

MUSICAL ANALYSIS WRITING GUIDE

THE CRITERIA

In writing your essay, the *only* thing you really need to do is fulfill the marking criteria. Let's look closely at what the criteria says.

The student evaluates music by thoroughly deconstructing the repertoire, and determining the manipulation of, and relationships between, identified musical elements and compositional devices, communicating detailed and substantiated judgments about how these relate to context and genre and the expressed style.

That's a bit wordy isn't it? Sometimes educational language is a bit more complicated than it needs to be. Let's try and simplify it.

The two most important words here are deconstruction and evaluation, in fact, that's the only two things required of your essay. You need to deconstruct the repertoire and then evaluate it.

To DECONSTRUCT means to identify:

- musical elements and how they've been used by the artist (pitch, rhythm, timbre etc)
- compositional devices (repetition, sequence, inversion, randomness, serialism, etc)

You should also identify if/how these two things relate to each other (for instance, maybe each time the music repeats the artist plays more softly?)

To EVALUATE means to make judgments about how everything above relates to:

- The songs context (time/place/history/production values etc)
- The songs genre (pop, rock etc)
- The songs or composers style (fun, sexy, epic, silly, carefree, intense etc)

DECONSTRUCTION (Don't just listen... "listen")

Usually when we listen to music, we listen *passively*. In other words, we're just letting the music soak in slowly the more often we hear it. We're not listening for anything in particular, just enjoying it. That's fine, but it won't help you write an essay. In order to deconstruct the music, you need to listen *actively*. That means you need to know what you're looking for before you begin listening.

A good method is to pick one musical element (pitch for instance) and listen to the entire song focusing on just that. Then listen again focusing on a different musical element. Make a list of everything you notice. By the time you've written notes on all the elements, you will have listened to the music heaps of times and will have hopefully started to form more complex opinions. These opinions will be the basis for your evaluations.

Unfortunately, a list of observations about the musical elements isn't an essay. Don't fall into the trap of simply making lists of musical facts. Eg: The key is G, the melody notes are from G major, it is in 4/4, The tempo is 130bpm. Unless you explain why those things are significant, why they contribute to the artist's vision or the listener's experience, they are meaningless facts.

EVALUATION (Find an angle)

To evaluate effectively, you need an *angle*, just like a journalist. You need to have opinions and be able to justify them. Here's an example of a raw opinion.

“The harmonic structure in Take Me Out by Franz Ferdinand shows more complexity than punk or grunge”

This statement might be true, but why? Where's the evidence? Without identifying musical elements, compositional devices and their relationships, this opinion carries no weight. Let's try again.

The following excerpt from the Franz Ferdinand exemplar paper (available on the MIC website) shows the same opinion but in this case it's been properly fleshed out and justified with evidence:

Harmonically the song (Take me out) stays in the key of Em, which is one thing that ties the two halves of the song together. All the chords are partial triads such as Em, D and G (see Figure #1) however some of them are “slash” chords with different bass notes such as Em/A and D/B in the first verse (0:07-0:33). The A major chords in the Prechorus don't belong in the key but when grouped with “Em” and “G” form a combination of chords that are quite common in rock. I should mention however that Em/A (A, E, G) could be interpreted as Am7, and that D/B (B, D, A) could be interpreted as Bm7. But most charts show them as slash chords, which probably reflects the simpler approach of many guitarists. However you name them, the way those chords are voiced between the instruments is a little more creative. Each guitar (including the bass) is playing single notes which blend together to create wider chord voicings that no single guitar could really play on it's own (see figure #2). This can probably be heard best in the first verse (bars 5 to 20) with big leaps. Cleverly thought out guitar parts like this are definitely a step beyond what you'd normally hear in Punk or Grunge.

Figure #1 – Take me out chords chart excerpt
(based on chords from www.ultimateguitar.com and aural transcription)

INTRO					
Em					
VERSE 1					
Em/A	D	G	D/B	Em	
Em/A	D	G	D/B	Em	
Em/A	D	G	D/B	Em	
Em/A	D	G	D/B	Em	
PRECHORUS					
G	A	Em	G	A	Em
G	A	Em			

Figure #2 – Take me out Verse tablature; guitars 1 & 2 (from www.ultimateguitar.com)

	Em/A	D	G	D/B	Em
Gtr 1	----- ----- -5-5-5-5-5-5-5-5- ----- -----	----- ----- -4-4-4-4-4-4-4-4S ----- -----	----- ----- =9--9--9--9--7-7-7-5- ----- -----	----- ----- ----- ----- -----	----- ----- -5--5--5--5--5----- ----- -----5--5--7--
Gtr 2	----- ----- ----- ----- -----	----- ----- -7-7-7-7-7-7-7-7- ----- -----	----- ----- -9-9-9-9-9-9-9-9- ----- -----	----- ----- -10-10-10-10-9-9-9-9- ----- -----	----- ----- -7--7--7--7--7--7--7--7-- ----- -----
Bass	----- -7-7-7-7-7-7-7-7- ----- -----	----- ----- ----- ----- -----	----- ----- -5--5--5--5--9-9-9-9- ----- -----	----- ----- ----- ----- -----	----- ----- -14-14-14-14-14-14-14-14- ----- -----

RIGHT OR WRONG?

In writing an essay, you may be worried about saying something and being wrong. The thing is, being right or wrong is not as important as justifying your opinion. Music is subjective (as you can tell from my example above), often there is no such thing as right or wrong. So argue away to your heart's content, as long as you can back it up.

BEGINNING MIDDLE AND AN END

Like any good essay, you should aim to have an intro, body and conclusion. However, please don't write the headings *INTRO, BODY & CONCLUSION* in your actual essay, it should just be obvious from your writing style. Also, don't feel you must have a separate section for your deconstruction and one for your evaluation, these two tasks should be interwoven throughout the essay. Have a closer look at the earlier written example in this guide and you'll get the idea.

You need to show that you can do more than just write observations, you need to show that you can THINK. Have fun, show some flare, let your personality shine through and be entertaining. Maybe you'll teach the teacher something?

THE ELEMENTS OF MUSIC

You've heard about them, you're supposed to write about them in your essay, but what are the elements of music?

- Duration
- Dynamics
- Harmony
- Melody
- Structure
- Texture
- Timbre

DURATION is all about time (long/short). It can refer to:

- The length of individual notes or even whole songs
- Beat and pulse
- Rhythmic patterns:
 - Notes, rests, duplets, triplets,
 - Time signatures like 3/4, 4/4, 6/8 etc
- Syncopation, polyrhythms
- Tempo
- Rhythmic features that belong with particular genres and styles

DYNAMICS is all about volume (loud/soft). It can refer to:

- The volume of individual notes or even whole songs
- Changes in volume; sudden (block dynamics) and gradual (crescendo, decrescendo)
- Accented notes
- Use of technology to control dynamics (compression, automation)
- Articulation
- Dynamic features that belong with particular genres and styles

MELODY is all about the *horizontal* arrangement of sound. I can refer to:

- A sequence of single notes (sung or played)
- The contour of the melody

- Patterns such as phrases, riffs, sequences, motifs
- Ornamentation or Embellishment
- Modulation
- Pitch bends, slides or electronic pitch adjustment
- Range and register
- Intonation
- Melodic features that belong with particular genres and styles

HARMONY is all about the *vertical* arrangement of sound. It can refer to:

- Chords such as triads, 7ths, 9ths, 11ths or 13ths
- Diatonic tonality such as major, minor and dominant
- Tension and resolution, consonance and dissonance
- Atonality
- Countermelodies
- Modal harmony
- Accompaniment styles
- Modulation
- Intonation
- Harmonic features that belong to particular genres and styles

STRUCTURE is all about sections of the music. It could refer to:

- Intro, Verse, Pre-Chorus, Chorus, Bridge, Middle eight, Collision, Instrumental solo, Ad lib, AABA form, Theme and Variation, Compound AABA form (A1, A2, B1, A3 etc..)
- Repetition, variety, contrast, development or unification
- Treatment of material such as samples and sequencing
- Well known forms such as 12 bar blues, verse and chorus, through composed, theme and variation
- The design of particular musical works such as rock opera or musicals
- Structural features that belong to particular genres and styles

TEXTURE is all about density. It may refer to:

- The number of instruments or tracks
- The way a recording has been mixed using effects such as reverb and delay
- Musical voicings
- The way an instrument's tone affects its timbre (distorted vs clean guitar)
- Musical textures such as monophonic, homophonic, polyphonic,
- Textural features that belong to a particular genre and style

TIMBRE is all about tone. It may refer to:

- The way particular instruments or voices sound
- Different tonal techniques used on an instrument (muting, fingertips, picks, bowing, scratching, tapping)
- Electronic altering of tone using EQ, effects, pedals etc.
- Tonal features that belong to particular genres and styles

COMPOSITIONAL DEVICES

Compositional devices are words or phrases that describe how the music was put together. They can describe common tricks or techniques used by composers, patterns that exist between parts or any meaningful structures that you might observe. While there are lots of existing terms for compositional devices, it's also OK to make up your own as long as it's well communicated.

Terms	Definitions
Canon	Where one or more voices imitate a leading melody/voice. The two or more parts will overlap. Eg frère Jacques
Call and response	Where one voice initiate an idea and another follows in a similar or slightly varied way melodically/rhythmically
Counter melody	A second melody (directly) above or below the main melody
Similar motion	Melody notes going in the same direction
Contrary motion	Melody notes going in the opposite direction
Cross rhythm/polyrhythm/hemiola	Two different rhythms used at the same time, eg 2 quavers in the melody and triplet quavers in the bass
Development	Changes/variations of motif and themes (imitation, sequence, inversion, fragmentation, augmentation, diminution)
Fragmentation	Breaking a theme into little bits in order to develop it
Extension	Developing a phrase or motif by making it longer
Imitation	Repetition by one or more different voices/instruments of a phrase
Inversion	Turning melody, rhythm, harmony, phrase, theme, motif upside down (reverse the order)
Sequence	Repetition of a musical phrase at a higher or lower pitch
Ostinato	A repeated accompaniment pattern that can be rhythmic or melodic, maintained throughout the section/piece
Repetition	Where a phrase is repeated immediately (exact)
Variation	Repetition with a slight change
Motif	A short theme that can be manipulated using other devices
Riff	Jazz/rock equivalent of ostinato
Voice leading	The technique of changing smoothly from one chord to another with as little movement as possible between the chord tones. Often used in Jazz, choir harmonies and string ensembles.
Transition	The shift from one musical idea or section to another. Transitions can be smooth or abrupt depending on what the composer is trying to achieve.