Guidelines for Writing Music Research Papers
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Why Do Research Papers?
A research paper is not (or should not be) just an academic exercise, a hoop you have to jump through to pass a class. It is your chance to examine in more depth a topic that interests you. Look at it as an opportunity to learn about something you want to study.

Choosing a Topic
A rule of thumb for topic searching: Find something that will either (1) be something you enjoy, or (2) will be useful to you in your own major. Ideally, you will come up with a topic that does both, but, in any case, #1 takes priority. Remember to keep your topic narrow—something that can be discussed fully in 10-15 pages (as opposed to 5 or 50).

Be sure to start creating a bibliography right away so that you can know if your topic is practical or not, given the resources you can obtain either in the NIU library or through Interlibrary Loan (see “Building a Biography,” below). Remember that all books and articles are NOT created equal—some are out of date, erroneous, or just plain bad. Beware especially of sources appealing to the lay listener (The Little Golden Book of Opera, etc.)—they tend to be casually written and include very little good information for your purposes.

The reason your professor requires you to get his or her approval for a topic is that experience teaches us that certain topics do not work well in most cases for a term paper. In addition, we can perhaps suggest additional sources that you may not have encountered—or warn you away from some bad ones.

Building a Bibliography

A series of books present published bibliographies on a subject (e.g., Claude Debussy: A Guide to Research); such books are annotated collections of significant literature on the subject. See if there is one of these sources relevant to your topic (check ML 134, both in the stacks and in the reference collection).

Many general sources (textbooks on music of a certain period, etc.) have bibliographies in them, sometimes very good ones. Ask your teacher for the most reliable general sources for a particular period or subject.

DON’T FORGET JOURNAL ARTICLES!!! Yes, they can be harder to look up, but they’re just as valuable as books, and frequently more so (they’re usually more up-to-date). The Music Index is your friend, and it’s available on-line.

Remember that you can Interlibrary Loan something if it’s not available in the NIU library (books, articles, scores; though not recordings). Start your search soon so that you give the lending libraries time to send the item(s). Ask your professor or one of the library workers how to do this if you’re not sure.

What Your Paper Should Include
A good title that succinctly summarizes what you intend to do in the paper (a separate title page is not necessary).

A well-written introduction with a clear thesis that tells the reader what your goal is in this paper. Tell us why this is a worthwhile subject to pursue, and how you intend to pursue it.
The body of the paper (10-15 pp. is the norm, depending on the topic).

A well-written conclusion that neatly summarizes your findings.

Notes. You paper MUST include proper documentation of all quotations and all ideas that are specifically indebted to a certain author. You need not provide documentation for things such as biographical items that are common knowledge and reprinted in many sources. It is your choice whether to cite your sources in footnotes or endnotes, or notes within the body of the paper (MLA style); just make sure you keep to one type of notes.

Bibliography. A listing (alphabetical by author’s last name) of ALL items consulted for the paper. This should be provided in addition to notes because there may be items in the bibliography that were important to the formation of the paper but never needed to be mentioned in the notes.

Make sure your paper is organized around your interpretation of the material; the paper should not consist merely of (correctly) footnoted sentences taken from other sources. Offer us your own original insights inspired by the material.

Style Manuals
You should consult a manual of writing style to deal with questions of format. Three are particularly recommended:


Earlier editions of the last two books are available in our library, as is the Chicago Manual (check in the reference section for all three). In addition, each is easily obtainable in bookstores (N.B., the Turabian and MLA Handbook are much cheaper than the Chicago Manual).

Each of these manuals has slightly (sometimes more than slightly) different ways of doing things such as footnote entries. You should feel free to choose whichever style manual suits you best, as long as you stick consistently with that one throughout the paper.

Assorted Writing Tips
In this Appendix you will find witty but wise guidelines for writing which were created by Austin Caswell, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University. Some will have more relevance for you than others, and there will be times when such things as passive voice (#2) and alliteration (#28) are very appropriate. You want to make sure your paper is written in a lively and active--but scholarly--style, and these maxims will help you to reach this goal.

Nitpicking Points
As Caswell notes in #7, be sure to supply diacriticals, i.e., accent marks in other languages: é, è, ê, and e are all separate letters in French, as are ø and ö in German, and you have often created another word in that language when you spell the word without the marks. At any rate, you have misspelled the word.

Béla Bartók, not Bela Bartok  Dvořák, not Dvorak  
Tannhäuser, not Tannhauser  Götterdämmerung, not Gotterdammerung  
Saint-Saëns, not Saint-Saens  François, not Francois
Use ellipses if you are cutting a passage out of a quote; this tells the reader that there is more to the quote than you are giving.

Original: “He played his jury on Monday in the Concert Hall. It went very well.”
With ellipses: “He played his jury on Monday . . . It went very well.”

When reprinting a quote in the body of the paragraph (3-4 short sentences or less), you can simply use quotation marks; when reprinting a larger quote, set it apart as follows: single-space, indented, and without quotation marks. (Except for block quotes, double-space the paper.)

When two separate words are combined to make an adjective, put a hyphen between them:
- Music of the twentieth century; twentieth-century music
- This opera consisted of one act; a one-act opera
- A composer who is well known; a well-known composer

If you use “however” in the middle of a sentence to set two clauses apart that could stand on their own, put a semicolon before the word instead of a comma:
- “He went over to his friend’s house; however, his friend wasn’t there.”
- Not: “He went over to his friend’s house, however, his friend wasn’t there.”

Avoid repeating the same word too many times in the same locale.

Use a variety of verbs in your writing; it’s very easy to rely too much on different versions of “to be” (is, was, were)—that makes the writing go faster but also deadens it.

When you use a pronoun (especially “it”), make sure that the antecedent—the word to which “it” refers—is clear to the reader.

As opposed to the way this guide is written, don’t use contractions—they’re too slangy for formal writing.

More Substantive Matters
You want to find the golden mean in discussing music. Don’t make your discussion so brief and/or abstract that the reader gets nothing out of them; use examples as necessary to illustrate your points. On the other hand, you don’t want to create what we call “road maps”—a blow-by-blow description of everything that happens in the piece (in the first measure the horn plays the first theme, then in m. 2 the violin does this, then in m. 3 the bassoon does this, etc.); such a description overwhelms the reader and is similarly unenlightening. Try to visualize how well you would understand the passage you just wrote if you didn’t know the piece and had only your prose passage to go on.

Although you should feel free to use examples, don’t use them simply as a padding device to get out of writing a page or two of prose.

Keep margins and font size reasonable; a teacher can tell when a margin is artificially wide or a font artificially big in order to make the paper have that much less writing!

Make your points clear: let the reader always know where you’re taking him or her from one moment to the next; make every sentence and paragraph connect logically with what came before and with what is coming after.

It’s best to write your rough draft one day, then go away and come back to it tomorrow (or the day after, if you can.)

Final Tips
Remember: to write a good paper, and to write well in general, takes practice and experience. Therefore, don’t be discouraged if your paper comes back with lots of marks and criticisms about your writing; it’s a necessary process to pass through on the way to achieving a good research and writing style. In some respects, writing a research paper is a skill, no less than ear-training. Someday, with practice, you’ll get there, and very possibly sooner than you think.
Start working on your paper early; DON’T put it off. To choose and research a topic thoroughly and write about it well takes time. A rush job will look and read like a rush job, and it will be graded accordingly. Besides, you won’t learn much for yourself doing the paper (let alone enjoy the experience). Always remember, a term paper is there for your learning experience first.

The faculty are always willing and able to look at rough drafts of your paper and go over them with you. In classes where a rough draft is not required, it is up to you to take the initiative to prepare one and get it to the professor WELL IN ADVANCE of the deadline for the final paper. It does no one any good if you bring in the draft two days before the final paper is due. The instructor might not be able to read it that day, and if there are substantial corrections to make you can’t make all of them in one evening.