Title: Expanding Understanding of Musical Forms Through Scholarly Writing
Author: Brad Osborn
Affiliation: University of Kansas

Summary: A music history professor redesigns an upper-level musical composition class required for undergraduate music majors to include more written assignments in order to build a vocabulary for musical form and works.

Background:

Course Description
The course I have chosen to redesign for CHRP is Tonal Forms (MTHC 410)—an upper-level undergraduate course offered each fall, taken only by music majors, and only after they have completed all four semesters of the core music theory sequence. It is required for all music majors except for those on the MEMT (education and therapy) track. Typically, sections enroll 10–15 students. The course addresses the formal structures used in instrumental compositions of the 18th and 19th centuries by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Starting with the shortest forms, like the 8-measure units used in the opening theme of a piano sonata, we slowly work our way up to analyzing progressively longer units, culminating with the entire first movement of a string quartet, symphony, or concerto. By the end of the semester, I want students to gain a vocabulary that allows them to describe elements of musical form and to understand form both as a set of family resemblances among a set of similar musical works, as well as an aesthetic process unto itself.

Student Goals
- Writing Across the Curriculum: students will learn how to express what they know about musical form in written scholarly prose
- Standard Written English: students will gain mastery in the written dialect of academia
- Self- and Peer-Assessment: students will be able to assess what constitutes various levels of writing efficacy, and will be able to self-assess their own work.
- Revision and Improvement: Students will revise to improve between first and second drafts of individual papers, and will improve from one paper to the next.

Rationale
I should explain why I spend so much time thinking about writing in a music class. First, the students who take this course are the most musically advanced of our undergraduate population in the School of Music. While we enroll students interested in all aspects of the musical universe—those interested in teaching middle school band, those interested in therapeutic uses of music—the only students who take 410 are those pursuing degrees in the composition and performance of music. In the four years of teaching this class, I have run into very little trouble with student comprehension of the material.

Second, it strikes me that all of us in higher education are interested in having students write well. But this is something that most of us expect, something that we assume we do not need to

spend class time teaching. This "pass-the-buck" approach to expecting-not-teaching writing does not seem to be working. Informally, I have seen student writing skills (as well as reading comprehension) diminish over the past decade. While I am certainly not qualified to speculate on the causes of this problem, I have decided to carve out time in my curriculum devoted to improving it. This not only speaks to teaching writing across the curriculum, but also, since I'm teaching them specifically to write about music, to writing in the discipline (WID).

Implementation:

I implemented my new writing assignments in F2014. A sample description of such a writing assignment can be found here. The rubric on the final page of this project description will be discussed in the section under "student work."

Students in this first year demonstrated admirable musical acuity in the analysis portion of these assignments, but that acuity was met with inconsistent success in conveying their thoughts in prose. Many students, for example, created compelling diagrams demonstrating their grasp of the shape of a Mozart piano concerto. Yet, when they tried to put this into words, they resorted to a blow-by-blow description of the musical events in the order in which they happened. Few students were able to understand that a more compelling account of these events might focus on a few interesting passages that may defy expectations, and concisely shape a captivating account of how Mozart's alterations to these expectations create surprise.

Since I knew in F2014 that 410 was to be my target course for CHRP, I had the foresight to collect as many samples of student writing assignments as possible with an aim toward redesigning the prompts to improve student performance. I was able to collect all papers from about 6–7 students at all levels of achievement. I then used these as a baseline indicator when comparing them to the papers I received in F2015. In F2015 I used Blackboard to collect all papers from every student. My additional goal in F2015 was not only to track student improvement from F2014 to F2015, but also to track individual student performance in the three papers over the course of the semester.

In F2015 I implemented two new review processes that I've learned in part from my collaboration in CHRP. Before any of the first drafts were due, we spent a class period going through a "grade norming" game. I put the students in teams of 3, and each team was given the same paper from F2014 (author name omitted, of course). Using the same rubric that they would be graded on for their own papers, the students each graded the paper individually, then had 10 minutes to discuss the grade they gave the paper with the other members of their team. The team had to agree on a single grade for the paper. The team that came the closest to the actual grade I gave in F2014 won. I repeated this for two other papers. The three papers ranged from an A to a D, and students had no problem getting within one letter grade of the actual grade I gave. The theory behind this activity was that students would have hands-on experience with what would constitute an A grade, a B grade, and so on, for their own papers later in the semester.

Students then repeated this activity, but this time the three papers were the three team members' first drafts of the writing assignment. Using a similar process, team members gave each others' papers a grade, then discussed that grade and suggested room for improvement. The final draft was then due a week later.

Rather than marking up the paper copy in pen, or providing electronic written feedback on a document, I tried a new feedback system in which I recorded a 3–5 minute audio track where I critiqued the paper. An example of this can be heard, and is discussed, in the student work section. My goals for moving toward this audio feedback were twofold. First, the audio format

allowed me to speak out loud phrases that sounded awkward and suggest, in real time, room for improvement. Second, freed from the time and space constraints of paper and ink, I can provide more *positive* feedback to encourage good writing habits the students are already exhibiting. Essentially, this mimics an in-office meeting about the student's paper, but has the added benefit that the student can revisit my comments in preparation for their subsequent papers. To ensure that they did so, I grade a one-to-two paragraph written description of the things I outlined in this audio feedback that they would specifically improve on the next writing assignment (moving forward I may have them actually record this as an audio track and share it with me to preserve the medium). This last component is what I hoped would ensure upticks in individual student performance over the course of the semester. Comparing individual student improvement from F2014 (when I used written feedback) to F2016 might be indicative of the relative success of the audio feedback mechanism. Moving forward, I would also like to collect students' reactions to this audio feedback mechanism. Do they feel less threatened by it? Is it encouraging? Do they feel able to make specific changes based on my audio feedback? Would anyone prefer a traditional red-pen on paper version?

In F2015 I also revised the writing assignments themselves, and reduced the number from 4 to 3. I kept papers one (binary forms) and three (medial caesura). I then added a new third assignment that asked students to analyze a very strange sonata form from Haydn, several portions of which we had analyzed in the course pack in the first 10 weeks of the course. The biggest improvement, however, was the addition of a multi-parameter rubric, which subdivided (both for me and for the students) the different categories in which they would be assessed.
This rubric will be discussed in the following section.

Student Work:

Reflection on Student Work
In comparing student performance from F2014 to F2015, I found that there were too many variables to really assess how any one change affected the outcome. First of all, I changed the number of assignments to 4, instead of 3. This was done largely to make room in the schedule for the aforementioned writing pedagogy. Second, the assignments themselves were different. Of the 4 given in F2014, only 2 were retained for F2015 and 1 new assignment was added. The required length for all was reduced, from 250–350 words to 150–250 words.

Nevertheless, I thought that my writing pedagogy, and especially my new feedback mechanisms, would show a significant improvement. For example, one big change I made halfway through the F2015 semester was providing audio feedback on students' final drafts of these papers (I will refine this in F2016 by using the Voice-Thread application). The students will now not only hear my speaking voice reading parts of their paper, but will also be able to watch my cursor move over parts of the text, providing a multi-media feedback system.

I hoped that I might see improvement not only in terms of absolute scores between F2014 and F2015, but also in the level of improvement for an individual F2015 student over the course of the semester. While the data in Table 1a doesn't show much improvement in overall mean scores from F2014 to F2015, the distribution data in Table 1b does provide evidence that my writing pedagogy did help individual students improve over the course of the semester in F2015. Note that in F2014 the grade distribution worsened over the course of the semester, whereas in F2015 it got better initially from WA1 to WA2 (but not WA3, a point to which I'll return shortly).

The data in Table 2 do show a couple of things conclusively. The second paper (WA2) showed significant improvement from WA1 over the course of a single semester. The second paper is also the only paper in F2015 with a higher overall score than in F2014. An example of student work for WA2 in F2015 appears here, and the audio feedback I provided for this paper can be heard here. A consistent problem in these papers is that students are providing "book report" style summaries, rather than arguing a position. You can hear in the audio feedback that I'm rather apologetic about calling the student out on this. Next year, I'd like to improve the way I present such feedback: honoring the student for a style of writing that has, likely, earned them high praise in high school, while at the same time stating clearly what kind of writing is now expected from them in order to earn that same A.

The second thing that Table 2a shows conclusively is that WA3 reversed any improvement F2015 students had made from WA1 to WA2. A number of these inconsistencies could be helped by tracking individual student data not only for their aggregate score on a paper, but for the individual student's component scores in four categories of the weighted rubric I used to grade papers in F201. I will track this information in F2016.

Three examples of student work for WA3 in F2015, and an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, can be seen here. My initial assessment of the "WA3 problem" is that students did indeed continue to improve as writers, but that the assignment, newly created for F2015, was

substantially more difficult than WA1 or WA2. This assignment asks the students to analyze the form of a particularly thorny string quartet (Haydn, op. 76/2, I) and, ultimately, determine whether or not it's an example of sonata form. I'm not all interested, in the end, about a "yes" or "no" right answer (scholars make arguments for both in this piece), but rather how effectively a student can argue for some answer. These three samples from WA3 reveal that Haydn's string quartet is a difficult piece to analyze. Even at a point in the semester where students have completed their 6-week unit on sonata form, the fact that this piece gives scholars difficulty suggests that perhaps it is too difficult for undergraduates to tackle.

The Multi-Parameter Rubric

Having spent a lot of time designing this multi-parameter rubric, I'd like to explain its construction a little more. The combined paper score is just an average of their four scores shown in the four columns. I segregated the scores this way because, in F2014, too many students were getting C, D, or even F scores because the quality of the written communication was so poor. The multi-parameter rubric helps to mitigate low performance in any one category. Another benefit of the multi-parameter rubric is that it helps to clarify the student's grade. They can see, for example, what score they earned in each of the four categories.

I am looking forward to seeing F2016 student performance in the individual categories of this rubric. Rather than make a number of huge changes, as I did between F2014 and F2015, this will be a year of refining what I've already done. I hope that this will expose fewer variables and really allow me to see how my changes in writing pedagogy and feedback mechanisms have improved student performance from F2015 to F2016.

Moving forward with the rubric, I hope to make it a more dynamic, student-influenced document each semester. Like creating rules for a classroom, I think that students might have more "buy-in" with regards to the rubric if they are given the chance to modify it based on experience. I am thinking about linking this rubric-modifying activity with the grade-norming activity. After assessing three papers using the rubric, students might be asked to reflect on how effective the rubric was at identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. I would then ask the students to identify places where the rubric might be slightly re-calibrated to better assess good argumentative writing.

Reflections:

My Perception of the Results
My perception of these changes in my approach to writing pedagogy has been positive. It seems that the students have a much clearer idea of what constitutes good writing, which I attribute to the grade-norming activity we do before the first assignment. Despite the fact that the grading data do not necessarily support this, I found that the students in F2015 craft better arguments in their writing than those in F2014. However, since I did not develop the rubric—which specifically calls for this sort of writing—until F2015, I will have to wait until F2016 to really compare grading data. In the end, it may be my grading practices that need refinement, rather than student performance.

It has dawned on me only of lately that my original impetus for including writing in this course (*teaching*, rather than expecting) still needs to be applied more specifically to the process of learning how to create a good argument. I need to actively teach this specific skill, not just expect it. In the future, I'd like to include some assignments that ask students to: 1) read good examples of argumentative scholarly writing; 2) reflect on what exactly in the rhetoric made this effective, and 3) use the rubric to assess the efficacy of this writing style in their peers' writing; 4) finally, be self-critical about their ability to create these sorts of arguments in their own writing.

Students' Perception of the Writing Assignments
The students in F2015 found the grade norming activity useful and enjoyable. We all know that undergraduates like competition. Having groups of three compete against each other to determine as accurately as possible the grade a certain paper earned last year proved useful. The debates that ensue are always spirited, and students are able to articulate clearly why they think a paper deserved a certain grade. This grade norming activity also results in the students' increased familiarity with the rubric. In turn, I find that the students really understand why they earned the grade they did on a certain assignment. We have all had students complain of "unfair" grading, but their interaction with the rubric has all but ceased this.

What I've Learned by Teaching MTHC 410 for 3 Years
Teaching this course every fall for the past three years has taught me a lot. Spending the past three years thinking about ways to revise the course has taught me even more. Having only taught at one-year gigs before arriving at KU in 2013, I find that this "immersion" within a certain course that I teach every year is what leads to these sort of teaching innovations. My Chair recently asked me, moving forward, what sorts of new courses I'd like to teach and, conversely, if there are any courses I'm currently teaching that I would like to cease. Sure, I have some I like more than others. But what I like more than the variety is the immersion. Ultimately, no matter much you plan and refine year to year, I find that so much depends on the individual students in the class that semester, and that you can only plan so much. Good teaching is, ultimately, about balancing preparation and spontaneity.

Moving Forward (F2017 and beyond)
Having spent the better part of these three years in MTHC 410 thinking about the writing

assignments, I hope to have settled on some practices and procedures at the end of this three year period. I will continue to collect specific data on those writing assignments, and would love to have 5 years of individual rubric-component scores to analyze.

Moving forward, I hope to apply this same level of focus to the composition assignment the students complete over the course of the semester. Over the course of the semester in F2105, students composed an entire first movement of a string quartet or piano sonata. There are five checkpoints along the way where I, and their fellow students, can track their progress. I am planning to use this assignment again in F2016 and every year after it, but would like to think more about ways to refine it. I'd like to see the students do more to integrate their performance and/or improvisation within this composition assignment. For example, instead of only writing for string quartet or piano, what if I allowed them to write for any ensemble that could be formed from the students in our class? This way, we could perform all of them live, and use those performances to inform the ways in which we refine and edit our compositions. Likewise, what if I had the students improvise several different themes, transitions, and codas, record those improvisations, and use those as a starting place for composing? This would probably yield more musical results than students just sitting down with pencil and paper to begin their composition.

Finally, one of my goals moving forward in the coming years is to include music written by female contemporaries of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. This project is fraught with several obstacles. I will need to find these pieces, transcribe them, commission good recordings, and integrate these into my course pack. Ultimately, it makes the most sense to host these examples on an open-access website, since a version of this course is taught at virtually every music school in the country. Though these are serious obstacles that will take several years to complete, it is too important a project to let go to the wayside. I believe that these hurdles may be overcome through a grant that provides for significant work time and collaboration with other scholars.