

On Teaching Composition:
Similarities, Differences, and Aesthetics of Teaching Music and Prose
Kirk O’Riordan
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During the fall semester of 2006 I found myself in the unique position of teaching courses in both music composition (18th-Century Counterpoint) and introductory college writing. My background and experiences as a musician and as a musical pedagogue prepared me well for the Counterpoint class (I had taught that course before), but I was about to teach the composition of scholarly prose for the first time, and to say I was a bit apprehensive is somewhat of an understatement. My undergraduate training at Indiana University had included some 35 credit hours of English courses, many of which were oriented towards writing, and I wrote many papers in the coursework for my three master’s degrees. My doctorate, of course, required a great deal of research and writing, which was carefully and pointedly edited by my advisor. I had always enjoyed the process, and had developed, as far as I could tell, a sound understanding of that process. Additionally, I was in fact hired to teach the course: at least two people had determined I was qualified to teach this course, so therefore I must actually be qualified to teach this course.

This was, however, only moderately reassuring. I still needed to develop a guiding aesthetic for the course: a system of priorities and goals; an approach to writing that could serve as a path for my students to follow even after the class; a way to give shape and purpose for the assignments; and, perhaps most importantly for the students, a method by which I could evaluate the students’ work. I needed to decide on a text or texts. As the course is called “Writing and Thinking,” I needed to work the “Thinking”

aspect into the course design. And, as it turned out, I had less than two weeks to make these crucial decisions.

Naturally, I immediately sought the counsel of people who had taught this before. Dr. Susan Bowers (chair of the English Department at Susquehanna University and one of the two people who had determined that I was indeed qualified to teach this course) provided me with sample syllabi, recommendations for texts, and the goals and priorities of the department. In addition, she served as a sounding board for ideas that I was developing, and provided the perspective of experience on my thoughts for the course. This was all very helpful, but I was still a long way from making the course my own.

At some point in the process I decided (remembered?) that my previous teaching experiences could guide me as well. It was while ruminating on this that I began to notice similarities between the composition of music and the composition of prose. As this list of similarities grew and developed, my aesthetic for the course came into focus, and I could begin to create meaningful assignments which would reinforce both the departmental goals and my own for the students. I could teach them an overall approach to the process as well as the mechanics of executing that process.

The Aesthetics

Perhaps at this point a discussion of my musical aesthetics might serve as a starting point for explaining these similarities. As a composer of concert music, I have come to believe very strongly in several ideals that govern my decisions in the course of creating a piece of music. The first of these ideals is that technique lives to serve the idea, and not vice versa. Ultimately, the performer and listener must be moved by what they hear or play: there must be an emotional response generated by the sounds. There certainly can be an intellectual or scientific response as well which may develop into debates about meaning, motivation, or interpretation, but there must first be something the composer wishes to express from his or her soul that must be transmitted through the performers to the audience. That message must be clear enough for the performers to identify it, and articulated well enough in the score for them to be able to execute it. Compositional technique, then, is defined for my purposes as the ability to clearly articulate this message in musical sounds. This definition sublimates the system of composition to the idea that generates that system: in other words, a given compositional technique should be employed when (and only when!) it is the best possible way to express the idea.

This means that composers of music should have as many different techniques and experiences with music as possible. Arbitrarily limiting oneself to the serial technique, for example, prevents one from using tonal and/or aleatoric resources when those resources might be more efficient vehicles for the message. One must instead know as many techniques as possible and know as much music as possible so that when an idea presents itself, one can express the idea in the most articulate and precise way.

For a writer of prose, this “idea” begins with the thesis, but also includes the purpose for the paper: what is the function, purpose, or goal of the paper, and to whom does the paper apply? In answering these questions, the author makes decisions about style, language, content, word choice, tone (the “technique” of writing), all of which should serve the idea. A good paper must have a purpose, and its topic must be of sufficient scope to allow study but not so broad that it exceeds the boundaries of that intended purpose. The mechanical elements of writing, such as grammar, style, vocabulary, et al, allow the purpose and thesis to be understood by the reader. The use of technical or vernacular language helps direct the paper toward the intended audience. As with the composer, the author must develop control over each of the aforementioned techniques so that they can use them to execute the decisions they have made: the “answers” to the questions of “*why?*” and, “*for whom?*.”

The second musical ideal is to achieve a balance between complexity and simplicity. Music that is too simple (“Mary had a Little Lamb,” or some popular music, for example) does not hold the interest of listeners even during its performance let alone over repeated hearings. Music that is too complex (the “total serialist” music of Babbitt, Boulez, and for some, even concert music as a genre!) requires more effort to metabolize, and often the listener loses interest in providing the necessary energy: the reward for that work is simply not evident. Works that create a balance between complexity and simplicity are often those which maintain a place in “the canon” of “great” works: these are pieces we return to again and again because the challenges are balanced by the rewards. As one’s ability to handle challenges increases, one’s definition of “great” music evolves. Some music becomes with repeated hearings too simple to maintain interest

(even some of these “great” works in “the canon”!), and the listener moves on to other composers, other genres, other techniques.

The composer, then, must make his or her first decision when beginning a new piece: for whom is this piece intended? Answering this question provides the framework for achieving the balance, and the process of finding that answer forces the composer to decide which elements of the composition will be challenging, and which will be rewarding. No music which is all-challenging or all-rewarding can be truly satisfying. If a composer chooses a complex, angular melody, he or she would be well-served to balance that with a simple form; if the form is complex, the melodies might be simple. If the rhythmic or metrical structure is complex, the pitch contours of the melody could be simple.

One of the difficulties of serial music is that the highly organized systems which regulate pitch and rhythm are not readily perceivable by the average listener. Indeed, the total number of human beings who can distinguish a prime form from a retrograde-inversion form on the first or second hearing is probably in the dozens. While the logic of the system is profound, the system is wholly incapable of digestion by the average concert-goer. To rely only on the logic to provide intellectual interest, especially when the means to understanding that logic—the score—is not available to the audience (and even if it were, many in the audience would not have sufficient expertise to make use of that resource), violates both of the aforementioned ideals. In other words; system cannot be the message itself: it must be balanced by some element the listener has access to, which, in most cases, is the emotional message.

Achieving this balance in writing scholarly prose involves knowing precisely who the intended reader is. While this is addressed to some extent in the first ideal, knowing the intended reader allows the writer to choose how much technical language is used without definition; to decide how complex sentence structures might be; to craft subtle or not-so-subtle allusions or metaphors; or to create complex or simple forms. Just as a serial piece may frustrate and isolate the layman, so will a paper which uses more undefined jargon than is comfortable for the reader. Clearly, if the author wants to achieve a specific purpose, controlling the amount of complexity is an important aspect of success.

The final compositional ideal is that the architecture of the piece must be clear. The form of the piece may be simple, such as the strophic form used in Brahms's famous *Lullaby* (Wiegenlied: *Guten Abend, gute Nacht*, Op. 49, No. 4), or it may be complex (such as Bartok's arch forms, which are proportioned according to the golden mean), but it cannot ramble or go off on tangents without returning from whence it came at some point in the piece. Rambling obscures the message, for both performer and listener, and leaves both feeling unsatisfied. In the Classical Period, composers like Mozart and Haydn used clear and simple forms as a matter of course for their compositions. Two- and Three-part forms (both of which, but particularly the three-part forms, contain an element of symmetry), Rondo forms (which involve the alternation of one main tune with two secondary tunes), and even the evolving Sonata form (which can be understood as a hierarchical composite of binary and ternary sub-structures) were as well-known to the listener as they were to the composer, and were understood by both to be one method by which rationality, order, and reason could govern musical expression.

Writers have borrowed the three-part Ternary form (notated in music theory classes as A-B-A, where each capital letter designates a self-contained, identifiable section) by structuring a paper with an introduction, body, and conclusion. This is especially true when the conclusion section is treated as a recapitulation (to borrow another term from music theory) of the opening ideas (the thesis).

This is a simple and functional form for the writer, but it is by no means the only possibility. Through-composed forms in music (such as Franz Schubert's *Erlkönig*, composed when Schubert was 17(!) to a poem by Goethe) begin with an initial idea that continually develops, but contains no readily identifiable sections or direct repetitions of melody. This can be a useful form for the writer, especially one who may be attempting to convince the reader of his or her premise.

Like the Classical (era) composer, the writer, especially the young writer, may benefit from choosing the form of a paper before actually beginning the writing process. This will save time: knowing where one is going ahead of time prevents aimless wandering, and allows the writer to work on sections out of order, rather than beginning with the first sentence and progressing chronologically until the final sentence. In addition, it allows the writer to keep his or her material organized, which prevents unnecessary redundancy.

Ultimately, these ideals help guide the composer toward an understanding of his or her audience. If one chooses to compose in a serial language, one must be aware that the audience (i.e. those who will be able to metabolize the music in one hearing) for that music will be rather limited. A composer choosing to compose in a minimalist style may initially receive a strong favorable reaction, but may not challenge the listeners enough to

hold interest over repeated hearings. The composer must be absolutely sure of his or her intended audience, so that the techniques employed to serve his or her idea can be as effective as possible.

Composers are trained in many ways that are often in opposition to the ideals outlined above. Many are taught that innovation is of primary importance, and that to repeat what has been done before, even by oneself, is tantamount to crimes against the profession. Composers are then forced to direct their energies toward developing new systems, new logics; which then are lost entirely upon the listener. The system sublimates the message. This is especially true of composers who use serial and pitch-set systems exclusively: the permutations of the sets and rows are more important than the resulting sounds the system generates: if the system is good, then the piece is good. The listener (and often the performer as well) is factored out the equation altogether.

As I mentioned earlier, control of “the system” allows the composer/author to choose exactly how to convey the important information. As with music, technique and idea (what musicians would term “expression”) are taught both separately and simultaneously: in the abstract (music theory classes, or grammar, vocabulary, or similar lessons) and in the concrete (the composition of original musical or prose work). My tasks in developing the course would then be to 1) grow the students’ technical abilities by improving grammar, vocabulary, style, and form with both abstract and real exercises; and 2) improve the students’ ability to understand any given topic through research by teaching them how to undertake that process.

The Development

As I solidified my compositional credo within my own mind, the parallels between what I considered to be good musical writing and good scholarly writing became increasingly evident. It soon became apparent to me that I could use what I already knew and believed to shape this course, and I could design exercises that would actually promote a pedagogical agenda: that there would be a clear agenda (a message!) in the assignments would be apparent to the students, who would (hopefully) accept the large amount of work I was going to give them.

From the beginning I understood that writing, like music, is a skill which can be developed. While it is true that each requires some innate ability for mastery, it is also true that with hard work, and a great deal of practice, anyone can improve his or her abilities. Musicians practice and take private lessons with master teachers who (should) provide direct, honest, advice. Writing students would also need feedback and the opportunity to revise before grades were assigned, so that they could actually apply my comments to their writing. This would mean more work for me, but this is how the students will improve.

In addition, I found from writing assignments I had given in other courses that most students had not read enough scholarship to have a firm grasp of the style. Young musicians experience a similar phenomenon when learning how to play Bach or Mozart: they must learn performance practice by listening to and imitating the style as demonstrated by their teacher and by great artists on recordings or in concert. Musicians need to listen to a lot of music: it is, after all, our literature, and just as it is unacceptable for a writer to not know great writers and great writings, it is unacceptable for musicians

to not know the great works of music literature. It would therefore be necessary for my writing students to read as much scholarship as they possibly could, with the hope that the issues of style which are, for me, more difficult to verbalize would become apparent.

With all of these ideas more clearly articulated in my mind, my decisions about how to execute these ideas in this course solidified. I am now in my fourth semester of teaching this course, and have felt (for the most part) successful in accomplishing my goals for the students. At this point, I would like to provide a profile of the classes which will lead to a discussion of my exercises, assignments, and pedagogical techniques.

The Students

Writing and Thinking courses at Susquehanna University are described as follows:

ENGL-100 Writing and Thinking

An introduction to college writing, reading and discourse. Active discussion among students and instructors in sections limited to 18 participants. Seminars typically focus on a current social problem or a topic of particular interest to the instructor. Each semester all seminar students read one common text by an author who visits campus during the term. Not for credit in the major. ¹

The course is usually taken by first- or second-semester students, and is considered to be part of the core curriculum: it is required for all degrees. Consequently, the students represent a wide variety of interests, majors, and ability levels. Additionally, Susquehanna University offers² an Associate Degree as well as various baccalaureate degrees, and this course is required for those degrees as well. Associate Degree students

¹ Susquehanna University English Department Website:
<http://www.susqu.edu/english/courses.cfm?Code=32>

² The Associate Degree program is currently being phased out as of this writing.

are usually adult students who may be returning to school for any number of reasons: they are usually older, and more focused. Course sections for the traditional students are held during the day and meet either two or three days each week, while courses for the non-traditional students meet one night each week for three hours each night. I have taught this class to both groups of students, and have found that even though the type of student varies between the sections, the material I developed worked well with both groups with a minimum of alteration.

The Course

For my sections I chose to use only two textbooks: Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference* (Bedford/St.Martin's) and Anthony Westin's *A Rulebook for Arguments* (Hackett Publishing Company). I supplemented this in the first semester with the University Common Reading for 2006-2007, Eric Schlosser's *Reefer Madness: Sex, Drugs, and Cheap Labor in the American Black Market*³ (Houghton Mifflin Company) and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (Scribner/Simon and Schuster). In the second semester I eliminated the Schlosser and Hemingway texts and supplemented the two main texts with articles by various authors. The reading list was expanded in the third semester to eight full-length articles from almost every discipline, including art history, popular culture, literature, and science. These readings provided ample material for analysis of the mechanics of the articles (as opposed to the content): who is the intended audience, how specific is the language, what is the form, etc.

³ We focused mainly on mechanics when discussing this text, although Schlosser's visit to campus inspired a lively debate on the content in the following class.

Another parallel between teaching musical composition and scholarly writing was the need for individual attention and feedback. Music composition is taught, especially to upper-division and graduate students, in private lessons with the teacher. This is similar to the approach used for teaching instruments, and it is used for the same reason: each student has a unique set of qualities and flaws, and it is often more efficient to address the particulars of a student's flaws directly with that student, using examples from that student's work. While introducing conceptual material is more easily accomplished *en masse* (music theory classes), applying the concepts directly often requires individual coaching. My schedule did not permit me to spend a great deal of time with each of eighteen students, so I tried to use my written comments to reinforce concepts I was trying to teach. I also constantly encouraged the students to see me out of class (I am not required to hold regular office hours as an adjunct faculty member), and I have usually required at least one meeting with all the students during the course of creating their term papers. This allows me to give more specific feedback on their topics, writing issues, research practices, and other relevant topics.

I give four categories of assignments each semester. The first category is intentionally misnamed *Journals*.⁴ The Journals are, in actuality, short essays of three to five pages in length (double-spaced), on topics I assign. Six Journals are written each semester, most of them toward the first half of the semester, before the term paper dominates the students' collective attention. The purpose of these essays is threefold: 1) to provide a short format for the students to learn to get intelligent thoughts on paper; 2) to introduce the students to basic research techniques, allowing them to see all sides of an

⁴ I use the title Journals because of the psychological associations. A student may feel more comfortable writing something called a journal than something called an Essay: this may help relieve writer's block and allow the student to get his or her thoughts on paper more easily.

issue and then form a cogent position on that issue based on evidence; and 3) to provide material for in-class coaching and Workshop discussions (this will be discussed below). The first five journals are submitted twice: the second submission, which occurs after revision based on my comments and in-class work shopping, is graded. The first submission is returned with commentary from me. The sixth Journal, which is composed near the end of the term, is graded after the first submission. This category of assignment is worth 30% of their semester grade.

I used the following topics during the Spring 2008 semester:

J1: What do you expect to achieve in this course? What does the University expect from you in this course? How do those two sets of expectations coincide?

J2: Choose a current political or social issue. Summarize and discuss both sides of the debate surrounding that issue. Decide which side you agree with, and explain why.

J3: Compose your essay in the form of a (long) letter to the editor. Explain the need for action, and propose a viable solution to the problem.

J4: Edit your J3 letter so that is no longer than one page. Re-write as necessary.

J5: Prepare a rebuttal to your J4 letter. Limit this letter to no more than two pages.

J6: Review your first Journal. Did you achieve what you set out to accomplish? How were you successful? What would you still like to improve?

Journals 1 and 6 are for personal reflection, and are meant to give the student a personal stake in what they are to get from the course. J1 also allows for an easy first assignment, in which the primary goal is getting the student to put ideas on paper in an intelligent way.

Journals 2-5 represent the “issues” phase of the assignments. In these essays, the students are required to explore issues of their choosing in a comprehensive way. J4 (the reduction of a four-page essay into one page) proved to be especially challenging for the students because they had to take a great deal of information and thought and compress it into such a small space: this, of course, teaches the student that to be concise is a virtue. J5 (the rebuttal to the J4 letter) also proved to be difficult because the students often fervently believed in their J3-4 causes, so to write an essay arguing with themselves was often difficult. These essays were either very strong or weak: it was not difficult to determine which students had put a lot of thought into the essay.

The Journals are often peer-edited in class, an exercise I call “Work shopping.” Though difficult in many ways for the students, it does allow the other students to practice editing and revision skills. Work chosen for the Workshop sessions is submitted to the other students anonymously, and the student whose work is being discussed is not obligated to identify him or herself. When a student identifies a problem, I ask the commenting student to provide a solution to the problem. On occasion, the author presents anonymous critiques of his or her own work!

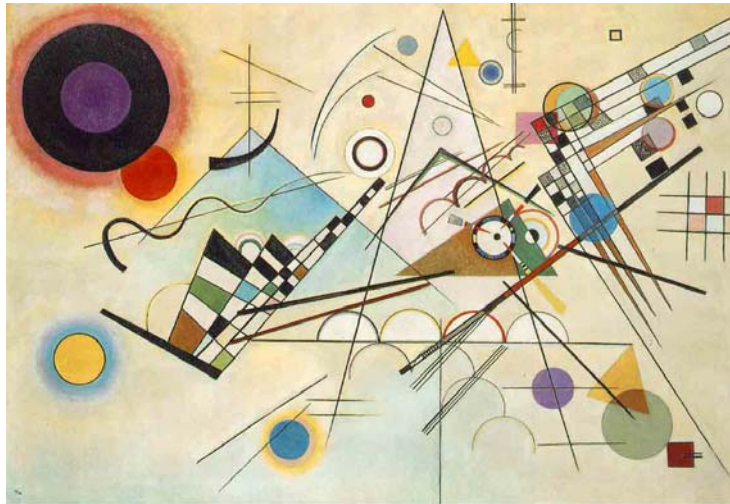
Overall, the journals have, I believe, been an effective pedagogical device. They provided a great deal of writing practice for the students, material for in-class analysis of writing technique, and the material often sparked impromptu discussions of the issues raised in other students’ writing.

The second category of assignments is Free Writing exercises. There are four of these, each composed primarily during class time to an artistic stimulus I provided. The

students had 24 hours to type these and submit them via email after class.⁵ The artistic stimuli I used were works of abstract art from four genres: concert music, painting, poetry, and literature. The students were asked to 1) react to the art by writing their emotional reaction to it and describing, in as much detail as possible, why they had that reaction; and 2) interpret the art, and attempt an explanation of what the artist wished to express. I wanted the students (mostly 18-year olds) to make first attempts at metabolizing abstraction, and I chose the following works based on that idea:

FW1: Concert Music: Gyorgy Ligeti: *Atmosphères* (1961)

FW2: Two paintings by Wassily Kandinsky. Students were also asked to compare and contrast the two canvases, and determine if the two works were executed by the same artist.



Wassily Kandinsky: *Composition VIII* 1923 (140 Kb); Oil on canvas, 140 x 201 cm (55 1/8 x 79 1/8 in); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

⁵ Submitting the Free Writing papers after class has proven difficult: if the class discusses the art after the, their thoughts are influenced by the other students, and the “revised” and edited commentary is often more indicative of the discussion than the individual student’s ideas. My procedure as of Fall 2007 has been to collect the work before engaging the class in discussion about the art.



Wassily Kandinsky: *Yellow, Red, Blue* (1925). Oil and Canvas, 127x200cm; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

FW 3: Poem: Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Après-midi d'une faune* (in English).

FW 4: an excerpt from James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Of the four artistic genres, the students had the most difficulty with the poem. They mentioned to me, either in person or in their writings, that the symbolist language (translated from the French) was beyond their abilities and interests. Many of their comments, however, were rather insightful. The students related most easily to the paintings, but in general the commentary was the least insightful of the three exercises. In this exercise, the students attempted to superimpose concrete reality upon the images, especially on *Composition VIII*, which was shown first.

The primary goal of the Free Writing exercises is to force the students to get their initial instincts on paper without allowing the need to revise to paralyze that process.

They are not graded on quantity of response in these exercises; rather, they are expected to make an intelligent observation and articulate it within the allotted time. I have found that students in both writing and music composition have suffered from what one might term the “Masterpiece Complex,” which makes a student feel as if he or she must produce a timeless, perfect work of art on his or her first attempt. This is paralyzing, and results in stifled creativity, procrastination, and ultimately, frustration. Removing the ability to edit on the spot gives the student freedom, and teaches them to trust their instincts, at least for the first draft. After the thoughts are on paper, one can revise them, but getting those thoughts out in the first place is, for many students of either writing or music composition, the biggest obstacle.

The third category of assignments consists of abstract technical exercises in grammar, vocabulary, editing, and library skills. This is typically the least important category with regard to the students’ overall grade, and the ratio of assigned to turned in assignments is the lowest. This category, though, does include three formal debates which are usually scheduled on class days which precede holidays or mid-term breaks.

These debates have proven to be the most enjoyable exercises for the students, and in some ways, the most challenging. In designing the rules for these debates, I have attempted to emphasize technique and reason over passion, so I randomly assign teams, which side of the argument each team will defend. Each topic is voted on by the class: I try to guide the topic choice towards issues that I think can be covered reasonably in the time permitted, and have, for various reasons, discouraged the topics of Abortion and the Iraq War. Some of the topics chosen are:

Selected Debate Topics

- Should the United States adopt Universal Healthcare? (Fall 2007)
- Should Marijuana be legalized? (Fall 2007)
- Should Capital Punishment remain legal? (Fall 2007, Spring 2008)
- Is Euthanasia murder? (Spring 2008)
- Should North Korea be allowed to develop nuclear weapons? (Fall 2006)
- Global Warming: Fact or Myth (Fall 2006, Spring 2007)

The first step in the debate cycle is to select the topic. I solicit possibilities from the students, and help them refine the issue into an “either-or” type of question which supports the pro-con format. After a list of seven or eight possible topics has been compiled, the class chooses the topic with a vote by secret ballot. If no clear winner emerges, the finalists are separated and the vote is taken again. Once the topic is selected, the eighteen students are then randomly divided into three teams, one which argues the “pro” side, one which argues the “con” side, and a neutral team which presents difficult questions to the pro and con teams. With three debates, each team performs each function once, so the work load is distributed evenly.

The members of each team are selected at random: a student draws names written on slips of paper from a container and reads the names to me. I then choose a representative from each team who will choose another slip of paper with that team’s function. This procedure all but guarantees that some members of the team will be arguing a position that is contrary to their own.

The next class sessions are held in the library, where the members of the teams work together to research their collective position. I meet with each team privately, and help them develop a list of the major arguments for their position (or for both positions if it is the question team). I do this without tipping off what the opposing teams are going to present (although I do prepare the question team for what they might hear, and guide them on how to challenge the other teams). Each member of the team is assigned (by the team, not me) a component of their argument which they specialize in, and the team must put together a written overview of its arguments which is presented as its opening statement. The research time is either one or two class sessions, depending on the length of the sessions, and the students are strongly encouraged to continue their preparations outside of class time.

The actual debate begins with the opening statements the “pro” and “con” teams, the order of which is chosen by coin toss. The overview is given by the team leader, and then each member presents his or her component. Following this, the question team begins the interrogation of the opposing sides, and this often leads to a spirited, informed discussion of the issue.⁶ As moderator, I attempt to control the tempo of the debate by moving through the question team members and not letting the discussion bog down. I provide little in the way of additional questions, preferring instead to let the students dictate where the exercise goes.

Time permitting, I allow open discussion (from the students’ personal opinion, which often has evolved in the process of preparing for and participating in the debate). These have been some of the most enjoyable classes for all of us. No winner is selected,

⁶ The important rule here is that each member must argue from the team position, not his or her personal position. This is where the exercise becomes difficult for many students.

and I provide comments from notes I have taken during the debates. Grades are determined by assessing participation and preparation; they are usually high.

The final category is the term paper. This is the largest percentage of the students' grade, and is broken into three major sections: the paper itself (due at the final exam period, and graded separately on mechanics and content); the presentation (the paper is presented as if it were at a conference); and the components of the paper's construction, which include a topic proposal, preliminary bibliography, a detailed outline, and two drafts.

Topics are selected by the students and must be approved by me. Below is a partial list of papers that have been written in my classes:

- I Will Kill It: President Andrew Jackson's Opposition to the Second Bank of the United States (Fall 2007)
- The Ideology of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (Fall 2007)
- "So may I introduce to you the act you've known for all these years, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." How Sgt. Pepper Reflected the Times and the Spirit of 1967 (Fall 2007)
- The Differences in Media Coverage of the Persian Gulf and Iraq Wars (Fall 2007)
- Sin and Retribution as Portrayed in *The Divine Comedy* and *Crime and Punishment* (Spring 2007)
- Is America Ready for an African-American President: Assessing the Candidacy of Senator Barack Obama (Spring 2007)
- The Evolution of African Music and Culture into American Jazz (Spring 2007)⁷
- Musical Pedagogy (Spring 2007)
- Body Image: The Negative Effect Media has on Adolescents (Fall 2006)
- On the Physics of Time Travel (Fall 2006)
- The Dark Side of Disney: Sexism and Racism in Disney Films (Fall 2006)

⁷ This paper was published in a student-run journal, *The Stance*, in May, 2007. Works selected for publication are reviewed by students, and the process is competitive.

The paper itself should be from 8-12 pages in length (double-spaced), which can include when necessary charts, tables, images, so long as the usage of those graphics a) supports the topic; and b) does not artificially expand the page count (the quantity of material submitted is for the most part dealt with in the evaluation of the draft copies submitted by the student). I ask the students to submit the paper bound, with a title page, which in addition to the psychological effect of handing in a small book, protects the papers, which are not returned to the student.

The process of writing the paper is begun before the mid-term break, and is divided into components which help to prevent the student from completing the entire project in the days before it is due. Each component is a separate grade. Each successive component is also progressively more demanding, building upon the last assignment until the paper is completed. Worth 12% of the overall grade, these assignments are crucial to writing a good paper: students who have not done these assignments have not only lost these points but have received substantially lower paper grades: many of the problems in a final paper can be corrected in these assignments.

In addition to helping the students detect and eliminate compositional issues in their papers, these assignments serve to keep the student on a schedule that will all but ensure that the project is completed on time. Many of the traditional undergraduate students I have worked with were content to procrastinate on this kind of project, and my goal is to teach a) them how to compose the paper; b) time management skills; and c) that professional scholarship is an on-going, life consuming art form that requires a passion for and a commitment to the topic.

The presentations are held during the last three class days, including the final exam period. Each student has a maximum of fifteen minutes to present his or her work, inclusive of questions. Visual aids (posters, Power Point presentations, hand-outs) are encouraged but not required if they do not lend themselves well to the topic.

The primary challenge with regard to the presentations is the timing: some students are asked to present before the papers are actually due. In most cases, this is not a problem, as the second (complete) draft of their paper has been submitted and returned, and all that remains with regard to the paper is massaging of language. If the student is well prepared, rehearsed, and the paper is good, the grade for the presentation will likely be high.

The students' final grades are determined by the following formula:

Journals: 5-7 Assignments	30%
Research Paper Sections: Topic Proposal Preliminary Bibliography Detailed Outline Draft 1 (incomplete) Draft 2 (complete)	12%
Miscellaneous Assignments: Library Assignment Grammar Vocabulary Debates (3)	15%
Final Paper: Mechanics Content	20%
Presentation:	8%
Class Participation: Attendance Attitude Class Discussions Support of Colleagues	15%

The Purpose

It is my hope that these exercises convey a set of priorities, techniques, and aesthetics to the student that he or she can use as a starting point for developing his or her own set of priorities, techniques, and aesthetics. It is also my hope that my course inspires in the student a passion for scholarship, for staying informed about current events and the important issues of the day, and becoming productive and intelligent citizens outside of academe. Indeed, these lessons may be more important than learning the mechanics of writing a paper: in my mind these lessons are what should be the primary focus of the liberal arts institution.

Beyond these general goals, my main pedagogical point during the semester is that technique lives to serve the idea. With that in mind, our study involves careful attention to content. Each assignment, then, is intended to add one component of technique. The first step is to acquaint the student with the style, which is accomplished by assigning many scholarly articles and discussing with the students the various mechanical issues of the papers, such as form, language style, intended audience, etc.

After having read and studied the articles, they are then asked to begin to imitate the style in their journal assignments. This imitation of style and study of literature is comparable to the composer studying scores and listening to recordings in order to learn the repertory and the compositional techniques of other composers. The various journal assignments present specific challenges which increase in difficulty, culminating in the Letter to the Editor Rebuttal. Workshopping student writing is reminiscent of master classes, in which the student (not anonymous this time!) is given a lesson in public. The

grammar, vocabulary, and editing exercises are similar to scales and etudes; the debates and presentation, performances; the final paper, the recital.

Additionally, the revision process of the Journals (as well as the final paper) help the student understand that the process of writing is fluid: the finished essay, like the musical composition, is the result of careful planning, knowledge of and passion for the subject, and perpetual editing and revision. Most scholars do not write the way Mozart composed: in one draft, without revisions, having arrived at all the important decisions in his head before pen touched paper. While the Free Writing exercises help to force the initial ideas onto paper (which then, in theory, could be revised), the Journals teach that the initial ideas are not the final product. The masterpiece is not, then, the result of pure inspiration nor is it the result of pure technique, but a hybrid of idea and skill in which both compliment each other.

Just as the great composer can be recognized for possessing good technique by having consistently demonstrated the ability to have good ideas and to articulate them clearly, so to can the writer. Despite the sometimes “dry” nature of scholarly prose, one can argue that great scholarship has (almost!) as much of an impact on its intended audience as does great music. The good paper is closely matched to its intended audience with regard to language, style, vocabulary, and content, creating a balance between complexity and simplicity. So is the great musical composition.

Teaching students of either discipline must involve helping the students understand the difference between what is good and what is not. Most students do not seem to know how to recognize good scholarship when they arrive as freshmen, and it is our job to help them develop a system by which they can make that determination.

Beyond the techniques and topics my students study over the course of the semester, I hope to show them, by example and by the aesthetics demonstrated in the assignments, my system for making that distinction.

As of this writing, I am in my fourth semester with this course. While some of the mechanics of the course have evolved to (hopefully) become more efficient, I have found that the philosophies that guided the conception of the course have been, at least for me, proven successful. And while I will admit that the students have at times felt overworked (time management and adaptation to college life are two side issues I try to improve in the students), most students have enjoyed the course—especially the debates—and have improved because of it. Additionally, I have tried to lead by example by increasing my own scholarly output and by finding ways to improve my own writing.

I believe that using my knowledge of teaching music, and specifically music composition, as a template for teaching introductory scholarly writing was a good decision for me. I have found the experience profoundly rewarding, and now, after three semesters, I am beginning to be comfortable with this course. I am grateful to those who have given me this opportunity to expand my pedagogical range, to improve my own writing skills, and to, through the process of preparing for this course, reaffirm my musical ideals.