MUSC 302W: Musicianship VI

Thesis-driven research paper assignment

This assignment will provide you with the opportunity to further the development of the research and critical thinking skills you began to develop in Musicianship V. At the end of the semester you will have written a 2500-word thesis-driven research paper on a topic of your choice. If this project seems daunting at first, don't worry – we will be breaking it down into steps over the course of the semester, beginning with the choice of your topic.

Choosing a topic

Generally speaking, any topic is OK, provided that the project is feasible within the course of one semester, takes a musicological approach to the matter, and is concerned with some aspect of music history (which includes the present day). You also cannot work on a topic that you've already written about in another class or are currently writing about in another class.

You might find inspiration in some of the things we've discussed and will discuss in Musicianship V and VI, although you will not be allowed to simply duplicate what we've done in class. Keep in mind that I take a very broad view of “music history” and “musicology,” so it should be easy to find a general area of inquiry that interests you. The trick will be to narrow it down to a bona fide research topic.

I would strongly recommend that you focus on one particular piece of music. This could be a symphony, an opera, a chamber work, a solo piece, an album, a jazz number, etc. It could also be just a section of one of those larger works (a movement of a symphony, or a song from an album). This will give focus to your topic, and it will give you some concrete ideas about what you should be trying to find out in your research.

Another useful strategy is to think of an important and somewhat complex question that you would like to have answered, perhaps relating to your choice of piece(s). This will guide your research and give you your motivation for writing the paper. The question should be limited enough in scope that you won’t need to undertake excessively enormous amounts of reading and writing to explore it adequately. Hence, “What was the influence of Beethoven on later composers?” is not a good question, because it would take at least seventeen books to answer it.

Your question should also not be so narrow in scope as to require only a miniscule amount of research and thinking. A question like, “What piano did Beethoven use in his last apartment in Vienna?” might be such a question, because it seems only to ask for one simple fact. However, there might be tremendous debate about which piano Beethoven used, and there might even be a lot more at stake in answering this
question than meets the eye – for example, did the specific piano that Beethoven used have an influence on the way he wrote a particular composition? – so don’t be afraid to go in the direction of extreme specificity.

Just make sure that you choose a question that hasn’t already been answered beyond a shadow of a doubt; the vast majority of topics fall under this category, but in any case, be aware that you have to leave room for your own creative thought. The paper cannot be solely a recitation of evidence from your research; you will have to make an argument that defends your conclusions about the topic based on that evidence.

As you brainstorm about topic ideas, please talk to me or e-mail me! I really want to help you come up with something that will be rewarding, manageable, and fun. Do keep in mind, however, that I must give final approval to all topics.

Sources

Depending on your topic, there are various sources you might consult. We can divide these into primary and secondary sources.

*Primary sources* would include musical scores, writings of composers, musicians, critics and so forth from the historical period that you’re dealing with, recordings (if your topic concerns the recordings themselves), and anything else that provides first-hand evidence relating to your topic.

*Secondary sources* include anything that offers interpretation and criticism of primary sources. Relevant books and articles about composers, works, instruments, etc. that do not date from the moment in time you’re studying would generally fall under this category. You are probably not the first person to think of your research question, and even if you are, other people have probably reflected deeply on related questions. Their collections and evaluations of primary-source evidence, along with their own arguments, will therefore be important sources for you.

NOTE: primary sources are not more “important” than secondary sources – far from it. These terms are only meant to distinguish between different kinds of sources. Your paper might rely predominantly on secondary sources, for example, and that would be fine.

Since I’m allowing you so much freedom in the choice of a topic, there will also be a lot of variety in the kinds of sources that different students will rely on for their paper. Nonetheless, please keep in mind that as a general rule, no sources not obtained through an academic library (such as Duquesne’s Gumberg Library) are acceptable. Following this rule will ensure that all of your sources are reputable and verified. If your topic requires the use of other kinds of sources, however, that is perfectly fine. However, you must ask me about it so that we can evaluate those sources together for their worthiness and relevance.
Stages of the project

**Stage 1:** Preliminary topic description – due Friday 25 January by 8 pm – 5 points

Turn this in on Blackboard, in MS Word or PDF format, under the menu option “Turn In Assignments Here”

At this stage, you will submit a brief description of your topic. This can range from a couple of sentences to a complete paragraph. All you have to do is explain your topic and research question, so that I can give you some feedback. If you're having trouble with something, like narrowing down your topic or making sure it has a music-historical focus, feel free to discuss that in your description, so I can address your concerns directly. This will be graded on effort alone; most of you will probably need to revise your topics as we progress.

**Stage 2:** Preliminary list of 5 sources and revised topic description – due Monday 18 February by 8 pm – 5 points

Turn this in on Blackboard, in MS Word or PDF format, under the menu option “Turn In Assignments Here”

At this stage, you will submit a list of the 5 most important sources that you have found thus far in your research, as well as a revised version of your topic, reflecting some advance in your thinking about the project.

The 5 sources you list at this stage *cannot* include any musical scores or recordings, *nor* can they include the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians or any other standard musical encyclopedia, *but* they may include anything else. (By no means do I imply here that you should not consult scores, recordings or the New Grove Dictionary, but I want to make sure that you are also casting your net wider from the very beginning of your research.) You must also include *at least 3 secondary sources* in this list (see above for definition of primary and secondary sources). Depending on your topic, you will probably include more.

All sources must be cited in a standard bibliographic format of some kind. Because it is the most commonly-used format in the humanities, I would encourage you to use what is known as “Chicago style.” To find guides to this formatting style, look under the “Citation Help” tab on the [Campus Guide for this assignment](http://guides.library.duq.edu/musc302w)

However, if you choose, you may opt to go with any other formatting style in standard use (such as MLA or APA). Just be sure to inform me that you are doing this.
The Campus Guide cited above will also give you other important information about how to refine your topic, how to locate citations of relevant sources, and how to find the actual sources, either in hard copy or online. Please take advantage of the Campus Guide to help you with your researching skills!

Another crucial resource at your disposal is Gumberg Library’s music librarian, Terra Merkey (merkeyt@duq.edu). Her office is on the 5th floor of Gumberg, right by the music section of the library. Please feel free to ask her for help with any aspect of the assignment at any time.

All you need to do for this stage of the assignment is give a list of your sources in proper format (depending on the formatting style you chose). You don’t need to summarize them or comment on them in any way. But by this point, you should be reading these sources and making serious progress on your actual research, because you will almost definitely need to find more sources other than the first ones you encounter. I will give you feedback on the usefulness and reliability of your sources, and if possible, I’ll steer you in the direction of further source material that might be useful to you.

**Stage 3: Preliminary thesis paragraph – due Monday 11 March by 8 pm – 15 points**

Turn this in on Blackboard, in MS Word or PDF format, under the menu option “Turn In Assignments Here”

At this stage, you will submit a rough draft of your thesis paragraph for the paper. The paragraph should accomplish the following four things, most likely in this order:

- Sketch out the essential background for understanding the research question or problem
- Clearly articulate the research question or problem at hand (even if you don’t actually phrase it in the form of a question)
- Outline how you are going to explore that question or problem
- Forecast what you will conclude about the question or problem

Think of the thesis paragraph as the definition of a problem, one that you are about to solve. Let us know what the problem is, tell us what we must consider in order to solve the problem (i.e. the evidence you’re about to present and analyze from your research), and point toward the solution of the problem. Remember, this is a thesis-driven research paper; you must make some sort of argument based on the evidence you present in the body of the paper. Anything else is merely a restatement of material you’ve collected.

The paragraph will be graded based on effort, since it is a rough draft. But effort includes serious proofreading, so please make sure your document is free of spelling errors and grammatical awkwardness.
**Stage Four:** Outline of the paper, including a revised list of sources (minimum 5) and a revised thesis paragraph – due Monday 1 April at 8 pm – 15 points

Turn this in on Blackboard, in MS Word or PDF format, under the menu option “Turn In Assignments Here”

At this stage, you will submit a document with the following items, in the following order:

- Revised thesis paragraph
- Blow-by-blow outline of the body of your paper, explaining the function of each paragraph in developing or supporting your thesis, and making reference to your sources when relevant
- A revised list of all your sources, cited properly (minimum 5)

I will grade the revised thesis paragraph based on content, clarity of writing, organization and proofreading. The outline will be graded based on substance and effort. The list of sources must be properly cited to receive full credit.

This is your chance to assemble the flesh and bones of your paper without having to actually write it. Don’t waste that chance! The more substantial the outline, and the more well-acquainted you are with your sources and your evidence, the easier it will be to move to Stage Five.

**Stage Five:** Rough draft of the paper – due Thursday 11 April at the beginning of class – subtraction of up to 40 points if not completed

Turn this in on Blackboard, in MS Word or PDF format, under the menu option “Turn In Assignments Here.” **You must ALSO turn in TWO PAPER COPIES of this assignment – read on for info.**

At this stage, it’s time to convert your outline into a rough draft of the paper (minimum 2000 words of the total 2500 words). This can be an intimidating moment in the process, so to encourage you and give you the opportunity for low-stress feedback, I’ve put a “Rough Draft Discussion Day” into the syllabus. On Thursday 11 April, you should bring two paper copies of your rough draft to class and give them to two of your colleagues (whom I will specify). Then, on Tuesday 16 April, you will meet with those two colleagues and spend 1/3 of class discussing your paper and getting feedback from them. For the other 2/3 of class, you will give feedback to your colleagues on their papers, which you will have read by that point.

Remember that the more effort you put into this part of the assignment, the better your paper will be in the end, because it will benefit more substantially from the advice of your peers. Also keep in mind that if you don’t complete this stage of the process, I will subtract up to 40 points from your grade. And please follow the golden rule: do unto others as you would have done unto you – i.e. read your
peers’ papers carefully and offer the same amount of constructive criticism as you would want to receive.

**Stage Six:** Final version of paper – due Monday 29 April at 8 pm – 160 points
Turn this in on Blackboard, in MS Word format, under the menu option “Turn In Assignments Here.”

This stage is fairly self-explanatory. Your 2500-word paper should have a title, but it need not have a cover page. You should also have a bibliography of all consulted sources at the end of the document. I will grade the papers according to the following scheme:

- Content and substance of evidence and argument: 90 points
- Clarity and transparency of writing: 30 points
- Organization and structure of ideas: 30 points
- Proofreading (including proper citation of sources): 10 points