirements to be a “full” sequence. What identifying labels do we use to distinguish different sequences? What analytical strategies can you use to identify sequences and analyze them?
2. Discuss your understanding of the Vivaldi example from Wednesday’s class--how did it go for you when identifying the sequences by ear? Do you find the score helpful or harder to process than the aural material? What concepts were you able to solidify through working on this piece during class (and after class), and what do you still want to improve on?
3. Discuss your experience during the repertoire analysis project on Friday--what are you learning about the music, what are you learning about your own skills and inclinations, and what are you learning about your weaknesses? (NOTE: If you select this option, it should go beyond the reflection quiz questions that are due as a part of that project itself.)

Example 3
Sample journal prompts.

The directions given to the students (see Example 4) emphasize focusing on their own learning and discovery, rather than requiring a specific word count or length. A target range is provided only to avoid having students feel that the project is undefined. When grading these assignments, the “thoroughness” of the topic treatment was always the means of evaluating length, rather than checking for a specific word count.

Each week, 2-3 journal topics will be made available (usually by midnight on Tuesday). A short “journal” is due by Sunday at midnight, using the assignment posted on Canvas. These journals are intended to be relatively informal and thus will not require formal writing or formal style. However, they will represent a reflection on your learning and discovery throughout the week, and as such should be carefully written and should treat your selected topic thoroughly. No maximum or minimum lengths will be set, but in general 200-400 words will be a good target range.

Example 4
Journal directions.

Student responses

In response to a targeted question on an anonymous in-class survey,⁵⁹ students indicated primarily positive responses to the content journal project. Students were asked to indicate why they did/did not find the journal project useful, and through these responses, students revealed that positive aspects of the journal project included:

- Receiving feedback/confirmation and/or correction of their understanding
- Being required to summarize & synthesize information and make connections between concepts, and/or to review and solidify their knowledge
- Reflecting on their knowledge and having to put concepts into words
- Figuring out if they know what they are talking about and/or prove to themselves that they know what is going on
- Frequency [of several shorter projects] over a single large project

Naturally, not all feedback was positive. However, feedback that was less positive was typically tempered by more neutral or positive statements. For instance, one student remarked that “...sometimes they just seem tedious. But I understand their usefulness.” Another student commented that “it helps with thinking about what I am learning” but felt that the word count was more than necessary for simple topics, while another student stated that “I hate the journals but they are actually pretty helpful since I have to know the topic well enough to write about it.” A few students also commented that they felt that restating things that they knew was only redundant, and would prefer more direct application.

The content journals were also mentioned independently on another evaluation by one student;⁶⁰ however, this single comment suggests that the frequency component was fulfilling its desired end: “I actually really liked the weekly quizzes and content journals because it made me reflect on what we had learned before too much time had passed so that it wasn’t just in one ear, out the other.”

59 The responses summarized here were provided by students in response to the following question:

With the premise that the content journals are intended to a) help you think through what you are learning, b) personalize and internalize what you are learning and doing in this class, and c) give you practice articulating your thoughts in written form, without assigning formal writing assignments: Do you find the content journals useful? Why or why not?

This question is to some degree a leading question, for the purposes of a mid-semester reframing of the assignment in addition to collecting feedback. Given that students did provide a mixture of responses, I think the feedback is still a reasonably fair reflection of students’ responses to this project.

60 This mention of the journals was on an anonymous end-of-semester evaluation form, in response to the question: “What types of activities in class best contributed to your learning?”

Grading

Each journal was graded on a pass/not-yet-passed basis, with the following rubric provided to the students:

- P = all of the following are present: thorough treatment of topic, appropriate length, evidence of engagement, high readability, evidence of self-reflection and assessment
- N = any of the following are present: largely incorrect or incomplete information, low readability, surface-level treatment of topic, minimal engagement, minimal work towards self-reflection or assessment

Students were permitted (and encouraged) to revise any not-yet-passed journals to achieve a passing grade, and the final score for the journal grade for the unit was determined based on the number of passing grades and the number of on-time submissions (journals were accepted up to one week late).

Grading of these journals tended to be straightforward and quick. Since these were shorter assignments, I utilized a “quiz” within my LMS with an “essay” question so that students could type their answer directly in the quiz, and I could use the grading software built into the LMS. I found that, especially after the first couple weeks, many students would hit the proverbial nail on the head, requiring little to no commentary. This is likely due in part to the fact that students could choose which prompt they wished to respond to and therefore felt equal to the task of responding to their chosen prompt. This allowed me to spend more time responding to students who really needed help with their responses, and the Canvas format allowed for a “dialogue” of sorts between comments left on the assignment by myself and the students and the resubmissions made by the students. Additionally, working in the LMS means that all previous versions are readily available for viewing. Students can view previous submissions and copy/paste them in order to edit them, and I can view previous versions to compare to the revised version and quickly assess whether or not students have made the requested revisions.

The opportunity to earn some amount of extra credit points was taken advantage of by approximately 50% of students in the first two units of the semester, and about 20% in the final unit. Given that the final unit is shorter than the other two units and that there was a larger final project assigned in the last unit, the drop in extra credit participation was not too surprising. In general, students seemed to engage well with this project and to find it manageable to keep up with.

Future revisions

Although the project was deliberately designed to always provide students with choice in their selection of prompts to respond to, this setup necessarily means that students may not achieve the same benefits from the project, depending on their choice of prompts. For instance, a student could choose to respond to content summary prompts throughout the entire semester, and thus never really engage in self-reflection. (The opposite—spending the entire semester engaging in self-reflection—is *nearly* true, although self-reflection prompts weren’t as readily available in the first couple of content-heavy review weeks.) Obviously, both types of “journal” entries are valuable, but their values are different, and students may at times be prone to taking the easier path rather than the one that is most likely to be beneficial.

Since the concept of student choice is an integral part of the project, one way to balance the benefit of different types of writing with the value of student choice would be to deliberately alternate the types of prompts available (one week could be all content-based, and the next could be more reflection-based). This would still give students choice when selecting from the prompts for each week while simultaneously nudging them towards engaging in different types of writing. Students would still have the option to omit a journal from each unit as well.

A second solution would be to ask students to engage regularly in self-reflective writing and have a separate series of assignments where students create “cheat sheets” or other summary-type documents for the major topics that are covered. Obviously, this second solution represents a higher workload for the students and the instructor, so this solution should be weighed against the other work present in the class. A modification of this solution could involve having students work in small groups (perhaps under a time limit) to create these “cheat sheets” in class. Such an approach decreases the amount of grading required and allows additional peer-learning benefits to exist alongside the individual self-reflection benefits.

Conclusions

The two projects presented here contribute additional new approaches to the growing literature on this topic, and also present a study in contrasts. The analytical papers as presented here require formal writing and are steeped in musical analysis, though the prompts can be structured to have a more performance-focused or reflective quality. The papers are relatively short, but they also require a somewhat lengthy scaffolded process: in-class analysis (which may also be prepared with a homework

assignment or other in-class work), complete draft, peer feedback, revisions from peer feedback, final draft, instructor grading, and final (optional) revisions. Though this process helped to make the results successful and keep the total workload manageable for both instructors and students, it also meant that no more than 3-4 papers could be executed well within a standard semester. This design still fulfills, to an extent, the element of “practice” that I had intended with the short-but-frequent approach, but the length of time to execute each assignment made additional frequency prohibitive. Nonetheless, students’ ability to write coherently about analytical questions and practice written communication about music still improved with repeated practice across the semester.

In contrast, the journal project featured informal writing and did not tend to focus on music analysis *per se* (except as a reflection on the process of analysis and learning). With weekly assignments, the frequency component was increased significantly, such that students should be writing a short response nearly every week of the semester. At the same time, this project was much more internally focused, in that only I and the student ever read these responses, and the *purpose* of the writing shifted (even if subliminally) to be more internal as well. The primary goal in these journals was for students to be able to summarize and reflect on both their knowledge of the course content and on their process of acquiring it. Though the analytical papers did not have a specified audience, there was an implied external audience,⁶¹ but the journals took on a sense of an internal audience, where the students were writing for themselves and for their own benefit.

Having taught this specific course with both types of assignments,⁶² I have grown to slightly favor the journal project for second-semester theory, though I see benefits to each project. The journal project carries a more immediate tangible payoff for students, due to the reflective content and the internalized knowledge-network building that they engaged in during this project. In fact, based on comments on evaluations from both projects, students themselves found this project more immediately rewarding, though of course some of the benefits may also be more surface-level. Additionally, students found it much more approachable and were writing about music more regularly, even if they were not doing formal writing.

The journal project does not, however, tend to achieve the deeper engagement level and critical thinking of the analytical papers, and as such it does not, on its own,

61 And, of course, the papers were read by two external audiences: their peers, and myself as the instructor.

62 I have since assigned similar journal projects in several other courses.

necessarily fulfill the motivating goal of helping students to think more deeply about the music they are working with, beyond labels and “facts.” However, it does seem to be a better entry point for students into writing in their music courses and helping them to see some potential benefits of this skill. Journals thus may potentially serve as a different type of scaffolding to prepare students for writing more formal, careful, and thoughtful analytical papers.

Based on this, one possibility to integrate both approaches would be to utilize both types of writing in the same course: Students might be assigned journals for 2-3 out of every 5 weeks, and then write a 1-page analytical paper (using the same scaffolded process as outlined earlier in this article) in weeks 4 and 5. Though only 2-3 papers would be completed (and fewer journals as well), students would benefit from the metacognitive and knowledge networks of the journals while also getting their feet wet with the analytical writing, and both types of writing would still be “practiced.” In an ideal situation, this pursuit of writing skills would be gradually developed across the complete theory core. For instance, if working in a four-semester sequence, Theory I might require only weekly journals, and 1-page analytical papers would enter in Theory II (with a consequent decrease in journaling). In Theory III and IV, the analytical writing could gradually increase in length and complexity,⁶³ and journaling could decrease as a result.⁶⁴ This approach would allow students to practice formal analytical writing over an extended period of time, while also giving them strong knowledge networks and more confidence in their writing *and* their learning and mastery of the material itself.

Although the ideas and assignments proposed here certainly do not make writing about music—or teaching students how to write about music—an “easy” task, they do offer ways to help students begin to develop this challenging skill in a way that is practical and manageable for both the student and the instructor. Scaffolding steps such as grading mock papers, completing preparatory analyses in class, and utilizing peer review all help to build stronger papers and therefore increase student success and decrease instructor (and student) workload. Journal entries can serve a different purpose, providing students with a low-stakes opportunity to make their own network

63 Lynne Rogers (2018), Attas, and Inman all provide excellent models of building up to larger projects in more advanced classes.

64 In a truly idealized situation, I would hope that students would learn the benefits of the knowledge-network building and reflection in their first year of theory courses, and would begin to develop that habit on their own as a way of learning, without needing a weekly assignment to (somewhat) artificially prompt them to consider those ways of thinking and learning.

of content connections and/or to reflect on their own learning and mastery of the content and the ways that it relates to the rest of their musical training. Content of both types of assignments can be flexed to fit the needs of the curriculum, and the specific requirements of the assignments (paper length, frequency, etc.) can also be adjusted to fit the needs of the students and the instructor. Short-but-frequent design characteristics in both projects encourage students to write more, thus helping them to build fluency with writing simply by persistent practice, while keeping the projects “bite-size” and manageable.

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