

## Jane Werry

### Homework: pitfalls and opportunities

It's likely that you teach in a school where there's some sort of requirement to set homework. This might be to a rigid timetable, or based on an expectation of homework being set at particular intervals. It's less likely that there are any particular requirements about what kind of tasks are set, other than a vague imperative that it should be 'meaningful'.

It can be tricky for music teachers to come up with homework tasks that are educationally valuable and yet do not create an avalanche of marking. Unless you work in a school where whole-class instrumental teaching involves students being able to practise at home, a little ingenuity is called for in creating useful and valuable homework tasks that do not come at a high price in teacher time.

### What do we want homework to do?

You probably want to keep your precious lesson time as focused on practical music making as possible: developing students' knowledge of music by experiencing it 'from the inside'. However, there is a body of knowledge about music that students will need to apply to their practical work in order to grow as educated musicians. This might include some essential concepts, some basic music theory, and some terminology that will enable them to communicate effectively about music.

#### Threshold concepts in music

It's worth giving some thought to the most basic concepts that your students must be clear about in order to progress with their musical thinking. These are the concepts where a misconception prevents further progress. What these concepts are for your students may depend on the music provision they've received at KS2. However, they're likely to include things like the concept of 'up' and 'down' in pitch, how this relates to instruments (which way is 'up?'), the idea of octave equivalence, the names of the notes within an octave, and the difference between a note and a chord. It can be surprising how widespread these misconceptions are, and how long they can persist, unless you deal with them explicitly. Without an understanding of these basics, progression on to more complex ideas and processes will be impossible.

Homework can be a valuable means of covering some of the factual knowledge about music that you want to bring into your lessons. By covering some of this in advance through homework tasks, you're effectively 'flipping the learning'. If this is your aim, you need to plan for students providing some evidence of their learning that's not onerous in terms of marking. You might even want to think about entirely paperless strategies for this, and there are plenty of ways to make that happen.

Another possible purpose for homework is to give students an opportunity to demonstrate some creativity, perhaps with some element of choice so that they can play to their strengths and interests. You're likely to get a whole range of very varied responses to this kind of task. It will necessarily be more burdensome for the teacher to mark, but the rewards and unexpected delights might make up for that. If you think carefully about the best time to set this kind of task (when you have the most time to deal with the marking) it can be inspiring and rewarding both for you and for your students.

What all of this boils down to is balancing 'front-end' preparation with 'back-end' marking. Flipped tasks that rely on technology for turning in work and automatic marking have a relatively high price tag of time to set them up. However, once this is done, you have a homework task that's low-maintenance almost to the point of no-maintenance for the teacher. You set the task, and then all you have to do is harvest the marks from whatever system you're using. It can be used again and again with different classes. The other kind of homework, with a choice of creative tasks, is very easy to set but will require teacher time after the students have completed the work.

This resource will give you strategies for both kinds of homework task, and will point you towards some sources that might save you time.

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Choose your homework from the menu to make it more difficult or challenge the homework maker.	
<b>Extra hot</b> 40 marks	Write and record your own blues song (ideally working on in class!)
<b>Hot</b> 30 marks	Make a video or sound recording of your favourite American music from the 20th century. You must explain the complexity, style and communication.
<b>Mild</b> 20 marks	Research the American civil rights movement and explain how it has inspired musicians, giving examples (400 of your own words).
<b>Very mild</b> 10 marks	Make a list of at least 20 songs that use the 12-bar blues chords. Use words and pictures to explain these musical terms: improvisation; chord; bassline; call and response.

## Content followed by quiz: a flipped learning model

This kind of homework task will involve students engaging with content in some way – perhaps by watching a video, studying a knowledge organiser, or reading some text – and then doing a multiple-choice, self-marking quiz. The front-end prep involved in getting this set up can be broken down into three chunks:

- 1 Deciding on the content, then either sourcing or creating it.
- 2 Writing good multiple-choice questions for the quiz.
- 3 Setting up the mechanics of the quiz on whatever platform you're using.

### Sourcing or creating the content

What content do you want to cover through your flipped homework? Is it contextual information, for example to do with the social and cultural history behind the blues? Is it music theory, for example how major and minor triads are constructed? Is it musical terminology? Is it exposure to background listening? Is it entirely new information or consolidation of what's been done in previous lessons?

Whatever you decide, it's absolutely worth having a good look around online to see if something already exists that meets your needs. There is now so much on YouTube, in particular, that is useful, that you may well find exactly what you are looking for.

There are also numerous examples of knowledge organisers that teachers have shared online. It's worth checking music teachers' Facebook groups, as they all have a 'files' section where members have uploaded useful resources. The groups *KS3 Music – hints and tips* and *Heads of music – running a department*, together with the relevant groups for whichever KS4 and 5 courses you teach, are well worth joining, even if you don't use Facebook for anything else.

However, if you decide that nothing already in existence quite suits your purpose, you can always create a video yourself. Once you get the hang of it, you can produce them quite quickly, and they have the dual advantages of being exactly what you want and available for repeat use in the future.

Even if you're a novice, it's quite straightforward to create your own videos. Perhaps the easiest way to go about it is to use PowerPoint as your starting point. Create a PowerPoint presentation of your content, including pictures, diagrams and notation as appropriate, and write a narration for yourself to go along with it. You can also include audio extracts, which you can trim within PowerPoint so you get exactly the right section of music.

There's plenty of online help about the technicalities of this, either on YouTube or via the Microsoft help pages (<https://support.office.com/en-gb/powerpoint>). Once you've created your slideshow with all the relevant audio and narration, you can export it as a video and upload the video to YouTube or your school's intranet system as appropriate. This (<https://youtu.be/G2muzl7RJgs>) is an example of a video I created using PowerPoint.

Having a department YouTube channel is very useful for storing and sharing homemade tutorial videos. You can always upload them as unlisted videos, so that they can only be accessed through a direct link and not through a general search.

If you find that you like making videos for your students, there are other video apps that you can explore.

- ▶ **Explain Everything** (<https://explaineverything.com/explainer-videos/>) is an app where you can easily create videos using your phone or tablet, inserting pictures, drawings and embedded videos, and with your own narration. You will be up and running making simple videos in minutes, and there's great potential for much more elaborate productions if that is what you require. With a bit of practice, you can even create a very quick video during a lesson, so that students can watch an explanation again later.
- ▶ **Powtoon** (<https://www.powtoon.com/home/>?) is another really fun option, and, like Explain Everything, the basic version is free and still gives you lots of creative potential. Powtoon has lots of templates and built-in graphics that can give your videos a great look, and it's straightforward to use, with helpful tutorials.

Whichever method you use for creating your videos, here are some tips:

- ▶ Plan your material first, and decide what you want to include. If there is going to be too much for a seven- to eight-minute video, you will need to chunk it into smaller segments.
- ▶ Decide on a logical order for the material, based on what you know of your students' prior knowledge. Think of it as an animated lecture.
- ▶ Write a script for your narration – this always works better than trying to wing it!
- ▶ Assemble all pictures, diagrams, music notation and audio/video for embedding before you start.
- ▶ If you're bothered about how it will look, give some thought to the visual design of your video.

If you decide to go down the knowledge organiser route rather than using videos, you can refer back to the resource devoted to knowledge organisers (*Music Teacher*, October 2019). This gives instructions about how to put knowledge organisers together, and how you can train your students to use them effectively.

### Platforms for self-marking quizzes

Once you've sourced or created your content, you need to create a self-marking quiz. This is easy to do, even if you've never done it before, and has many advantages. Although you need to spend time devising the questions and uploading them all, once that's done, that's it – and you can use the same set of questions again and again with different classes.

If your school has **Show My Homework**, then it makes sense to use the quiz option on this, as your students are likely to be used to having everything in one place. Simply put a link to your content video or knowledge organiser, and make your instructions explicit that students should study it before attempting the quiz. Alternatively, you can use either **Google Forms** or **Microsoft Forms** to create self-marking quizzes, and there are plenty of tutorials available to show you how to do that.

Another option is **EDPuzzle** (<https://edpuzzle.com/>) This free online service allows you to add questions to a video, either one you've uploaded yourself, or something that you've chosen from YouTube. You can even trim the video so that students only watch a particular section – useful if what you want is part of a much longer video. Through EDPuzzle you will be able to track your students' responses to your questions, and see how many times they've watched the video, whether they watched all of it, and even exactly when they watched it.

### Creating multiple-choice quizzes

Multiple-choice quizzes can be a surprisingly powerful tool for probing students' understanding, but in order for this to be the case, careful thought needs to go into creating the questions. Your knowledge of common misconceptions that students have is invaluable in this.

What you should aim for is that all the incorrect options should be **plausible distractors**. To explain this very simply, imagine the question is an extremely straightforward one such as this:

**What is the pitch of this note?**



If the answer options look like this:

- ▶ **A** Joan of Arc
  - ▶ **B** Alfred the Great
  - ▶ **C** B flat
  - ▶ **D** William the Conqueror
  - ▶ **E** Florence Nightingale
- then the incorrect options are all implausible distractors because they are very obviously nothing to do with a musical note.

This will not test students very much, and you will not discover much about their level of understanding. However, if you bear in mind, for example, that your students struggle to remember the difference between sharps and flats, and flats and minors, you can create a set of plausible incorrect options to delve into the possible misconceptions that my students have. So, the answer options including plausible distractors might look like this:

- ▶ **A** B sharp
- ▶ **B** D flat
- ▶ **C** B flat
- ▶ **D** G flat
- ▶ **E** B minor

If students go for either answer B or D, then you know that they need more practice at identifying the notes of the staff. If they answer E, then there is clearly still confusion about the difference between flat and minor. If they answer A, then perhaps they have not grasped the difference between sharps and flats.

Using plausible distractors in your answer sets not only makes students think more (and therefore makes the homework task more valuable and ‘meaningful’), but also gives you excellent information about their level of understanding that can inform your future planning. This is one form of assessment for learning – using assessment as a planning tool.

Once you’ve got the hang of using common misconceptions to create plausible distractors, there are various other points to bear in mind when creating multiple-choice questions:

- ▶ Five options is the optimum number of choices, although you could mix up five-option questions with true/false questions if appropriate.
- ▶ Phrase questions as a direct question rather than an incomplete statement, so ‘In which of these cities did blues start?’ is better than ‘Blues started in \_\_\_\_\_’
- ▶ Keep the lengths of each option similar, so that the correct answer is not obviously the longest or shortest.
- ▶ Mix up where the correct answer is placed in the list of options (some quiz platforms give you a ‘shuffle answers’ option).
- ▶ Use simple, unambiguous and grammatically correct language for all options.
- ▶ Avoid giving a clue to a question somewhere else in the quiz.
- ▶ Make sure that there is only one clear correct answer, with none that are partially correct.
- ▶ Avoid ‘all of the above’ or ‘none of the above’ as options.

### Reinforcing quiz content in lessons

It’s not enough simply to set the content-plus-quiz routine for homework, and then never again touch the ideas contained in it. A well-timed homework of this kind should come at a point where the ideas from it will be revisited in every subsequent lesson for the duration of the unit of work, being applied to whatever practical work you’re doing. Ideally the concepts covered in the homework tasks should be cumulative, so spacing and interleaving of ideas is built into your overarching scheme of learning.

Don’t hold back from re-using questions from the quiz. You can recycle your quiz questions at any point in lessons. Retrieval of information is an extremely important part of learning. It’s best to do this using a whole-class response rather than picking an individual to answer (and in the process, letting the rest of the class off the hook). The quickest, low-tech way of doing this is to display the questions and answer options on the board, and labelling the options 1-5, so that students can show their answers on a count of three using their fingers.

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This excellent article (<https://theeffortfuleducator.com/2018/09/26/wabmcq/>) looks in more detail at the research behind the construction of multiple-choice questions.

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### Giving students creative options: takeaway homework

The idea of ‘takeaway homework’ is to give students a menu of possible tasks to choose from. A quick internet search will reveal many examples from different subjects. The menu that you give students needs to include some higher-level creative options, as well as some easier research-based tasks. Assigning a point score to each task gives an idea of how demanding it is, with students needing to complete tasks in the combination of their choice to reach a prescribed total. This kind of homework is easy for the teacher in terms of front-end prep: it is the follow-up that needs careful planning.

Many takeaway homeworks follow the example of a Nando’s ‘peri-ometer’, as it shows very clearly which tasks are more or less demanding. Here’s an adapted example:

Choose your homework from the menu below. The heat scale suggests the difficult or challenge the homework may offer. You need 40 marks in total.				
<b>Extra hot</b> 40 marks	Write and record your own blues song (ie not the same one we’ve been working on in class!)			
<b>Hot</b> 30 marks	Make a video or sound recording of yourself singing/playing a piece of American music from the 20th century. You will be marked on accuracy, complexity, style and communication			
<b>Mild</b> 20 marks	Research the American civil rights movement and explain how it has inspired musicians, giving examples (400 of your own words).	Create a diagram to show different styles of music in the USA in the 20th century, <b>when</b> they started and <b>how</b> they relate to each other.		
<b>Very mild</b> 10 marks	Make a list of at least 20 songs that use the 12-bar blues chords.	Use words and pictures to explain these musical terms: improvisation; chord; bassline; call and response.	What is gospel music? Explain in 200 of your own words, giving examples.	What is jazz? Explain in 200 of your own words, giving examples.

With this example from a Year 8 blues project, students can make up their required 40 marks by any combination of tasks that fits.

You will notice that word counts are given where appropriate, as is some indication of how the different tasks will be assessed. The caveat ‘your own words’ is there to guard against lazy copying and pasting – you’re likely to be able to spot things mindlessly lifted from Wikipedia a mile off. Each task is described as precisely as possible to make the requirements clear.

For all of the more creative options (composing, performing, making diagrams), make it clear that students may use whatever creative processes they choose. The diagram of American musical styles, for example, could be computer-generated or hand-drawn. For the performance option, any instrument could be used, including multi-tracking or an app such as Loopy HD or Acapella. The composition task could be recorded live using instruments and/or singing, or might use an online sequencing program.

The advantage of this approach is its flexibility to allow students to work to their strengths. You will undoubtedly be surprised by some of the responses to the higher-level tasks. Some students who may be reticent in class will relish this kind of creative challenge because they can work in their own way and in private, and then share the end product with you without anyone else necessarily seeing it.

The disadvantage of this method is the amount of time it will take you to mark all the work once it’s submitted. You’ll also need to be very clear about how feedback will be given to students, and how (if at all) they will respond to the feedback, together with your criteria for awarding marks.

If all work is submitted electronically (for example via Show My Homework or some other online system), then you might give feedback on the same platform. But what if some work is handed in on paper? How will work that is clearly sub-standard be dealt with? Will students be required to amend or entirely re-do the work? Will all students have DIRT (dedicated improvement and reflection time) in lessons? Is this practical, given the nature of the tasks? Perhaps they could be required to follow up on teacher feedback for a supplementary homework. How will the best work be celebrated?

All of these things will need planning in advance, and communicating to students. The thing to avoid here is the homework being seen as something that can be dashed off in a hurry without there being any comeback.