

## Music in the First-Year Writing Classroom

**Scott Strovas**

*Claremont Graduate University*

“Primary research counts, but we don’t teach it.” This was the sentiment, if these were not the actual words, of Lynée Lewis Gaillet in her critique of the traditional composition curriculum at the spring 2011 annual meeting of the College English Association in St. Petersburg (“Everyday Archives”). Gaillet proposes an alternative to furthering students’ sometimes unnecessary reliance on secondary research. In her own course, she sends students not into library stacks or electronic databases to begin their writing projects, but rather to special collections and archives. Her approach teaches students sincerity, originality, and independence in their writing. By situating her course within primary source investigation, Gaillet aspires to train “scholars who have something original, interesting, and pointed to add to academic conversations” (“Extending the Vertical” 2).

Gaillet’s presentation was both affirming and disconcerting for me. As a musicologist, I was troubled slightly by the notion that working closely with primary source materials is either overlooked or underemphasized in a large number of composition programs. [\[1\]](#) Nearly all academic fields, including music, require primary source analysis whether this analysis is a statistical account of data, a close reading of a novel, or, in music, the examination of a score or recording. It seems natural to me, then, that students progress in their general education

curriculums from composition to literature courses having learned to make observations from, write in detail about, and explore the implications of primary sources. Nevertheless, as Gaillet makes clear, student engagement in primary research is not always an objective of composition curriculums.

From my own experience in the first-year composition classroom, I have observed that students enter college with a number of preconceptions concerning writing. They have been taught that college writing is about extensive research, that “good writing” always uses sources, and that a research paper is simply the collection and reorganization of other writers’ work. As Gaillet observes, students are trained in secondary research beginning in elementary school (“Everyday Archives”). Secondary education also emphasizes certain writing formulas over in-depth reasoning, and new college students continue to focus on conforming to models such as the five-paragraph form rather than developing their own critical thinking skills. As a result, many students have lost the confidence to write without relying on other people’s ideas and pre-existing organizational templates.

Thus, Gaillet’s argument for the use of archive research in the composition classroom resonates with my own music-centered approach to the first-year writing curriculum. In my course, I seek immediately to subvert students’ expectations about the writing process, lessen their dependence on writing formulas and bad research habits, and foster their confidence in their own ideas. As a writing instructor trained not in rhetoric or composition, but in the writing conventions of musicology, I have found music to be a useful course topic in advancing more important writing objectives such as learning to think critically and to engage primary source materials effectively. Writing about music reinforces the importance of writing descriptively,

which in turn empowers students to trust in their own perceptions and develop an individual writing voice.

This article briefly outlines a music-based writing curriculum and presents the first assignment of the course, focusing on the ways that it engages the objectives above. I will also demonstrate how I teach the skill of *active listening* early in the semester. I analyze two performances of a single song to show how different musical settings can influence the interpretation of a song's lyrics and meaning. Although the curriculum presented is non-traditional, it satisfies the objectives of a traditional college introductory writing course, namely to apply critical thinking and sound logic in arguing a position, and does so using a topic that most students find interesting and enjoyable. [\[2\]](#)

My course is entitled "Writing about Music." During the one-semester curriculum, students work through three writing cycles, each comprised of a series of minor assignments on a single musical topic of their choice. I discuss the first paper, a personal essay, in detail below. The second paper is a researched argument. Students can write about their observations concerning a musical artist or group, such as an analysis of lyrical themes and musical techniques across a range of selections. Or, they might choose to examine the ways that music and musicians interact with and influence American culture. The third writing assignment, a journalistic music review, is usually a class favorite. Students attend a live concert or select a recently released album to evaluate and profile in the manner of a magazine or newspaper article.

The first writing cycle, provided as [Appendix 1](#), is designed to confound student expectations about the writing process. [\[3\]](#) Students are asked to identify and detail a significant moment or period in their lives, select a musical work that relates to their chosen moment, and

examine the ways that the musical selection interacts with their story. As a personal essay assignment, the prompt not only permits students to write in the first person, but also to write creatively, as I encourage them to use vivid descriptions in telling their personal narratives. In considering audience, students are expected to use fairly conversational language (I even design the prompt itself to subliminally promote personalization through Comic Sans font and bright green paper color). Early in the semester, these types of allowances, formerly discouraged by many of their high school teachers, relieve tension among students who may view a seminar dedicated to writing as intimidating or pedantic. More importantly, they facilitate the students to begin writing right away.

Likewise, being able to write about themselves and the music they love gets students energized immediately about the writing process. All too often, they feel overwhelmed by or unknowledgeable about a paper topic. So, they rely on mundane and sketchy internet sources to get started, or, worse, to frame a large portion of their paper. Writing Cycle 1 models an alternative. It requires no research and almost deemphasizes the research process in order to teach the benefits of examining primary source materials early on in a new writing project. Both the individual student's narrative and her corresponding musical selection constitute primary sources. As the writing prompt's outline of [Deadlines, Drafts, and Daily Work](#) demonstrates, students complete their personal narrative and music analysis as separate assignments.

Subdividing the writing cycle in such a way forces students to consider the various components of the paper in more depth and trains them to write with more detail. Moreover, reflection of the narrative and music independently prepares students to examine the relationship between them more critically.

By the time that students are asked to write a complete draft of the paper, they have already written descriptively and drawn conclusions about their narrative and musical selections. They are expected to synthesize and revise their thoughts from previous assignments, and, yes, even to disregard some of their early observations. But most students are surprised and excited by the ease with which they draft their four- to five-page essay. In its emphasis on primary source analysis, the writing assignment helps students learn to write large amounts of prose solely from their own experience and observations. It is my hope for the students that realizing this productivity is a formative experience which dissuades them from mechanically turning to Google when faced with future writing assignments.

Once Writing Cycle 1 is complete, music analysis remains a central component to the curriculum's subsequent assignments. Early in each writing cycle, students are required to complete an analysis of the musical selection or selections on which they intend to write. I permit students to write about their own preferences, so most are working with the conventions of lyric-based popular genres. Students are taught to consider how aspects of music such as rhythm, harmony, and instrumentation interact with the lyrics, and they are encouraged to write about these elements using their own descriptive vocabularies rather than terminology that a music specialist might employ. For example, students might describe the harmony of a selection as consonant or discordant, sonorous or dense, abrasive, bright, or dark. I provide the students with a Guide for Music Analysis, given here as [Appendix 2](#), which lists a set of questions by which students can listen actively and make observations concerning the different elements that comprise most musical selections. [\[4\]](#)

Fully acknowledging that students with little or no experience performing or studying music might struggle to analyze their musical selections, I generally am pleased with their work as long as they have made an effort to verbalize their observations. It is important that the students critically evaluate the ways that musical settings relate to the lyrics, title, or overall rhetorical message of a musical selection. As such, throughout the semester, I lead the students through various music analyses. Often, I play two different artists' interpretations of the same song in order to demonstrate how musical setting can affect the meaning or interpretation of lyrics. What follows is just such an analysis.

Early in the semester, students are guided through two radically disparate performances of Woody Guthrie's well known folk song, "This Land Is Your Land." I provide a page of [lyrics](#) for each music example, but, at first, I give the students no other information about the song, songwriter, or performers. During class, I play each musical selection in its entirety twice. [Listening Example 1](#) is a typical performance of "This Land" in that it features acoustic instruments, folk stylizations, and the song's most customary stanzas. [5] As I detail below, it is significant that the listening example uses only the first four verses of the [lyrics](#), so students are not made aware of remaining verses until after completing their analysis. For the first listening, I ask them to think of words to describe the song's tone or purpose. The familiar first verse (which also functions as the chorus, refrained at the performer's discretion) reads as follows:

This land is your land, this land is my land  
From California to the New York Island;  
From the Redwood Forest to the Gulf Stream waters  
This land was made for you and me. (Guthrie lines 1-4)

The students' comments, while insightful, are, as planned, usually straightforward. Students describe the lyrics as celebratory, idealistic, American, and nationalistic, connoting freedom, possibility, and expansiveness. As the [Guide for Music Analysis](#) suggests, they also take note of how certain poetic devices help convey these associations. Guthrie's use of imagery, for instance, emphasizes enchantment with and optimistic potential of America's vast natural resources. Further, his use of binary relationships—"your land" and "my land," "California" and "New York Island"—exemplifies an idealized sense of national community shared by individuals divided by physical, if not ideological distance.

A second listening allows the students to reflect more thoroughly on the musical setting. Using the Socratic Method, I guide the class through the process of engaging the predominant musical features of the performance and considering the implications therein. Again referring to the [Guide for Music Analysis](#), the class observes that there are multiple voices singing and that some of the instruments played include guitars, banjo, and harmonica. They identify the harmony as the brighter major mode and that rhythm or the presence of a percussive beat is understated. With my assistance, the class determines that unified voices and common, everyday instruments are more communal in nature, that the bright harmonies signal prosperity or optimism, and that the unassertive rhythm conveys a sense of relative calmness or contentment. Having framed the music within their observations about the lyrics, the class is usually satisfied with the conclusion that the musical setting corresponds with and supplements the nationalistic ideals conveyed by the text.

My [Guide for Music Analysis](#) indicates that students should consider additional contexts that might additionally frame their understanding of the musical selection. As noted above,

[Writing Cycle 1](#) asks students to interpret their music as it relates to their personal narrative. For their second writing projects of the semester, students might look at the historical or cultural circumstances in which a musical selection is written or performed. For instance, after their initial analysis of [Listening Example 1](#), students are given some historical background about “This Land,” including the date Guthrie wrote it, 1940, and his leftist political ideologies. Having contextualized the song against the backdrop of the Great Depression and Guthrie’s common-man interests, I inform the students of the three additional [verses](#) not heard in Listening Example 1 and guide them through lyrical analysis. [6] One of these lesser-known stanzas reads,

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,  
By the relief office I seen my people;  
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking  
Is this land made for you and me? (Guthrie 21-24)

Guthrie’s allusions to economic hardship and social hierarchy in the previously unheard verses undermine the students’ initial characterization of the song as spirited and patriotic. In its contrasting stanzas of optimistic idealism and the realities of class difference, “This Land” presents a disillusioned, rather than celebratory, attitude toward the nationalistic values previously observed. Guthrie’s commentary, the students conclude, is belied by the first listening example’s incomplete text and communal musical setting.

I then contrast the first recording with [Listening Example 2](#), which does feature two of the previously unheard stanzas. [7] Once again, I guide students through a discussion of musical setting. They observe that this version features a single female vocalist and that the tone of her delivery is one of resentment or cynicism. They also recognize that the instrumentation is quite



different than [Listening Example 1](#) in its use of horns, drums, and bass. They are attuned to the denser harmonic texture and recognize the contrast between its darker minor mode and the brighter harmonies of the first listening example. And, rhythmically, they discern that a sharp, driving, percussive beat is apparent, even foregrounded. When I ask whether this alternative musical setting reflects the content of the [lyrics](#), the students generally conclude that the discontented nature of the music—its aggressive beat and vocalizations, its abrasive harmonies—more aptly accompanies the disconcerted character of Guthrie’s lyrics than [Listening Example 1](#).

The music may even be *more* confrontational than Guthrie’s own disillusioned sentiment. I prompt students to consider how musical genre may further inform their analysis and alert them to one important lyrical adjustment. In [verse six](#), the vocalist changes the line, “By the relief office” to “By the *welfare* office,” modernizing the song’s central marker of class identification. Students observe that, through its instrumentation and foregrounded rhythm, [Listening Example 2](#) appropriates Guthrie’s folk material into the medium of jazz or funk, musical genres originating in the African American community. Based on these observations, students debate the possibility that the performance reinterprets the social content of Guthrie’s lyrics from Great-Depression era class politics into contemporary race relations.

The juxtaposition of these two different performances effectively and succinctly demonstrates the type of extensive, yet non-specialized approach that I expect students to incorporate into their own analyses. Students enter college with an incredible reliance on the internet and secondary materials to explain and interpret *for them* the texts and topics about which they are asked to write. Many either lack the skills to look at primary resources critically, do not practice these skills, or (and perhaps worse) are not asked to use them. By modeling and

expecting active listening, I hope to provide students not only the tools to examine music in my own course, but also a method by which they can approach the data, texts, manuscripts, and other primary materials that they will be expected to engage critically throughout college. Writing about music practices such critical skills as identification, interpretation, and explication. Moreover, it provides students a chance to develop and gain trust in their writing abilities while exploring what their favorite music means to them.

## Appendix 1

### Writing Cycle 1 – “Situations and Soundtracks: The Music of a Moment”

**Subject:** In your first essay cycle, you will write about what you know best—yourself. And, you will examine the ways that your experiences are shaped by or reflected in the music that you choose to listen to. This essay is not an autobiography; rather, you are to select and describe a key moment, event, or period that challenged you, impacted your goals for the immediate future, or significantly altered your outlook on daily life (if possible, try to avoid certain clichéd moments: high school graduation, break-ups, leaving home for the first time, family deaths, etc.). Then identify one or two specific songs with which you felt a strong connection during this time, and interpret why these particular tracks held a certain significance for you. In other words, evaluate why your musical selections might serve as a “soundtrack” for this moment in your life.

**Sources:** Your only required sources for this paper are your ears, insight, and imagination, as well as the one or two musical selections that best represent your chosen experience. In writing about both your life experiences and music, you are dealing with *primary sources*—sources which require your own individual analysis. Draw on lyrics and other musical features to

interpret any larger message conveyed in the music, and discuss the reasons why you identified with the music at this particular stage of your life.

**Purpose:** There are three purposes for this assignment. The first is to let me know more about you and your musical preferences. Secondly, you will practice dealing with primary sources, an aspect of writing which will be important to each of the writing cycles this semester. The final goal is to give you a chance to present your best writing on a hopefully enjoyable topic without the formalities of the research process. This will allow us to discuss your strengths as a writer and create goals for improving your writing.

**Audience:** For this assignment, your audience is any lover of music and stories. Other students will read drafts of your paper during peer review workshops, so include only autobiographical details you will be comfortable discussing with others. You may, of course, *write in the first person* and use a fairly informal tone, but be sensitive to the differences between spoken and written discourse.

**The Details:** The final draft of this paper will be four to five pages in length and must conform to the “Manuscript Guidelines” page in your syllabus. Cite your musical selections using an MLA-style “Works Cited” page attached to the end of your paper. Independent assignments within this cycle are detailed below.

#### Writing Cycle 1 Deadlines, Drafts, and Daily Work

Writing is a progressive task. Composing your four- to five-page essay the night before it is due does not facilitate in the learning of this important skill. Thus, each writing cycle is broken down into smaller assignments that enable more focused critical thought from you, and more focused feedback from your peers and me.

**Assignment 1, Topic Proposal (1 page):** Write a short description of your topic including the period, situation(s), or event(s) you will be discussing, and possible musical selections you will analyze. Also (and perhaps most importantly), tell me why you care about the topic. Why does writing about this moment matter to you? Do not simply list these requirements. Write one page (double-spaced) in paragraph format.

**Assignment 2, Personal Narrative (2 pages):** Tell me a story. Vividly describe the situation or period that you've chosen for this assignment. Write in paragraph format, and feel free to include any or all of these basic elements of narrative: setting, plot, characters, dialogue, and particularly introspection (your inner thoughts as you faced the situation). *This is your chance to write creatively!*

**Assignment 3, Music Analysis (2 pages):** Refer to your handout, [A Guide for Music Analysis](#) as you examine the musical selection(s) you intend to include in your paper. You should paraphrase (i.e. put into your own words) and interpret the song's lyrics. Direct quotation of lyrics is advisable, but you should limit the use of direct quotes to one or two key lines per verse or selection. Remember, any time you use a direct quote, you should prepare the reader to receive it and then offer an analysis of the quote that is equal to or greater in length than the quote itself. Some consideration of the actual music is also important. How well does the music convey the meaning or spirit of the words? Also, describe your own reaction to the music. There is a reason you choose to listen to this track. What about the music appeals to you, how does it make you feel, and what does it make you think about?

**Assignment 4, Complete Draft 1 (4-5 pages):** This document should demonstrate significant revision, consolidation of your ideas, and synthesis of your previous writing assignments. *Papers which simply paste together the previous documents will receive a failing grade!*

**Assignment 5, Complete Draft 2 (4-5 pages):** This final draft should reflect any changes in content or organization that I have directed you toward in your graded Draft 1. Additionally, presentation is important. Proofread your document carefully to avoid losing points for errors in spelling, punctuation, syntax, and page formatting.

## Appendix 2

### A Guide for Music Analysis

Music is a composite of elements such as melody and harmony that we can examine independently of each other. Throughout the semester, use the following list of questions to help guide you through your analyses. First, make what observations you can about a given musical selection, taking into account the questions raised by the bullet points below. Then, from these observations, consider how the separate elements work together to create an overall impression of the selection. Finally, relate your observations to any personal, cultural, or historic contexts that may be relevant to your paper topic.

*Note:* your paper likely will not answer each of the questions presented in the categories below, nor should it read like a point-by-point list of musical features. Use discretion in determining what observations and specifics are important to include, and always contextualize your findings within the broader explicit or rhetorical message of the musical selection.

## *1. Lyrics/Melody*

- What is actually being expressed by the lyrics? Can you put lines, stanzas, or the overall message of the selection into your own words? Is there an emotion, mood, or theme prevalent in the lyrics?
- What poetic devices has the song writer employed? Such devices include rhyme, assonance, alliteration, metaphor, imagery, hyperbole, and symbolism. How does use of these elements strengthen, complicate, define, clarify, or support the theme which you have identified in the above bullet point?
- If your selection does not have lyrics, how might you best characterize the melody? Some useful descriptors include linear, lyric, songlike, soaring, pleasing, disjunct, technical, unpredictable, active, complicated, unpleasant, and virtuosic. Is there a clear melody-accompaniment relationship, or are there multiple melodic lines sounding at once?

## *2. Vocalization and instrumentation*

- How many vocalists are singing? What is their gender? How can you describe the manner or tone with which they deliver the lyrics (i.e. thoughtful, moving, cynical, angry, carefree, straightforward)?
- Do your best to identify the instruments performing. Are they easily distinguishable from one another? Is the instrumentation typical or atypical when compared to an average selection of that artist or genre?

### 3. *Harmony*

- How might you characterize the harmony? Some useful descriptors include resonant, consonant, pleasing, sonorous, dense, discordant, harsh, and grating.
- Determine whether your selection is in major or minor. In general, songs in a major key are associated with more pleasant moods and can be described as light, content, comforting, spirited, or optimistic. “Twinkle, Twinkle” and “Meet the Flintstones” are in major. Songs set in a minor key are commonly associated with darker, solemn moods and sometimes convey a sense of restlessness or agitation. Many holiday songs, such as “We Three Kings” and “Greensleeves” begin in minor. NOTE: when considering major and minor, try to avoid the simplistic duality of happiness and sadness. Always consider how the harmony relates to the lyrics.

### 4. *Rhythm*

- How prevalent is the beat? Would you consider the rhythm accompanimental (compared to the lyrics, melody and harmony) or foregrounded? Some useful descriptors include percussive, sharp, bouncy, pulsing, or understated.
- Can you group the beat into a regular pattern (1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4), or does it follow an asymmetrical or irregular pattern (1 2 3 / 1 2 / 1 2 3 / 1 2)? Do these patterns remain consistent throughout the selection?

### 5. *Growth/Development*

- Can you decipher a pattern of verses or choruses? Or, does the music gradually progress or build from beginning to end with few repetitions?

- Are the various sections contrasted with each other through changes in vocalizations, harmony, rhythm, or instrumentation, or does the selection feature a largely homogenous (consistent) musical setting?
- Does the selection have a climax? Is there a dramatic structure conveyed by oppositional musical elements and a distinct and audible beginning, middle, and end?
- What role, if any, do dynamics (loudness, softness, density of instrumentation, etc.) play in shaping the development of the selection?

## Notes

[1] I should explain that my attendance at CEA 2011 was perhaps unconventional, for, at the time that I presented my work, I was a Ph.D. candidate in musicology. But during my candidacy, I followed my cross-disciplinary interests and taught first-year writing at a private liberal arts university. Presenting my methodology at CEA, I thought, would give me the opportunity to receive some valuable feedback and hone my curriculum. What I did not expect was the sincere interest in my approach shown by those in attendance. I had fruitful conversations with more than a few of you, some of whom had already begun to incorporate music in your own classrooms. What follows is a continuation of what I hope to be our ongoing discussion.

[2] Recently in *CEA Forum*, Nancy Riecken has written about the benefits of modeling the composition classroom after music theory and performance. Her approach touches on the parallels between the process of writing and preparation for musical performance, between the organization of ideas and musical structure, and between the fundamentals of grammar and musical syntax, using music as an example by which students can approach the different tasks of writing more clearly.



[3] The format and language used in this assignment incorporate concepts covered in the Teaching Writing Workshop taught by Diana Glycer at Azusa Pacific University.

[4] This list is loosely adapted from Jan LaRues's *Guidelines for Style Analysis*, which, for the purpose of analysis, categories music into six basic elements: Sound, Harmony, Melody, Rhythm, Growth, and Text Influence (I am indebted to Christopher J. Smith for first introducing me to this method). In order to meet the needs of undergraduates with little or no training in music, I have removed musical jargon that would overcomplicate the process of analysis. I do not teach such terminology to non-specialists; rather, I encourage students to use and expand their own descriptive vocabularies. For the students, this makes the process of listening to and writing about their music more meaningful, and it teaches them to write with more detail and personalization.

[5] Performed by Pete Seeger, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Doc Watson, and the Little Red School House Chorus. To facilitate discussion in this online forum, I have provided YouTube hyperlinks for Listening Examples 1 and 2. Please disregard the visual images, as I do not use these links in my own classroom discussion. Original distribution information for both listening examples is provided in the [Works Cited](#).

[6] Guthrie continued to revise his text to "[This Land](#)" well into the 1950s. But archival research completed by Mark Allen Jackson confirms that the more political verses five and six were indeed part of Guthrie's original conception. Moreover, the first recording of "This Land," which dates to 1944 and is featured in the report by [Spitzer](#), contains verse five of the "official" [lyrics](#). Additional historical consideration of Guthrie's song might include the ways it was adopted by

social activists in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. For more about “This Land” and its lesser known stanzas, see Jackson, Spitzer, and Pedelty.

[7] Arranged by Bosco Mann and performed by Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings. See the [Works Cited](#) for original distribution information.

### Works Cited

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