Essay-writing skills at A level

KS5

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Introduction

'Essay' can often be quite a daunting word for students, and also for teachers. As we navigate mark schemes, criteria, expectations and unknowns, we also have to guide and prepare our students.

This resource looks at essay-writing skills and offers tips on how to approach essay writing with your students. It also works through some ideas that will support different exam boards. It is important that you consider your students and exam board, and look at how the ideas in the resource can most support both you and your students.

Starting points

At GCSE level, music students are now required to write longer answers in the final exam. When they reach A level, they will therefore be familiar with how to analyse music. The earlier they can get used to writing about the set works and unfamiliar pieces the better.

When students start A level music courses, it's a good idea for them to ease themselves into writing about music. They need to build good habits, and you can help them to do this. There are a number of ways in which teachers can approach the forming of good habits in essay writing. Here are some starting points for advanced writing skills:

- Set students the task of writing about their favourite piece of music. Encourage them to pick out any musical features that they particularly love about the piece.
- Ask students to write a short history of music based on their prior learning at GCSE. They might like to use the set work or works from their GCSE or any other pieces they know.
- Compare and contrast: give students two pieces of music, and ask them to compare and contrast them. Make sure they are aware that they should draw out both similarities and differences.
- Set students an open-ended question that will get them thinking and writing. For example: What makes music powerful? Why do we need music? What made Mozart so special? Or to be topical for 2020: What would the musical world be like if Beethoven hadn't composed?
- Provide them with three to five key terms, and ask them to write about them, giving musical examples for each.

The fundamental idea behind tasks such as these is to get students writing, thinking and enjoying music. The more they write, the better, but this should always be coupled with wider listening and key musical examples. As they develop through the course, they need to build up a good base of understanding, and this should be supported by specific musical examples.

Wider listening

Wider listening has already been covered in its own *Music Teacher* resource (October 2018). But it's important that students link their writing to their listening. They should get into the habit of deliberately listening to music and then writing something down about it. More disciplined students should be able to keep a wider listening diary, but others might need more encouragement. Try to embed listening and writing into their weeks by regularly setting them written tasks, even if you don't mark them all.

Wider listening ideas

A good place to start for wider listening is the *Guardian*'s top 50 symphonies of all time (**www.theguardian.com/music/series/50-greatest-symphonies**), which has an article to go with each symphony. The list is varied and interesting, but it is of course just symphonies.

Alternatively, *Rolling Stone*'s 500 greatest albums of all time (**www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-156826/**) will give students a different – and very large – range of music to listen to.

A third suggestion is Classic FM's Hall of Fame (**www.classicfm.com/radio/hall-of-fame/**) which will give students a wide variety of music from the classical genre as well as film and gaming music.

The *Match of the Day* approach

At some point in your life you've probably seen the BBC programme *Match of the Day*, in which Gary Lineker and other pundits analyse, evaluate and pick apart the weekend's football. Can you imagine how boring it would be if they simply read out the scores and the time at which the goals went in? It would be nothing more than a simple list of what had happened – and furthermore, it wouldn't provide any analysis, so we wouldn't learn anything from the programme.

What gives the programme value are its explanations of why the scores went the way they did, what happened in the match that led to the final score, and who was pivotal in the game. We don't want a description of every minute of the match, but instead we want the key highlights, perhaps with a bit of context, considering games from previous seasons.

Why do I bring this up? First, *Match of the Day* is a programme that students will almost certainly know. It's also a good example of analysis at its best. If students can apply its approach to their writing, they will be on a pathway to success.

Here are key things we can learn from *Match of the Day* when applied to music writing skills:

1. Bar numbers, like a minute-by-minute analysis of a football match, are not needed. They don't bring anything to essay writing. And without access to a score, it would probably be impossible to remember precise bar numbers from a set work.
2. In an essay, students should pick out key points (or 'highlights') in their analysis: features in the music that they believe are crucial to its sound, style or genre.
3. *Match of the Day* shows that good analysis relies on comparison. Comparing current events to what happened in a match last season is like discussing how music has changed since the Baroque period.
4. *Match of the Day* also shows that good analysis is structured, and follows the flow of an event, from its beginning to its middle to its end. Students should get into the habit of covering the whole piece of music in question, not just the start.
5. Simply stating facts is not useful, and students should provide more information rather than simply cataloguing musical events. If *Match of the Day* simply listed what had happened in a match, nobody would watch it.

Furthermore, at the end of Match of the Day, the commentators always bring things to a final conclusion with some kind of evaluative judgement. Students should consider doing the same, thinking perhaps about what makes a piece successful, or a good example of its particular genre.

Here are two examples of a paragraphs that seek to bring together some of the points made above:

Cinematic composers sometimes chose to use chromatic, unstable and non-functional harmony. This is immediately seen at the start of 'Prelude' from *Psycho*, where we hear the 'Hitchcock chord' (a minor chord with an added major 7th) juxtaposed with rhythmic punctuation. Bernard Herrmann hasn't established a tonal centre in the music, and has thus created a tension in the score that is perfect for this film setting. This approach is also seen in Herrmann's music for *Vertigo* and *Mysterious Island*, and was a technique used by Stravinsky in *The Rite of Spring*.

Like other composers of programme music, Berlioz was keen to establish a character in his music, which he achieves through his use of an *idée fixe* or fixed idea. This short thematic idea helps the listener to follow the path of the artist in the story, and brings together the music, taking the listener on a journey through this five-movement piece. Elements of the *idée fixe* are then used to influence melodic ideas throughout the piece, such as the second subject. This approach was also used by Berlioz in Harold in Italy, and Wagner in his *Ring cycle*.

Forget the set works

Set works are fantastic, but at times we need to forget about them – or at least approach them in a healthy and helpful way. Of course the exam will focus on them, and therefore students will need to know them inside out. But initially students should focus on the composer, the genre and the context.

Context is everything when writing an essay. Of course students need to know the finer details of a piece, but if they can't set these features in context, they're unlikely to be successful in their written work.

Context can be approached in a number of different ways:

- **Composer context:** when were they composing, and where? What instrument did they play, and who were they writing music for? Who and what influenced their writing?
- **Cultural context:** where was music happening at the time? What kind of music was popular and why? What was the artistic landscape like at the time? What other art forms were prevalent?
- **Historical context:** in what period was the piece composed? What impact did its times have on the music? Which instruments were available to the composer at the time? How did advances in technology affect the music?
- **Social context:** how was society changing at the time the music was created, and how had it changed previously? What demand was there for music? Where and why were people consuming music?

Context should focus on all of aspects of history, society and culture that affect the music in question. Students must have a good grasp of the historical development of music, which can be supported by wider listening. Asking students to research different pieces and composers can also get them thinking about anything that might affect the sound of the music itself.

When preparing a set work, think about giving students a list of pieces that help them understand the style and genre they're exploring. Part of forgetting the set work is ensuring that students don't focus solely on one particular piece, but explore other music from that period, place or style.

Who, what and why

Students often benefit from taking a clear approach to their writing, and it's often helpful for them to think about who, what and why in order to provide a full analysis.

1. **Who** composed the piece in question, and what other music did they write? Did they have any specific style to their music, or did they favour any particular techniques?
2. **What** features can be identified in the music that link to its context? There's no point focusing on a time signature, for example, if it provides little information about the music and its context. Students must carefully select the 'what' features they plan to focus on.
3. Students should always suggest **why** a particular element has been used or included by the composer: simply stating facts is not enough. Why did Mozart write his Queen of the Night aria for a coloratura soprano? Why did Bach favour highly contrapuntal polyphony in his church music? Why was technology such an important feature in music by the Beatles?

If students can describe a musical feature, then link it back to the composer and context, and finally explain its overall affect on the music, they'll be making great progress.

Lines of argument

Every exam board is different, but students might benefit from considering a line of argument for their written work. As teachers, we can help by setting questions for homework that gets students thinking in this particular way:

- What makes this piece a particularly strong example of Baroque music?
- What features in this piece are typical of the Classical style?
- How is this piece typical of the music of Mozart?
- What makes this music suitable for a film about war?
- Can you suggest how the composer has successfully portrayed a fantasy world in this music from a computer game?
- Can you identify features of this piece that place it in the early 20th century?

The history of music

You might begin teaching the history of music at Key Stage 3, and it's clearly crucial for students to grasp how music has changed over the decades and centuries. But there's a lot to take in. Here are some ideas for alternative ways to approach the topic:

1. Howard Goodall's *The Story of Music*, available as a book and audio book, is quite detailed, but provides students with an interesting overview of music history. There are also a number of videos on YouTube (the first is here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoY6NpahlDE**) of the BBC series of the same name.
2. Research lessons: it's a good idea to get students involved in doing the work in lessons. Simply gathered some textbooks, put them at the front of the class, and ask the students to research the answer by doing old-fashioned research in the books. Phones and tablets are great, of course, and the internet is something we can't do without, but working in this way can encourage students to link things together and read lots of different approaches.
3. Concert reviews: there's nothing better than asking students to write about music they've experienced. Encourage them to find a local concert or musical event, and then write a review of the music – or even some programme notes, which provide lots of contextual information about the music in question.

Tips for exam essay success

1. Make sure that your students know the style of question and how it will be worded in the exam. They should also read the marking criteria for your exam board.
2. Prepare students for the exam by getting them to write lots of practice essays.
3. Don't worry about bar numbers – students can't remember them all!
4. The more students listen to music, the more they will know. Encourage them to have a targeted playlist of different genres, styles and composers.
5. Where possible, ask students to get a score or sheet music as they listen. When they write about the music, they will then be able to look up any key features they notice.

Conclusion

Being able to write about music is crucial for our music students. Some are gifted performers and composers, but they also need to be able to communicate how music has changed and evolved through history. Being able to analyse music is a key skill for the next stage of their studies, should they decide to study music further at university or elsewhere.