

## Gradus ad Parnassum: Writing the DMA Document

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The following is an incremental plan—like the steps to Parnassus—that should help you select a topic and write a proposal for your DMA document.

**1. Broad topics.** To decide on a topic, try this exercise:

Jot down three topics that interest you and that you think you'd like to pursue in detail. Flesh out each topic a bit. Ask yourself about its

- a. relationship to what you already know
- b. broader ramifications
- c. the tools you would need to answer further questions about it

Write informally on each without worries about writing style. Allowing your imagination and your musical training to take flight, write a few lines about each topic.

**2. Narrowing.** For each of your topics, ask three questions that interest you.

Example: Let's say your topic is Beethoven. You might ask:

- 2a. At what point in his career did Beethoven become deaf?
- 2b. What are some of the most important pieces Beethoven wrote after becoming deaf?
- 2c. Does the fact that Beethoven was deaf affect the way we think of his music?

**3. More narrowing.** "Interrogate" each of the three questions in greater detail. For example:

- 3a. How might the question I have posed be divided into 3-4 subcategories of inquiry?
- 3b. Can any one of these subcategories be broken down further? Ideally, you will identify a manageable "problem." Around this problem, you'll form an *argument*, that is, a point of view.
- 3c. List any concerns or problems you might confront. Consider a possible advisor and committee.
- 3d. Don't overlook the personal. Keep asking: *why* does this topic appeal to me? Could I live with it for many months? Do I have the necessary skills for this project? These include foreign languages, availability of sources, compatibility of your personal time-table with the demands of the topic.

Do this additional "narrowing" for each of your three topics.

**4. Finding Sources.** A paper depends on good sources. Part of your work is to engage with others' reflections. For each topic and its accompany series of "narrowing" questions, find three relevant sources. Provide a bibliographic citation for each source and a brief annotation that shows the source's relevance to the question posed. Use Chicago format (consult cheat-sheets provided in MUS 830).

Remember: as you track down sources, you are seeking out the company you will be keeping for a good many

months. Do you like the authors you've found? If they strike you as boring, move on! There are plenty of authors out there.

**5. Commitment.** By now you are probably drawn to one of your topics, with its "narrowing" questions. Find 3-4 more sources for that topic only. Begin to elaborate on the following:

- 5a. What, exactly, is the question you will be addressing?
- 5b. Who else has thought about it?
- 5c. How can previous insights be enhanced or modified?
- 5d. What broader issues is it connected to?

Example: Let's go back to Beethoven. The string quartet you're playing with this semester is working on op. 132, which you and colleagues find perplexing. You will be glad to learn that many others have seen the work this way. At the same time, you will deepen your interpretation of this work if you understand the role the late quartets have played in our understanding of Beethoven. (This is the "broader issue.")

NOTE: the student's initial interest in Beethoven has suddenly ballooned into a huge topic. At this point, the adviser would encourage the student to narrow further.

**6. More Sources.** Continue finding and annotating additional sources. For your proposal, you will need around twenty-five. Again, use Chicago format.

**7. Proposing.** Draft your proposal as described below. (Note: The excerpts here are from student efforts.)

## DOCUMENT PROPOSAL MODEL

Although there is no formula for writing a document proposal, you might consider the following as a possible roadmap.

*Introductory paragraph.* Explain your topic (research problem) in broad outlines.

Example [for a document in music history on Charles Mingus]: "The boundaries between classical music and jazz have long confounded scholars and audiences alike . . ."

You might end the paragraph with the thought, "Yet few scholars have explored this phenomenon in terms of an individual musician. . . ." or something to that effect.

*Paragraphs 2 and 3.* Bibliographic overview. In one or two paragraphs, describe what sort of work has already been done on your topic or in closely related areas. This section will give the reader confidence (1) that you have command of the literature on your subject and (2) that you are prepared to engage with existing scholarship. These two paragraphs should *bristle* with footnotes, showing that you have become intimately acquainted with all those sources you've painstakingly gathered. At the conclusion of this section, the reader should be aware of the gap (lacuna) in the literature that your document will fill.

Note that footnotes are not given in the examples in this handout.

Example [for a document on film score composers during the McCarthy period]: "To date, there are but a handful of studies on music during the McCarthy period. In her 1997 doctoral dissertation, Jennifer DeLapp discusses the effects of McCarthyism on Aaron Copland [footnote]. In another dissertation from the 1990s, Donald C. Myer devotes a chapter to McCarthyism in relation to the NBC Symphony [footnote]. In addition, a few scholars have dealt with McCarthy's impact on visual artists [footnote, two or three sources]. Others deal specifically to Hollywood, the aspect of American culture that may well have been most deeply affected

by the senator from Wisconsin [footnote, two or three sources]. Yet there is no study of the relationship between film music and the political upheavals of this period.”

This portion can also include studies you consider models or theoretical bases for your document.

*Paragraph 4.* Enter—your document! At this point, you “announce” how you will explore the research problem stated at the outset. (Remember, in the proposal you have not yet solved the problem, and therefore an “answer” is not expected at this point.)

Example: “This document explores the Capuchin aesthetic [you’ve just described it] in musical terms. In addition to consulting the archival sources described above, I will also observe the choir rehearsals at [Fill in name] Monastery . . .”

*Paragraphs 5 and 6.* Chapter breakdown. This will show that you have conceived of a logical order in which to explore your topic. Tell the reader what the main topics will be and how you envision addressing them. One sentence per chapter is usually fine. “Chapter 1, “Introduction,” sets forth . . . etc.”

For a longer DMA document (ninety pages) a five-chapter layout works well. Chapters 1 and 5, “Introduction” and “Conclusions,” need not be more than five pages each. Essentially they serve as “bookends”; chapter 1, moreover, is simply a fleshed-out version of your proposal. Every good document has a “core” chapter, where the really original ideas unfold. In the five-chapter format, this is usually chapter 4. Chapter 2 offers needed background. Chapter 3, which is a bit more flexible, links the background of chapter 2 to the “core” material in chapter 4. Of course, variations are possible, depending on your topic.

Chapter format will vary depending on the length of the document. For example, a forty-page document may be divided into two sections, roman numerals I and II, with “bookend” passages as described above.

Your proposal should be no more than three pages, double-spaced. You should also attach a detailed outline and an *unannotated* bibliography of at least twenty-five sources. (Some advisors require an annotated bibliography. Check with your advisor to see if they want you to have one.) You must also come up with a working title. See the checklist at the end of this handout.

#### **PRACTICAL DETAIL:**

Remember the 1/3 + 1/3 + 1/3 formula (research, writing, editing) discussed in MUS 830. The final third, editing, is usually the least familiar to students. Yet you can save yourself a great deal of time if you print out and edit portions of your work before turning them in to your advisor. As you write the final drafts, use the Editorial Checklists distributed in MUS 830. Allow time also for inputting figures and musical examples, cleaning up footnotes, and other clerical work. This kind of work always takes longer than one expects.

It is also helpful to purchase—and read—the following manual, which has inspired generations of writers:

Strunk, William Jr. and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. New York and London: Macmillan, 2000. Paperback ISBN: 0-205-30902-X .

Certainly there will be frustrating times ahead. But it is perfectly reasonable to think of eventually publishing an article version of your work. If you aspire to university-level teaching, this can greatly enhance your employment prospects. Most important will be the adventure of getting to know your own voice as a writer and of saying exactly what *you* want to say—with elegance and polish.

Good luck!

**DMA DOCUMENT PROPOSAL:  
Checklist**

1. proposal text, not to exceed three double-spaced pages, with footnotes in Chicago style
2. bibliography of twenty-five sources, unannotated or annotated, depending on committee's request and in Chicago style
3. detailed outline
4. verification of committee's approval of proposal