

This was initially generated in 1998 (if not four or five years earlier) for use in a University of Minnesota graduate seminar/proseminar in recent writings in musicology and music theory. I revised it at least once again in 2008, probably in the context of a Yale graduate seminar, and before posting it here I reordered some of the items, changed a few words, and added three or four parentheticals.

James Hepokoski
1998, rev. 2008, 2015

ANALYZING PROFESSIONAL WRITING ON MUSIC

Who is the author and what is his/her background of experience and authority in this field?

What is the scholarly reputation, tone, and general point-of-view of the essay's vehicle (the journal, the essay-collection, the series, etc.)? Does that vehicle have an agenda or an interest in publishing (only?) writings of this kind?

What is the question that the author is trying to answer? Within the context of the essay, why is this considered a sufficiently worthy problem? What's at stake? Why should we care? Is this issue addressed, or is it only implicit?

Into which ongoing conversation is the written piece intervening? How extensive has that conversation been? (Indeed, is the extent of the preceding conversation even acknowledged?)

Where are the structural divisions or breaks in the essay? Are the sections properly ordered? What is the strategy of their ordering?

What are the essay's key words and terms?

Does the author buttress the argument with the most primary sources available (original documents, original languages, etc.), or is he or she relying largely on somebody else's prior processing of those sources?

Is there obviously relevant evidence that the author is ignoring in order to further his/her own particular argument? Are the issues at hand simplified in order to buttress a preformulated conclusion? (Suspicious of cherry-picking; confirmation bias?)

Are non-English-language sources, if relevant, left unexamined? If so, why? Or is this a discussion involving only the English-language community and its publication traditions?

From which direction, if any, is criticism of this essay likely to come? Could the author have anticipated and forestalled this criticism? How?

Could another scholar look at the same evidence/piece/style and come up with significantly differing views? Or does the evidence, by and large, lead "inevitably" to the conclusion made here?

Is the author fair to other points of view? Or are others' positions misstated, simplified, or caricatured in order to facilitate the task of dismissing them?

If the essay is primarily an argument on behalf of a certain mode of interpretation—a style of hermeneutics, a way of reading—from which grounds does that argument spring? How and why has the author chosen those grounds as opposed to the many others that are available? How convincing is the author's choice of those grounds?

Can we read below the surface of the prose in order to root out the unstated foundational convictions? What are the assumptions that generate the argument at hand, that make possible its style and details? Are they defensible? fully acknowledged? Pay attention to the tactics of name-dropping: are "authorities" cited whose unquestioned, ready acceptance (the acolyte syndrome) should be problematized more than it is here? Who? Why? On what grounds? At bottom, every article or essay is driven by one or two generating assumptions or convictions. These may or may not be directly stated. Find them. Assess them.

Is the complexity of the author's treatment adequate to the complexity of the issue at hand, or does it treat a complex issue more reductively, more simply than is appropriate? Beyond its manifest content any sample of writing also serves to reveal the author's opinion about the breadth of knowledge and sophistication of thought needed to grasp the piece, style, or cultural problem being addressed. While usually tacit, this message often speaks more loudly than does the content at hand. The unstated implication is unavoidably: "The sophistication that I, the author, possess is what I regard as the level of adequacy required to deal with this topic." Do you agree with that author?

Thus: How does the author wish to present himself or herself? What does the author want you to think of him/her by the end of the essay? Which strategies are pursued to accomplish this end? Bluntly put: One subtext of every piece of writing is: "Let me show you what kind of person I am." Every such product, a performative act, is also a strategic act of professional positioning, a bid for prestige within a politicized, much-conflicted field. Tone, stylistic register, and choice of language are telling indicators that sometimes strive to trump content per se. A central issue in play is typically one of disciplinary politics and a jockeying for recognition. (We may publicly pretend to lament this, but there it is.)

For whom, then, does the author seem to be writing? Who is the expected audience? (All musicologists? all theorists? some musicologists? some theorists? a general audience? an interest group?) Is the author allying himself or herself with a "traditional" group of scholars or an "innovative" or "challenging" group? With which other writers in the field does the author most wish to situate himself or herself? Why? Schmooze-factors: Who are the implicit allies, the boosters; the in-group; the out-group? Which banner is being flown? Just who (apart from the writer, of course) are imagined to be dans le savoir?

Does the author rely heavily on the rhetoric of persuasion or the rhetoric of group-solidarity? Are there exaggerations? overstatements? If so, for which purposes are they put there?

Finally, how difficult would it be for you, the reader, to write this essay? What would it take in terms of expertise, research, prose ability, and so on?