

Guidelines for Writing a Theory Paper

John Morrison

As with all essays, the general format of a theory paper should be to expose a thesis in the opening paragraph, and follow up that thesis throughout the body of the paper with points of support. A conclusion should follow, in which the thesis is reaffirmed and possibly extended.

Opening statement

In a theory paper, one should not waste the reader's time with unnecessary biographical or extraneous personal or historical information about the composer. Likewise, unless particularly relevant to the task at hand, one should not spend time generalizing about the formal type of a composition. Of course, if the paper is focussed on one of these topics, and one feels such information to be critical to understanding what you have to say, then of course expend effort in laying out necessary foundations.

If an assignment has been made to focus on a particular topic, one must state clearly what the topic is, why you have chosen it or what its relevance is to your pursuit. The thesis itself is a well-defined point of view, an analytical finding which you will defend in the body of your paper. Something of a quick overview of the topic's operation in the piece you have analyzed is suitable to follow the statement of a thesis. That overview will give the reader a sense of the way your thesis will generate ramifications as you follow it through, hopefully stirring the reader's interest without making outlandish or completely unsupported claims. Some kind of claims must be made, and the full support is delayed until the body of the paper.

Body

Given a solid thesis, the paper should virtually organize itself around the strength of the idea. Spend time thinking about how to logically organize the material so that this is the case. Often, the presentation of analysis will be other than chronological due to the stronger need to follow up the implications of the thesis. Description of musical content is a necessity, but one must be constantly aware that description is not in itself analysis. Always take care to keep lengthy description under control, guiding the reader through analytical points based on the description, and hopefully to larger observations based on that description and those smaller points.

One should be especially careful not to confuse interpretation with analysis. To maintain that a composer intends to represent something specific with music, and related possibilities for drifting into the extramusical, is conjecture. Conjecture may have a place in an analytical paper, but one must be able to present it as such, with disclaimers to that effect.

Conclusion

The last paragraph should be a summary conclusion of the thesis defense that constitutes the body of the paper. The conclusion may very well be little more than a restatement of the thesis in slightly more confident tone, or it may take the thesis a few steps further, drawing on the strength of argument carried by the body of the paper.