



Writing Musicology at University

GUIDES FOR WRITING IN SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES

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1 What is Musicology?

Music has been the object of study since ancient times, but musicology is a relatively new science. Under the term *Musikwissenschaft*, at the end of the nineteenth century Guido Adler and Hugo Riemann organised it into two main specialist areas: historical (palaeography, musical forms, categorisation by historical periods and musical instruments) and systematic (aesthetics, music theory, pedagogy); with a third incipient area, comparative musicology, which focussed on non-European music and oral tradition. In the mid-twentieth century, Alan Merriam and John Blacking developed ethnomusicology—the study of musical expression as it is situated within the society that generates it. In 1985, Joseph Kerman conceived New Musicology, which identifies the problems of the discipline and presents new challenges, and in the 1990s Susan McClary and Marcia Citron introduced the gender perspective. Currently, musicology is concerned with all aspects that converge in the life of a society and offers the possibility to generate new knowledge from the study of musical phenomena, from the technical and formal to the symbolic. Musicology studies a well-established field of study at both universities and at higher conservatories of music.

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2 General characteristic of writing in Musicology

Academic writing in musicology is situated right at the centre of the social sciences and the humanities and shares objectives and approaches with both. However, it does have one peculiarity: it is necessary to know and master the language of each musical tradition, whether historical or contemporary. This requires specialisation in the different musical techniques referred to in the studies—instrumental, vocal, compositional, interpretative—and rigorous attention to the correct vocabulary for sonic expression. Also, the knowledge to be transmitted has to be comprehensible—something which is not always easy even within the scientific community as a result of the great variety of areas within the discipline. In the case of a non-specialist text aimed at people who do not necessarily know the specific terminology the means of explaining the same content in the clearest and most straightforward way must be sought, without the change of register rendering the text partial or over-simplified. A combination of scientific rigour

and comprehensibility of the text aimed at any kind of reader is one of the fundamental pillars of academic writing in musicology.

On the other hand, since music is something that cuts across many other disciplines, certain musicological studies may touch on other areas beyond the humanities and social sciences—especially in the natural sciences, with questions related to physics and the properties of sound, or health, for therapeutic applications, for example. That is why writing musicological texts requires minimal knowledge of key words and concepts across this spectrum of sciences. Every research project must begin with solid training in the relevant areas, with clearly delimited concepts that can sustain scientific criticism and avoid vague or imprecise expressions.

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When it comes to writing it is also essential to use the correct taxonomic and folksonomic terminologies. The former corresponds to exclusive, univocal concepts such as technical procedures or the physical designation of a sound interval, like ‘digital recording’ or ‘Pythagorean comma’. The second, conversely, includes popular terms taken from current use in a culture and at a specific social time, which may be constantly changing, such as ‘Catalan rock’. This distinction is commonly known in the social sciences as the etic and emic perspectives.

Any musicological text must also focus on the historiographical renewal of the object of study, and be able to clearly distinguish in a single text those expressions that depart from current standard paradigms, even if they were written in some other period, including in academic articles. This can be done using using graphic elements such as italics and bold. For example, when we talk about questions related to colonialism (“vilancets ‘de negre’”), or the names of cultural groups which are, in fact, derogatory (“traditional *Eskimo* songs”). Similarly, writing in musicology has to take inclusive language into account; in other words “a set of linguistic resources that aims to avoid discrimination in language, whether for reasons of gender, race, language, age, or sexual orientation, among others” (IEC, 2023). Also, given the limited gender perspective in musicological literature, it is important to avoid habits and practices that are still deeply ingrained. We can correct them, for example, by adding the names of women when listing the musicians of a certain era or musical style; indicate whether we are referring to Felix or Fanny Mendelssohn when we write the surname and not just assume it is the former—as we can also do with the Mozarts, the Schumanns and the Mahlers; or avoid

using certain expressions that would seem taxonomic but are not, in fact, such as ‘masculine ending’ and ‘feminine ending’ to refer to the position of the last note of a melody in the bar.

When talking about musical works that contain text, whether it is poetry in the case of a choral song or a song from the libretto of a stage work, the authors should be taken into account when we are writing, at least in the sense of whether it is necessary to mention them in the text or not. Similarly, other possible contributors, such as choreographers or set designers, should also be considered.

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3 Texts types in Musicology according to register

Educational texts and those related to the scientific development of the discipline are aimed at **expert readers**. Generally they are in one of two formats: the book chapter and the academic article, and these are common to many other specialities. They should have a clearly defined structure that includes: abstract and key words, an introduction setting out the main objectives, the working hypothesis and methodology used, the body of the text and, finally, the results and conclusion. However, musicology texts have some specific characteristics:

- **Graphic illustrations: the scores.** It should be clear whether the material consists of oral annotations made by the authors (often mistakenly called *transcriptions*), original musical creations or scores by other composers taken from published editions. In the first case is essential to cite the authorship of the annotation, even if it is the writer’s own, but also that of the informant, whether by direct recording or via an intermediary (online sound file or in a physical format). In the second case, if it is an original unpublished creation, whether to include just a fragment for protection of copyright or whether to include a Creative Commons licence (copyleft) is an important decision. Finally, if it is a score by a different composer

(or annotator) that has previously been published, it must be included as a bibliographical reference and the proper citation method should be used.

- **Sonic examples: links.** It is usual to include a sound document illustrating the written explanation. If the text is on paper a QR code can be added and if it is digital a link can be included. Some documentation centres or institutional repositories have permanent links that are reasonably reliable. Personal repositories tend to be less stable. If the link becomes inactive it is possible that the content will not be fully understood without listening to the example it contains. In any case, the longevity of the link should be assessed before deciding to include it.
- **Obsolescence and scope of relevance of the concepts.** In the study of contemporary urban music, in particular, the key concepts of the text must be explained because it is probable that some terms will be temporally and geographically limited, meaning that some of them could become obscure in just a few years.
- **Fieldwork ethics.** It is essential to have permission from all the informants who have contributed to the fieldwork to include their names and also to transcribe parts of their explanations—either within the text or in an annexe—or to link to their sonic illustrations. On the other hand the text must respect anonymity and privacy.

Another very specific type of musicological text is the prologue in **critical editions** of scores. Whether the publication is your own or that of a different musicology scholar it is essential to add a section on sources for the edition; in other words, a very specific section in which to explain the decisions taken and modifications carried out with respect to the original manuscript or manuscripts, or previous editions. In this case, the reader is the performer of the musical work and there must therefore be an explicit commitment to providing accurate information that is presented as clearly as possible.

For articles, book chapters or popular science monographs for a **general public**, all of these specific points should be taken into account, but bearing in mind that it may be necessary to offer more explanation of the technical questions covered. These types of text have an added difficulty in that the technical information to be transmitted has to be explained in other words, and in a way that does not make the general public feel that they do not know anything about music, so that they do not skip entire paragraphs or abandon the text altogether because they feel excluded. But neither should the content to be transmitted become limited or reduced; on the contrary, every effort should be made to use an optimal register to maximise as far as possible the communication of musical ideas.

In **work environments** musicological texts can adopt different forms and also be directed at different audiences. On the one hand there are commissions from **institutions or companies**, such as museums, concert halls, festivals and record companies. These could be texts for permanent or temporary exhibitions, commentaries for concert programmes, sleeve notes, or teaching guides for schools. On the other hand, there is the **press**, which may commission concert reviews, music criticism, and book or record reviews. Generally, texts are required to be fairly brief because space is limited. It is satisfying to synthesise ideas and articulate them in paragraphs that are appealing to read.

It is also possible to receive commissions for **technical reports**, both from public administrations such as libraries, archives, local councils, concert halls, or private entities such as foundations or associations. These could be for inventories or catalogues of musical works, for example. Often there is an agreed formula that must be adhered to for the descriptions or, if there is not, some guides are available that be used for reference, such as the GUIDMUS guide to the description of musical documents, or international standards such as the *Répertoire International des Sources Musicales*, RISM. In these cases it is essential to have some knowledge of the professional norms of musical documentation.

4 Writing conventions in Musicology

Whatever language is used for writing certain technicisms must be used which in musicology are usually written in specific languages, such as Italian for instructions regarding tempo and expressive timing in classical music (*più mosso* and *rallentando*, *largo* and *allegro*), or genres and techniques that are not translated (*glam-rock* and *détaché*). It is advisable to consult a dictionary of terminology to know whether or not these words should be written in italics. For example, Termcat includes the translations in several languages. Similarly, depending on the language used the nomenclature of musical notes and harmony will need to be adapted (*mi bemoll* in Catalan; E-flat in English), and the text revised to ensure it is correct where musical symbols such as sharp, flat or natural are used (F#, Bb, C♮).

For each historical period the most pertinent musical nomenclature must be selected when referring to technical aspects such as keys and modes, harmony and melody. They are not the same when writing about music in antiquity, medieval, modern or contemporary periods. For example the word *tenor* in medieval vocal music does not have the same meaning as in nineteenth century vocal music.

It should also be remembered that the transliteration of certain proper nouns in the Latin alphabet is different according to the language: Piotr Ilitx Txaikovski (in Catalan), Piotr Ilich Chaikovski (in Spanish), Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky (in English), Piotr Ilitch Tchaïkovski (in French).

5 Works and websites of interest for writing Musicology

1. BELLMAN, J. D. (2007). *A Short Guide to Writing About Music*. Pearson Longman.

This guide offers a brief commentary on the topics covered, but it is nevertheless very complete and inspiring. It includes chapters on theory but the chapters that really stand out are the practical ones on how to produce all kinds of musical texts, from notes in concert programmes to opinion articles. The second part is dedicated to the process of musical research, from the first stages of the investigation to the presentation of the written results, set out in an academic style.

2. DONAHUE, T. (2010). *A Style and Usage Guide to Writing About Music*. Scarecrow Press.

A basic and practical guide designed for writing correctly in US English, which is based on key reference guides. The author states that it also includes personal reflections from experience.

3. HERBERT, T. (2009). *Music in Words: a Guide to Researching and Writing About Music*. Oxford University Press.

A guide which includes a first section on writing texts in different registers, managing research and information, and the use of citations and illustrations, and a second section which is more practical but which, given the date of publication, contains some information that needs to be updated.

4. HOLOMAN, D. K. (2008). *Writing about music: a style sheet*. University of California.

This style guide offers very precise instructions on how to write musical terminology, musical examples, tables and illustrations in a text, or the format that concert programmes should have. It also explains how to write special characters to be able to include musical symbols such as dynamics, clefs or accidentals, and time signatures in text processors such as Microsoft Word and web pages.

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