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# From Homer to Hip-Hop: Using Popular Music to Teach Composition

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From Homer to Hip-Hop: Using Popular Music to Teach Composition

By

Rebecca Kraegel

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department of  
English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

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College of Humanities & Social Sciences  
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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of  
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the Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
in the Department of English

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From Homer to Hip-Hop: Using Popular Music to Teach Composition

By: Rebecca Kraegel

July 14, 2012

Chapter One: The History of Popular Music in the Classroom

*“The problem of getting the freshman to write something he cares about...continues to be the biggest obstacle in a first-year English program.”*

Wrote teacher Steven Carter. In 1969.

In more than forty years, not much has changed: engaging students remains one of the biggest challenges composition teachers face. Frequently, students are indifferent about assigned topics, and as a result, they are also indifferent about the writing process. Because capturing students' attention is crucial to teaching them how to write, teachers should design assignments with students' interests in mind. One of the best ways teachers can encourage students to write about something they care about is to use popular culture, particularly music, as a basis for writing assignments.

Literature teachers have been using popular music in their high school and college classrooms since the 1960s. Carter was one of the first to write about the idea, but many teachers experimented with it and published articles about the results in journals. These early articles frequently promoted the use of lyrics by the Beatles because they were the first popular band whose lyrics were considered artistic enough to be studied as literature, alongside poetry. Textbooks in the 1960s and 1970s often included lyrics, demonstrating the affinity between

lyrics and poetry. For example, *Beowulf to Beatles: Approaches to Poetry*, published in 1972, intersperses Beatles lyrics with poems to demonstrate literary concepts (Pichaske). In fact, literature is the focus of all of the early published suggestions of how to incorporate popular music in the classroom curriculum, even those that are presented as writing assignments. Fred Kroeger provides another early example in an article about a music-related assignment that connected with students in his classes. While Kroeger offers his idea as a writing assignment, he treats the lyrics as literature.

Articles by Kroeger, Carter, and other early advocates of the use of popular music reflect how teachers taught at the time. In the 1960s and 1970s, composition classes were rarely differentiated from literature classes. Composition teachers used literature to teach writing, and assignments using popular music were literature-based, treating song lyrics as poetry. Identifying themes and explaining imagery were the focus of most composition assignments. Even though English teachers incorporated a wider variety of popular songs into their curricula during the 1970s and 1980s – more artists were considered classroom-worthy – the way lyrics were used did not really change.

As the field of composition developed, however, teachers and scholars generally agreed that literature did not belong in a rhetoric-based classroom. When the composition curriculum changed, popular music assignments based on literature did not fit the new rhetorical model, but few teachers or scholars redesigned them as tools to teach writing. As a result, most of the popular music-related assignments that are readily available to teachers today are literature-based; the assignments found by searching the Internet are similar to the assignments used in the 1970s: comparing poems and lyrics and using lyrics to demonstrate characteristics of poetry.

Because scholars and teachers have made little effort to rethink how to use popular music to teach writing, writing teachers are overlooking an important avenue for capturing students' attention. If you don't think that music is integral in the lives of most college students, try to count the number of students wearing headphones while walking across campus at class change. It would be far easier to count the number of students who aren't wearing them. Popular music in the literature classroom may be an old idea, but it's one that needs to be updated for use in today's composition classroom in order to take advantage of students' interest in music.

Teachers have assumed for decades that music-based assignments are a positive experience for students, but little research has been done on students' opinions. For this thesis, I surveyed a class of students who had recently completed an argument-based writing assignment designed around popular music to find out what they thought about it. I also explore the literature and research that has been published on the use of popular music in English classes, both literature and composition. Many teachers are unaware that a significant number of today's popular songs are suited to classroom use and that students listen to songs from the entire rock era, not just current music, so I explain why teachers need to consider using popular music, not only to teach literature, but also to teach writing. Finally, I include writing assignments that are based on popular music. Teachers can use these as they are written or adapt them to their particular situation and needs.

Just as Steven Carter bemoaned forty years ago, engaging students in composition classes is a difficulty all teachers must contend with. Using popular music to create opportunities for students to connect with writing is an excellent way to overcome their apathy.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature on Using Popular Culture, Including Music, in the Classroom

I know from personal experience that students enjoy music, but two scholars, Krystine Irene Batcho and Daniel J. Levitin, have studied the effects of music extensively. Both provide evidence about the strong emotional connection between people and the music they listen to. Batcho, who has studied nostalgia and reminiscences, and Levitin, who is a neuroscientist, come from divergent backgrounds, but they reach the same conclusion through their research: music is integral to people's sense of identity. In Batcho's article, "Nostalgia and the Emotional Tone and Content of Song Lyrics," she argues for people's strong emotional connections to songs, particularly those they grew up with. She says being nostalgic is a positive thing because it "enhances the sense of connectedness to others" (17). While most people know that music is strongly linked to a sense of nostalgia and that songs can bring back emotions experienced years before, Batcho's study provides psychological evidence for this nearly universal phenomenon.

Daniel J. Levitin provides similar evidence in his book *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature*. Levitin's experience is unique. He was a music producer for many years before he became a scientist. He has the practical experience on which to base his research, and that experience also helps him connect to readers. As director of the Laboratory for Musical Perception, Cognition, and Expertise at McGill University, he studies connections between music and the brain. Levitin's book provides a scientific basis for my argument that popular music should be used to teach writing. In his book, he interviews many successful songwriters, and their insight has helped me explore connections between the writing process in composition students and songwriters, connections that are valuable not only to understanding theory, but also to designing assignments. Levitin also argues that songs were the

first verbal communication between humans and that they predate the development of language. The appreciation for music, according to Levitin, is hardwired into human DNA, and therefore intrinsic to humans and the cultures they develop.

While Batcho and Levitin write in general terms about how attached people are to music, other scholars provide information that is more specific to using popular culture and music in the composition classroom. In the late 1960s, Fred Kroeger and Steven Carter wrote some of the first articles about using popular music to teach writing, with a focus is on using lyrics as literature. Kroeger notes that the “great problem” of freshman composition is to find topics that are “fresh” and interesting to students, and he argues that using popular song lyrics is a good way to connect with them (338). He describes an assignment he has used in class, a rhetorical analysis of two songs with opposing viewpoints (338-40). Steven Carter devotes an entire article to explaining why and how to use Beatles’ songs in class. He writes that the Beatles’ popularity means that students are familiar with their lyrics in a way they are not familiar with George Orwell or Jane Austen, something he describes as an “advantage” in connecting with them (229). While Carter does not offer an assignment as detailed as Kroeger’s, he critiques many Beatles’ songs and offers general ideas about how they could be used to teach literary concepts and the idea of comparison-contrast. Carter is dismissive of other music of the time, but writes that the Beatles are different because they have “transcended” the “wasteland of popular music” (229). This is a judgment about the value of various music that Carter cannot defend (he does not really try), but his high opinion of the Beatles was shared by many of the teachers who started to use popular music in English classrooms in the late 1960s. Many early articles discuss songs by the Beatles, and a poetry textbook called *Beowulf to Beatles* was published in 1972. It uses popular

songs lyrics to demonstrate metaphor, imagery, allusion, meter, and many other aspects of poetry.

The idea of using popular culture and popular music as teaching tools continued to be explored throughout the 1970s. Marjorie Smelstor and Carol Weiher offer popular culture as “a new way to teach writing skills” (46) in their article, “Using Popular Culture to Teach Composition,” published in 1976. They are effusive about using popular culture, contrasting students’ interest in familiar topics with their lack of interest in unfamiliar topics (42). Although Smelstor and Weiher discuss assignment ideas using advertising, television, movies, newspapers, magazines, and bestselling books, they mention music only briefly (42).

Roslyn Z. Weedman also writes about mass culture without mentioning music in “Mass Appeal: Pop Culture in the Composition Classroom.” While it is impossible to know why these authors left music out of their articles, it may be because their articles focused on composition, and at the time, popular music was being used to teach literature, not writing. It is interesting that Weedman’s article is a review of literature on the topic, dating back to 1969, which indicates that even though music was commonly used in English classrooms in the 1970s and 1980s, it was not being used to teach writing, or it would have been mentioned in her literature review.

The widespread use of popular culture in classrooms resulted in backlash and debate. For example, in “Bait/Rebait: Pop Culture Has an Important Place in the English Classroom,” a point/counterpoint column in *The English Journal*, Edmund J. Farrell, and Charles L. Davis face off on the issue. Davis disparages what he sees as the mistake of allowing students to focus on popular culture, something he describes as “watching movies, writing journals, and analyzing last night’s broadcast of *Happy Days*” (9). He explains that the use of popular culture in the classroom teaches students to continue to be adolescents rather than teaching them to begin to

grow up and join the adult world, where “writing clearly and sensibly is a skill an adult might find useful” (9). He goes on to attack the idea that in order to learn something a student must first be interested in it, saying that teachers are responsible for making information interesting to students, and that furthermore, students must learn it whether or not they are interested in it, something they cannot do if they are not exposed to new ideas. Davis sums up with this statement: “There is a point where the student must become relevant to society. It is not likely that society will change to become relevant to the student” (12). Davis’ point about narcissism and prolonged adolescence is amazingly prescient and describes problems teachers are dealing with in the classroom more than twenty-five years later, specifically with millennial students. However, arguments by other scholars who disagree are more convincing.

In “English 101: Composition Students, Popular Culture, and Discourse Communities,” Daniel A. Clark discusses the disconnect between students’ academic lives and their everyday lives (225), a disconnect that studies have shown is biggest between students and the content of their general education courses (234). Composition courses are not only general education courses, but also they are usually *required* general education courses that many students have no interest in (225). In part, Clark blames the university’s “[emphasis on] the importance...of ‘high’ culture,” which he calls a “limited view of the culture” (224). His solution is to embrace the use of popular culture in the classroom, particularly in the composition classroom. According to Clark, “students who can see the connections between themselves and their subjects and can forge new connections are going to benefit most from their education” (235). Assignments based on topics that are familiar to students, such as popular culture, help students forge these connections. In Clark’s view, using popular culture achieves much more than increasing

students' interest in their coursework; it improves their education by showing them how to integrate their own experience into the academic discourse community (235).

Gerald Graff addresses the same topic in his essay, "Hidden Intellectualism." He claims that any subject can result in a thoughtful and meaningful discussion, including popular culture. Like Clark, Graff argues that a wall exists between topics used in the classroom and topics students encounter and care about in their "real lives." Students do need to read great literature in order to learn critical thinking and writing, but he maintains that students "would be more prone to take on intellectual identities if we encouraged them to do so first on subjects that interest them rather than ones that interest us" (199). Once students have learned concepts using familiar topics, they can more easily adapt those concepts to unfamiliar material.

Kermit E. Campbell and Geoffrey Sirc also provide evidence that using popular music in assignments acts as a bridge between students and their coursework, particularly in writing. Both have written widely about using popular music, specifically hip-hop music, to teach composition. Campbell sees the use of rap and hip-hop as a challenge to the white middle class-ness of the composition classroom. In his article, "There Goes the Neighborhood: Hip Hop Creepin' on a Come Up at the U," Campbell criticizes teachers who "[turn] a deaf ear to a generation increasingly shaped by the...rhetoric of hip-hop" (329). He argues that the "middle-class whiteness" of teachers and universities continues to dominate the classroom and that not acknowledging race is a mistake. The popularity of hip-hop continues to increase, not just among non-white students, but among all students. Campbell offers general arguments for teaching popular music, but he also offers specific reasons to teach hip-hop, beyond just engaging students. Any assignments that include popular culture, including music from any era, tend to be

popular with students, but hip-hop currently dominates music culture, and therefore should not be ignored.

In numerous articles that are considered seminal in the field, Geoffrey Sirc strongly recommends the use of hip-hop music in the writing classroom. His “Never Mind the Tagmemics: Where are the Sex Pistols?,” published in 1997, argues for a return to the rebellious attitude exhibited by many English instructors in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Just one year after the Sex Pistols article, Sirc wrote “Never Mind the Sex Pistols: Where’s 2Pac?” a reference to Tupac Shakur, a popular rap artist at the time. Both Sirc and Campbell maintain that comparing a classic rock song to poetry is not enough. Hip-hop, and to a lesser degree, gangsta rap, have become the dominant cultural influences in the past ten years. In order to engage students, teachers need to meet them where they are, and right now, where they are is entranced with hip-hop music and culture.

Jeff Rice would agree. He recommends using hip-hop as a “model” for students to emulate when writing argumentative essays. In “The 1963 Hip-Hop Machine: Hip-Hop Pedagogy as Composition,” Rice compares putting together the pieces of an argumentative essay to the way hip-hop composers pull pieces of music and lyrics together to create a “new” song, via a process called sampling, which is familiar to nearly all current freshman writing students (454). Rice explains how to use the idea of sampling in hip-hop songs to help students understand how to “[synthesize] unlike material in order to construct an argument” (469). His model suggests many possible assignments that would allow teachers to use music that is familiar to students to demonstrate how to create an effective argument.

Few articles in the literature include composition assignments, rather than literature assignments. However, Thelma Altschuler offers three assignment ideas in her article, “Using

Popular Media to Achieve Traditional Goals,” which was published in 1968. Her advice, specifically addressed to writing teachers, is about using visual media rather than music. The assignments leave the specific film or television show up to the teacher, but Altschuler offers numerous options and describes not only the assignments, but also their purpose. One is suited to persuasive and evaluative essays; one is suited to descriptive essays; and one is suited to narrative and critical essays (342). The article is followed by a long list of short films she recommends (344-347). The films listed are outdated, but two of the assignments could be easily adapted from film to music.

Jennifer Eddy offers examples of how to use song lyrics to create assignments in her article “Song Lyrics as Culturally Authentic Material for Standards-Based Performance”, but she is focused on foreign language classes, not writing classes. Nevertheless, some of her advice could be adapted to creating composition assignments. So could an assignment that ninth grade English teacher Sarah Duncan Newsom describes in detail in an article titled “Rock ‘n Roll ‘n Reading.” Although Newsom’s class was a reading class, not a writing class, her positive experience using popular music in the classroom is encouraging. Newsom explains how her apathetic “students came alive when the discussion centered around music” (726), and that “students’ interest was unusually high” (728), even among students who were usually disinterested in class (728). She thinks that success with music-based assignments requires “using currently popular songs” (728), something other scholars have written about as well.

Very little research has been conducted into students’ response to assignments based on popular culture and popular music, but in “Popular Media, Critical Pedagogy, and Inner City Youth,” Diane Wishart Leard and Brett Lashua describe a study they conducted with high school students at alternative inner-city schools, wherein they interviewed students and teachers about

their experiences with popular culture-based assignments. Interviews with teachers indicate that many of the students, who were at an alternative school because of some sort of past difficulty in their local high schools, engaged with writing assignments related to hip-hop more strongly than they had engaged with any other assignment in the past. Interviews with students indicate that many of them felt that they had a reason to be in school for the first time.

Some assignment ideas are provided by high school teacher Jerome Evans in his article, "From Sheryl Crow to Homer Simpson: Literature and Composition through Pop Culture." Despite the article's title, most of it is devoted to literature assignments, such as identifying themes, rather than composition. However, in a section of the article titled "Critical Thinking and Writing," Evans discusses how students can develop the same writing skills by writing about subjects taken from popular culture that they can develop writing on more traditional subjects (37). Some of Evans' assignment ideas that are literature-related could be adapted for composition classes.

Karen Fitts has included specific writing assignment ideas in her article, "Ideology: Life Practices, and Pop Culture: So Why is This Called Writing Class?" Because her article was published in 2005, it synthesizes the views of many people who have studied and written about this topic since the late 1960s. Like Clark and Graff, she argues that in order for students to connect what they are learning in school to their everyday lives, teachers must "blur the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture, thus bringing popular culture into the classroom focus" (91). Fitts describes assignments she has used in class in enough detail that they could easily be duplicated (94-103). Although her focus is on media other than music, the sound pedagogical theory she offers for each assignment would be invaluable to someone creating assignments based on popular music.

For more than forty years, teachers have grappled with the problem of persuading students to engage with writing, and many of them have come to the same conclusion: students are more likely to connect with familiar subjects, and popular culture and popular music are an excellent starting point. Graff points out that “colleges are missing an opportunity when they do not encourage students to take their nonacademic interests as objects of academic study” and that doing so can help solve the ongoing problem of student apathy (204). If teachers were open to using students’ experience with popular music as an introduction to critical thinking and writing, they might be surprised by the results.

## Chapter Three: Survey: What Do Students Think About Using Popular Music in the Classroom?

### Introduction

While many teachers and scholars have written about the benefits of using popular music to teach writing (as well as literature and history), very few of them have performed studies to ask students what they think about music-based assignments. Most college students enjoy popular music, and therefore, it is logical to assume that they would enjoy writing about music. Because so little literature exists about a student-music-writing connection, I thought it important to ask students who had completed a music-based writing assignment about their opinions of such assignments: What do students think about music-based assignments, and if their opinions are positive, can music-based assignments help address the perennial problem of student engagement?

Determining students' perceptions of music-based assignments was the focus of my research project. In order to answer this research question in just a few months, the goal of the research and the design of the measuring instrument needed to be simple, which limited the type of research that could be performed. Research methods such as discourse analysis and case studies were ruled out due to time constraints, leaving one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and surveys as the best options for answering the research question. An additional factor in deciding on a research method was the advice of Mary Sue MacNealy in her book *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing*. She points out that when a researcher is "looking for a respondent's perception of reality," interviews and surveys are the best options (166). Finding out what students think about an assignment, then, is best achieved by direct questions.

Both one-on-one interviews and focus groups raised issues that could not be easily overcome in a few months. How to recruit students, how to reimburse them for their time, and where to meet with them all posed major problems. A survey, however, can be quickly administered in a classroom and analyzed in a shorter period of time than the results of interviews or focus groups. I decided that well designed survey questions should result in an answer to my basic question: “What do students think about assignments based on popular music?” and more specifically, “Are students engaged with music-based assignments?”

### Methodology

MacNealy’s *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing* informed the methodology for this study in many other ways. MacNealy explains three characteristics of empirical research and three issues to consider when performing survey research; together they formed the foundation of the methodology of this project. According to MacNealy, teachers must follow certain guidelines for conducting empirical research, even in a basic study. She lists the “essential characteristics” of empirical research: It should be “*planned in advance* of the data collection”; the “*data [should be] collected systematically*”; and the “method of *data collection [should produce] a body of evidence that can be examined by others*” (40-41), emphasis hers. These basic criteria must be met for a study to be considered a valid empirical study. MacNealy also devotes an entire chapter to how to conduct surveys (148-75). In this chapter, she outlines three issues of “concern” to the researcher. The first issue is the need to establish a “clear purpose” (148), something I did early in the process by deciding that I wanted to discover what students think of music-based writing assignments. The second issue is to “[select] a sample that will be representative of the population of interest” (148). Because the “population of interest” was

freshman composition students who had completed a music-based assignment, and there are many freshman composition classes at Kennesaw State University, it was relatively easy to find a fellow teacher who was willing to work with me and assign an essay based on popular music. The third issue is the “design of the survey instrument” (148). Because MacNealy covers in detail ideas about proper survey design, it was a relatively easy process to follow her guidelines.

MacNealy’s general outline of empirical research was central to the design of the survey. She writes that having a clear purpose in mind affects the “layout of the questionnaire and the design of individual questions” (153), something that may seem obvious but helped me refine the survey questions. MacNealy points out that exploring a relatively unexplored area with a survey necessitates the use of open-ended questions (163), so I included several “open-ended” questions as well as “check-off” or “close-ended” questions. She also advises the survey designer to be careful of how questions are worded in order to avoid “subtle bias” (154). Her explanation of this potential problem led me to be more careful than I would otherwise have been. As a result of her admonition to test the questionnaire (171), I asked several people to read it and offer feedback, which led me to adjust several of the questions.

After the survey was created, the next step was to find students to give it to. MacNealy emphasizes how important it is that studies be above reproach with no hint of bias. She says that any teacher studying her own class is likely to affect the outcome of the study. For example, if a teacher gave her students an assignment then asked them to complete a survey about it, their answers would be less honest because a) they wouldn’t want to be critical of their teacher’s assignment and b) they would answer the way they perceive the teacher wants them to because they think if they don’t, it may negatively impact their grade. Therefore, I decided not to survey

my English 1101 classes but instead to work with another English 1101 teacher to minimize any conflict of interest and obtain the most honest answers possible.

Kennesaw State University composition teacher LeeAnn Elliott was willing to work with me on this project. Together we revised an assignment I had given in an earlier composition class so that it suited her pedagogical needs as well as my research needs. Elliott and I decided that the assignment should be the second of the four major writing assignments in her class because not only did that work well with Elliott's plans for her class, but it also fulfilled my criterion that the students have at least one college composition assignment to which to compare the music assignment when filling out the survey. The assignment Elliott presented to her class asked the students to use rhetoric and research to argue that their favorite popular music artist should be included in an English 1101 Music Hall of Fame that the class created. Criteria for induction into the Hall of Fame were discussed in class, but ultimately students were encouraged to use their own criteria and to argue in their essays that their artist met them. The assignment required that students use *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in support of their arguments, and evidence could include personal experience as well as factual information. When Elliott presented the Hall of Fame assignment to the students, she gave no indication that anything differed between it and the assignment they had completed earlier in the course. The students had no idea that they would later be questioned about their opinion of the Hall of Fame essay.

I waited until Elliott had graded and returned the essays to the students to visit her class and ask the students to complete the survey. Even though the survey was anonymous, I didn't want students to think their answers might affect their grades. On the day of the survey, Elliott checked attendance, explained briefly that I was doing a research project and had requested their help, and then turned the class over to me and left the room. I explained to the students that I

was a graduate student working on a research project and that while I would appreciate their filling out the survey I was about to distribute, they were under no obligation to do so. I told them that Elliott had left the room to ensure that they understood that my request was completely separate from their class and their grades. I passed out the surveys and reminded the students not to write their names on them. I instructed them to put their completed surveys face down on a corner of a table when they were finished, and I waited while they completed the surveys. All the students who were present chose to fill out and turn in the survey, and after everyone was done, I explained my project in more detail and thanked them for helping.

### Findings

The nineteen respondents' ages ranged from eighteen to thirty-seven, with all but two aged eighteen-twenty. Eleven were female and eight were male. None of them could be classified as L2. This is a typical English 1101 course offered during the day at Kennesaw State University. The title of the survey was "Survey on Hall of Fame Essay Assignment."

*Question 1: What did you think when you were first told about this assignment? (Were you excited? Did you dread it?) Why?*

- Thirteen of the nineteen students answered that they were excited about the assignment.
  - Two of these students explained their excitement about the assignment by using the word "passionate" to describe their feelings about music, and another student said he "loves" music.
  - Two students who were excited were also concerned about how they would choose an artist to write about.

- Five students indicated that they dreaded the assignment.
  - Three of them said they were uncertain how to successfully argue for a particular artist.
  - Two were concerned about the research component of the assignment.
- One student reported that he was neutral about the assignment.

*Question 2a: Was this the first time you've written an essay about popular music? (This was a close-ended question with the choice of yes or no for an answer.)*

- Three of the nineteen students answered no.
- Sixteen of the nineteen students answered yes.

*Question 2b: If you've written an essay about music before, when and for what class did you write it?*

- Two of the three students who answered “yes” said they wrote an essay about music for high school English classes.
- One student explained that he wrote about music for the newspaper, but I think this student misinterpreted the word “essay” as he most likely wrote reviews if writing for a newspaper.

*Question 3: Was this the first time you've written an argumentative essay based on research? (This was a close-ended question with the choice of yes or no for an answer.)*

- Fourteen of the nineteen students indicated that they had written an argumentative essay based on research in the past. Because the first essay

assignment the students had done in Elliott's class was not based on research, these students had likely written argumentative essays in high school.

- Five of the nineteen students indicated that they had not before written an argumentative essay based on research.

*Question 4: What did you like about this assignment?*

- Sixteen of the nineteen students responded with some variation of "I liked choosing my own topic."
- One student wrote that he liked the "challenge" of writing a persuasive paper.
- One student wrote that he liked the research aspect of the assignment.
- One student wrote that he liked that "there weren't too many restrictions" in the assignment.

*Question 5: What did you dislike about this assignment?*

- Nine students responded that they disliked the research part of the assignment.
- One student didn't like not being allowed to use Wikipedia as a source.
- Three students didn't like the requirement that the essay be argumentative.
- Two students wrote that they disliked "nothing" about the assignment.
- Two students mentioned difficulty with the technical aspects of writing.
- One student didn't like his final grade.
- One student's answer to this question was nonsensical.

*Question 6: Do you think you spent more time or less time on this assignment compared to the essay assignments you completed earlier in this course-English 1101? Why or why not?*

- Fourteen of the nineteen students indicated that they spent more time on the Hall of Fame essay than they did on the personal narrative essay that was assigned earlier in the course.
  - Seven students wrote that they spent more time because the assignment required research.
  - Three students wrote that they spent more time because they cared about the topic.
  - One student wrote that he spent more time because he wanted to improve his grade compared to the first essay.
  - One student wrote that he spent more time because he wanted his essay to be good.
  - One student wrote that he spent more time because the essay needed to be “constructed differently” compared to the first essay assignment in the course.
  - One student wrote that he spent more time on this essay compared to the first essay, but he did not indicate why he did so.
- Three of the nineteen students indicated that they spent the same amount of time on the Hall of Fame essay as they did on the personal narrative essay that was assigned earlier in the course, but they did not have other comments.

- Two of the nineteen students indicated that they spent less time on the Hall of Fame essay than they did on the personal narrative essay that was assigned earlier in the course.
  - One student wrote that he spent less time because this assignment was “easier.”
  - One student wrote that he spent less time because he “already knew about the subject.”
- One student’s answer to this question was nonsensical.

*Question 7: What was the hardest part of completing this assignment?* This question included three options with check boxes and a write-in choice of “other.” The three check-off options were *deciding what artist to write about*, *researching facts about my selected artist*, and *composing the essay*. There are twenty-one responses described because two students checked two items.

- Five of the nineteen students checked the option “deciding what artist to write about.”
- Eight of the nineteen students checked the option “researching facts about my selected artist.” Several of these students elaborated on this answer by writing a note that indicated their particular difficulty was with finding *credible* sources.
- Eight of the nineteen students checked the option “composing the essay.”

*Question 8: How do you think this assignment could be improved?* There are twenty responses described because one student made two suggestions.

- Ten of the nineteen students replied that they thought the assignment needed no improvements.
- Three students responded that they had a problem with the page requirement.
  - Two students thought the required number of pages for the assignment, which was 3.5, should be lower.
  - One student thought the upper limit of allowed pages (five) should be higher.
- Two of the students responded that they didn't know how the assignment could be improved.
- One student suggested allowing more leniency in choosing sources.
- One student suggested adding more time for completing the assignment.
- Three students' answers were unclear.

### Interpretations

Having seen students' answers to the survey questions, I wish that I had time to rewrite the questions and perform the survey again. Because I do not, I have suggested better worded questions in this section when appropriate, along with interpretations of answers to the questions as they were presented to students.

*Question 1: What did you think when you were first told about this assignment? (Were you excited? Did you dread it?) Why?*

The purpose of this question was to discover students' overall opinion of a music-based essay assignment. This question should have been more specific, for example, "What did you think when were told about an essay assignment in which you would write about popular

music?” It also should not have suggested words such as “excited” and “dread.” This led many students to answer using these words, which may have limited their responses.

Nevertheless, the responses were 68% positive, and in several cases, students mentioned that they are “passionate” about music. The students who were negative about the assignment indicated concern about parts of the assignment that were unrelated to the topic: writing an argument and conducting research. No students expressed a negative opinion about the topic of popular music. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to reach the conclusion that most students were positive about the topic of music for an essay.

*Question 2a: Was this the first time you’ve written an essay about popular music? (This was a close-ended question with the choice of yes or no for an answer.)*

*Question 2b: If you’ve written an essay about music before, when and for what class did you write it?*

The purpose of this question was to determine how many students had been exposed to writing about popular music in the past. Only three students (15.7%) indicated that they had written an essay involving popular music before. Because one of these students seemed confused about the meaning of the word essay, he likely had not written one, meaning that only two students (10.5%) had the experience of writing about popular music in a writing class in high school.

Why have so few students been given any assignment, literature-, history-, or composition-based, related to popular music? For several years, I have discussed this project with many teachers, at levels from kindergarten to college, and I most frequently encountered one of two reactions. Many teachers expressed surprise that there might be any current music that is suitable for the classroom, while many others expressed surprise that there might be

anything new to learn about using music in the classroom because it has been such a common practice for so long. Obviously, if teachers are afraid of using current music in their classrooms, how can it be a common, and some indicated overused, teaching technique? This survey seems to show that teaching composition students to write by engaging with popular music is an underutilized part of the English curriculum, at least in high school.

*Question 3: Was this the first time you've written an argumentative essay based on research?* (This was a close-ended question with the choice of yes or no for an answer.)

The purpose of this question was to determine how much experience students had with composing an argument with evidence gleaned from sources. Although fourteen of the nineteen students (nearly 74%) indicated that they had written an argumentative essay based on research in the past, the research component of this assignment was both a source of worry pre-assignment and a difficult task for students during the composing process, something that becomes apparent with answers to other questions on the survey.

*Question 4: What did you like about this assignment?*

The purpose of this question was to determine whether the topic of music had a positive effect on students' opinions of the assignment. Sixteen of the nineteen students (84%) responded with some variation of "I liked choosing my own topic." While the same number of students might respond in the same way to any essay assignment where they were allowed to choose their own topic, it is interesting to note that in this case, students really were not allowed to choose what to write about, only who. The assignment "topic," proposing an artist for the Hall of Fame, actually offers students no opportunity to deviate from the topic. Students interpretation of it, however, was that choosing an artist to write about gave them freedom that they enjoyed, indicating a positive opinion of the topic.

*Question 5: What did you dislike about this assignment?*

The primary purpose of this question was to determine if any students disliked writing about music. Because more than half of the students mentioned disliking research, I'm not sure this question achieved this purpose. No students specifically mentioned disliking the topic, but a more pointed question, such as "Did you have any problem with the music aspect of this essay?" may have helped students focus on something other than research, which is obviously unpopular.

*Question 6: Do you think you spent more time or less time on this assignment compared to the essay assignments you completed earlier in this course-English 1101? Why or why not?*

With this question, I was trying to discern whether students might put more effort, and thus more time, into an essay about something they cared about. I realize now that this was a poorly designed question. One problem with the question was that the essay the students had previously done in this class was a personal narrative that involved no research. The essays were so different that asking students to compare them was meaningless. Another problem that became apparent upon reading students' answers is that there are many reasons a student might spend more or less time on one essay than another, and most of them have nothing to do with the topic. Many students mentioned that the research for this essay required them to spend more time on it, which is logical. Work schedules and desire to improve grades were also mentioned as factors in the amount of time spent on this essay. One student mentioned that he worked harder and got this essay done faster because he liked the topic, but that was the only mention of the topic in answer to this question. Finally, the purpose of this survey was to identify students' perceptions of the assignment, but a question about the amount of time spent on an essay should not depend on perceptions.

*Question 7: What was the hardest part of completing this assignment?* This question included three options with check boxes and a write-in choice of “other.” The three check-off options were *deciding what artist to write about*, *researching facts about my selected artist*, and *composing the essay*.

The purpose of this question was to determine whether parts of the assignment were unclear or unnecessarily difficult for students to complete with the goal of improving the assignment for future use. Five of the nineteen students (26%) checked the option “deciding what artist to write about,” which indicates that invention was a bigger issue than expected. While students enjoy listening to certain artists, they still need to be assisted in the process of choosing which artist to write about, something that could easily be achieved by an in-class invention exercise upon presentation of the assignment.

Eight of the nineteen students (42%) selected the option “researching facts about my selected artist” as the most difficult aspect of the assignment, which is consistent with negative responses about research elsewhere on the survey. Several of the students who chose this option also used the space for “other” to describe the difficulty they had in finding credible websites and articles about their chosen artist. Students’ struggle with research for this essay is not specific to the topic of music and indicates that students need more instruction in how to conduct research than they sometimes receive.

Eight of the nineteen students (42%) checked the option “composing the essay.” This option is too general to gather much meaning from the answer. “Composing the essay” could mean anything from structuring the essay to writing grammatically correct sentences, meaning it should not have been included as an option. This question would have been better as an open-ended question, “*What was the hardest part of completing this assignment?*”

*Question 8: How do you think this assignment could be improved?*

The survey concluded with this open-ended question about how the assignment might be improved, a direct attempt to improve the assignment via student feedback. Ten of the nineteen students (55.5%) replied that they thought the assignment needed no improvements. The nine students who suggested improvements did not mention changing the topic or having a problem with writing about music. In fact, two of them answered “I don’t know,” which might be another way of saying that no improvements were needed; this leaves seven students who made suggestions. These “suggestions” more accurately fall into the category “complaints,” and they are common ones among students working on any essay assignment: shorter length requirement, more time to work on the essay, and leniency on which sources are allowed. The high percentage of students who suggested no improvements and the type of suggestions that some students did make seem to indicate that the students had no problem with the music part of the assignment.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this survey was to find out what students think about essay assignments that are based on popular music. Overwhelmingly, the students liked the idea of the assignment and enjoyed it, even though writing about music was new to most of them. Most negative comments were unrelated to the topic of music, but these comments indicate that teachers shouldn’t overlook the importance of invention exercises just because students are already familiar with a topic. Students’ comments also indicate that research is an ongoing struggle for students, and they need a great deal of direction in how to conduct it.

The secondary goal of this survey was to determine how the Hall of Fame argumentative essay assignment presented to the students could be improved. The assignment fared well and proved to be well-designed, based on the lack of problems mentioned by students that were directly related to it rather than to typical issues in FY composition classes.

The question of what students think of music-related assignments deserves further research. Analyzing the results of this survey posed questions that could be asked on a future survey to continue to explore this subject. The responses to the survey questions also suggested other studies that could be conducted using other research instruments, such as diaries and interviews. A survey is not an effective way to determine how much time students spend on essay assignments because answering a question about time after-the-fact is subjective; diaries and one-on-one interviews used together would be the best way to determine how much time students spend on different assignments and why. Diaries would require students to make notes about how much time they work on a particular assignment as they work, and follow-up interviews would allow the researcher an opportunity to question the subject about the accuracy of the notes. Discourse analysis on multiple essay assignments could potentially address whether students write better when writing about popular music than they do when writing about other topics that they are not as invested in. This survey answered the basic question it was intended to answer: “What do students think about music-based assignments?”, but there is much more work to be done, and many more questions to be answered.

## Chapter Four: Incorporating Popular Music into the Composition Curriculum

It's the first day of fall semester, and I'm meeting with my 9:30AM class, first-year composition students. Many of these students have never stepped foot into a college classroom until this day. I take roll, discover who's in the right room at the wrong time, or vice versa, and ask for their indulgence as we dissect the syllabus. I stress the importance of both class and departmental policies, emphasizing the strict attendance rule. The students respond to my frequent entreaties with blank stares. Some look bored, some look frightened, some alternate between the two expressions with startling swiftness.

Finally, it's time to explain the theme of the course. Despite my belief that I have designed a good course, I've been concerned about students' reaction to focusing on one theme all semester. I fear that this will be a disaster.

"All of the assignments in this course," I tell them, "are related to popular music in some way. For example, one of the required essays is an argument about why your favorite band should be inducted into our English 1101 Music Hall of Fame." I advise them that if they are not interested in music, they have time to withdraw from my section and find another. I ask for questions. One young man raises his hand, and I call on him.

"Thank you," he says.

"For what?"

"For making this class about music."

I smile. "You're welcome."

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A “long and winding road” led to this moment in the classroom. My long-time obsessive love of popular music was a factor in my belief that I could use popular music to teach writing, but a few key moments in the past thirty-plus years contributed to my desire to investigate the subject in an academic way. Listening to music has always been a part of my life: my parents enjoyed country and pop music, both on the radio and on LPs. When I was eight years old, they gave me a transistor radio for Christmas, and although I first listened to my parents’ favorite station, I soon began to change the radio dial to hear what else was out there. Instead of spending my \$1 weekly allowance on a new outfit for Barbie, I started to spend it on 45s. My interest in music became an obsession, and my record collection expanded to include LP’s; within a few years, my allowance was \$5, and LP’s were \$4.77, a near-perfect match.

By the time I was in Jan Cox’s eleventh grade American literature class, I had accumulated a substantial music collection. I spent all my time prowling used record stores and all my money on records and concert tickets. Conversations with my music-devoted friends resembled those of the characters played by Jack Black and John Cusack in the movie *High Fidelity*. I was likely involved in one of these conversations the day Mrs. Cox presented to our class a short essay assignment: analyze a popular song. She randomly passed out copies of the lyrics of five or six different songs, and students excitedly began discussing the assignment, who got which song, and who might be willing to trade. After we turned in the essays a few days later, we received even better news. Our next assignment was to explain a song to the class, but this time, we would choose our own song, with Mrs. Cox’s advance approval. This was the first time any teacher had even mentioned music in a class I was in; learning that a teacher thought song lyrics worthy of being treated as literature changed the way I thought about them.

As a result of this influence, as an undergraduate English major, I incorporated song lyrics into as many essays as I could. I also provided my professors with “material.” When we read *Lysistrata* in World Literature, I gave my professor a cassette tape of a song by Todd Rundgren that is based on the play. When we studied Greek mythology in World History, I told my professor about an eighteen-minute mini rock opera by Rush called “Hemispheres”; the lyrics describe a battle between Apollo and Dionysus for dominance over mankind. In several classes, I wrote essays that compared the themes of modern and contemporary poets to the themes in popular music lyrics. My knowledge about music, as well as my overwhelming, and perhaps scary, desire to share it, created an opportunity that led to another breakthrough in my understanding of how music could be used in the classroom.

As a college senior, I took an advanced composition class where we were required to work on a quarter-long project: a twenty-page paper on any topic. Choosing a topic was difficult for me, and I made an appointment with my professor to discuss my problem. He knew me well from many other classes, and he asked why I wasn’t writing about what he knew to be my favorite subject: music. It was a revelatory moment; I had thought about music as a supplement to the writing I did in English courses, not as a topic unto itself. In the essay, I concentrated on the gulf between high and low culture and how academia’s insistence on such a divide results in lost opportunities to connect with students. I used examples of lyrics to show how they could be used to teach literary concepts, such as theme and imagery, and included song lyrics that alluded to historical events or to major literary works. Sting’s lyrics were a major source. His work includes simple allusions, such as “caught between Scylla and Charybdis” in “Wrapped Around Your Finger,” as well as entire songs inspired by books, such as “Moon Over Bourbon Street,” which is written from the point of view of the character Louis in Anne Rice’s *Interview with a*

*Vampire*. When the class was done, my professor suggested I submit the paper to an upcoming conference of The Popular Culture Association of the South, and it was accepted.

Had I been able to go on to graduate school after college as planned, I have no doubt that my work would have centered on music and that I would have used it to teach literature. This idea was not considered radical idea in the 1980s. Unbeknownst to me at the time, teachers had used popular music to teach literature since the late 1960s. They had used it in much the same way I'd written about in my senior paper: to illustrate concepts in literature such as imagery, rhyme scheme, and metaphor. Once I reached graduate school years later, I studied composition and rhetoric and realized how effective using popular music to teach writing, not just literature, could be. I was disappointed to learn that when composition scholars and teachers began to concentrate on writing as a process and turned away from using literature as material to teach writing, they also left behind song lyrics. A review of the literature and informal discussions with many teachers showed me that teachers rarely use popular music to teach writing, even though it could potentially help engage their students in a way other texts do not. Today's teachers offer many reasons they don't use popular music, from a lack of familiarity with current music to a lack of understanding of how to incorporate it into their curriculum. Overcoming these problems is well worth the effort.

The most important advantage of using popular music is that it engages students. For more than forty years, teachers and scholars have written about the difficulty of motivating their students to become invested in their own writing, a difficulty Daniel A. Clark describes as a disconnect between students' academic lives and their everyday lives (225). For just as long, some teachers and scholars have proposed using popular culture, including music, to connect with students, and to encourage students' connections to their own writing. Examples of writing

assignments based on popular culture and popular music appeared in the literature as early as 1968, when Fred Kroeger analyzed how song lyrics had helped him engage students in their writing about literary concepts, such as theme. Steven Carter published an article with similar conclusions in 1969. A few years later, Sarah Duncan Newsome described how her normally apathetic students “came alive when the [class] discussion centered around music” (726) and that “students’ interest was unusually high” when they were working on a music-based assignment (728). Articles extolling the virtues of using popular culture and popular music in the classroom were common in the 1970s and 1980s, as evidenced by a review of the literature conducted by Roslyn Z. Weedman in 1988. Although many of these articles focused on movies or television rather than music, the message is clear: using popular culture in the classroom is a powerful way to engage students and overcome their indifference to writing.

The argument is compelling, and based on the literature, it would seem that teachers incorporate popular culture and popular music into their curricula regularly. Surprisingly, this is not the case. A closer look at the literature reveals that articles about the use of popular music continue to be primarily focused on equating song lyrics with poetry, and if today’s teachers use song lyrics in class, usually it is to teach concepts in poetry or literature. They use mostly older lyrics (such as the Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby,” which frequently appears in textbooks), and they rarely use lyrics as a method of teaching writing. In a survey I conducted of nineteen first semester, freshman composition students, only two indicated that they had written an essay about popular music in high school. Although this survey represents only a small number of students, the lack of scholarship published on the subject of using popular music specifically to teach composition seems to back up the survey’s findings: few teachers are utilizing music as a way to connect with their writing students.

In informal conversations with many teachers, kindergarten to college, in the past few years, I have discovered that teachers do not make popular music part of their writing classes for several reasons: they think that music is not a “serious” topic; that current music is “no good”; or that today’s popular music contains profanity and other explicit content. These objections are based on misperceptions about students and about music, and all of them can be addressed by clearing up these misperceptions.

Some teachers indicate that they think popular music is not serious enough to use as a teaching tool, but Gerald Graff and Jerome Evans would disagree. Graff addresses this issue directly in his essay “Hidden Intellectualism,” where he writes about the “many buried or hidden forms of intellectualism that do not get channeled into academic work but might if schools were more alert about tapping into them” (22). He theorizes that students who have grown up arguing with their friends about sports, fashion, music, or “the myriad other things adolescents talk about” (29) have learned intellectual skills, and by focusing on students’ interests, teachers can help students “bridge the gap” (29) between academic and non-academic discourse. Topics students write about should not be categorized as “intellectual” or “not intellectual,” according to Graff, but instead the focus should be on the approach to the topic. Therefore, it is possible to create academic discourse on any subject, including popular culture.

Jerome Evans writes that “popular culture...is an object worthy of study” in both literature and composition (32) and describes how he has used popular music in his literature classes to teach the concept of theme. According to Evans, common themes in literature are also common themes in songs, and if students work with familiar material when learning a new concept, it is easier for them to understand more difficult material, such as *The Crucible* and *The Great Gatsby*. He even offers a list of ten popular songs and their themes (34) to illustrate his

point. When teaching composition, Evans explains rhetoric by having students analyze articles on popular culture topics and demonstrates specificity in writing by using popular culture articles as models. He maintains that his students' argumentative essays improve after these lessons (34-5). Both Graff and Evans contend that not only is popular culture a serious topic for academic discourse, but it also helps them connect to students.

Teachers who have no problem with the idea of music being treated academically express other concerns about whether music is suitable for their classes. Many say that current music is "no good" or that it is all too provocative for them to play in their classrooms. These teachers are making a number of false assumptions. The first is that when they think of using music to teach, they think only of current music. Many students enjoy older music of the modern rock era, which is defined as beginning with the Beatles. Students may be familiar with older music through their parents, or they may have discovered it on their own through friends or the Internet. Many of them actually like the music their parents like; I attribute this to the shift to the modern rock era that occurred in the 1960s, a shift that created a new type of sound. Music from the late 1960s differs much less from today's music than music differed between 1940 and 1950, for example. Teenagers today still hear many of the same songs on the radio that their parents did, and not only on "oldies stations." It was uncommon for a teenager in the 1970s to listen to their parents' music because it was different not only superficially but also in the instruments used, the way chords were played, and the way music was recorded. Although styles have changed, today's music has much in common with the music of twenty-five to thirty-five years ago, and therefore is more palatable to today's teens.

The results of two assignments I have given to students have persuaded me that music used in the classroom does not have to be current in order for students to respond to it. I ask

students to write an essay arguing that a favorite artist should be in a Music Hall of Fame that we create in our class. Many students choose artists from their parents' era, something that was a surprise to me the first time I gave this assignment, but something that has proven true every time I've given it. In another assignment, I ask students to write a narrative tracing their personal musical history from the earliest songs they remember until the present day. Most of them indicate that when they were very young, they listened to music their parents liked, which is not unusual. However, many of them still enjoy listening to "their parents' music," and not just because of a sense of nostalgia.

The second misperception underlying some teachers' opinion that current music is inappropriate for the classroom is that music-related assignments would require them to play songs for their students. Even if teachers do not want to play music or show videos, there are many ways for them to include music in writing assignments. Neither of the assignments described above requires teachers to play music or share lyrics with the class; both ask students to reflect on and write about their favorite artists privately. The Hall of Fame essay assignment is just one example of how to teach students about argument using music; another would be to discuss and examine published opinions about the easy availability of explicit music. Another way to appeal to students' interest in music without actually playing music is to have them read and analyze articles about artists. Articles about rapper Jay-Z appear frequently in business-interest magazines, such as *Forbes*, as well as entertainment-related magazines, such as *People*. Comparing how disparate sources cover an artist can teach students about audience and editorial bias, using reading material many of them will be interested in. A creative teacher could design many such assignments.

Often, teachers object to current music on the basis of taste; they say today's music is not as good as music they grew up with. Regardless of when people grow up, it is common for them to believe no good music has been released since they were in college or their early twenties. Anyone over the age of twenty-five has probably felt like he or she has lost touch with the music younger people are listening to. While teenaged students may enjoy their parents' music, chances are their parents don't enjoy their music in return. In general, music is produced for, and frequently by, a demographic that deliberately ages people out once they are "adults." Each generation wants, and perhaps needs, its own musical identity, despite sometimes enjoying their parents' music. Even Bruce Springsteen, who at the age of sixty-two still writes, records, and tours, agrees. In the keynote speech at South by Southwest in March 2012, he says, "When I look out from my stage these days, I look into the eyes of three generations of people, and still popular music continues to provide its primary function as youth music..." ("Exclusive"). While first year composition teachers, all of whom are likely to be over the age of twenty-five, may dismiss using popular music as a teaching aid because they believe it has no value, they need to focus on its value to students.

Teachers should understand that musical taste is affected by many factors, age likely being the most important. Writing teachers, who strive to connect with their students and to encourage their students to connect with their own writing, overlook this valuable resource. To be an effective teacher in any subject requires a desire to continue learning and improving, and a willingness to go outside of one's comfort zone to do so. Teachers ask students to leave their comfort zones to enter academia every time they walk into the classroom. It is not necessary for teachers to become experts in hip-hop or 2000s rock to create successful assignments, but just as

they continue to study about their field, they need to learn about what students' interests, including music.

Today's students enjoy different genres of music, not just hip-hop and rap, as many adults seem to think. It is not unusual to find a student whose two favorite artists are hardcore rapper Lil' Wayne and one of country music's newest young stars, Jason Aldean. Because students are so egalitarian about music, they are likely to respond to any popular music played in class, regardless of its genre or era, even if they have never heard the song before. Teachers do not need to base music-related assignments on current music, but if they are willing to make the effort to learn more about current music, they can do so.

Teachers who want to learn about current popular music have many options. Magazines such as *Rolling Stone* produce websites that replicate much of the content of the newsstand version as well as daily blogs by music writers. Their website also includes charts of current popular songs, reproduced from *Billboard*, which has been considered the official charting organization since the beginning of the modern rock era. iTunes also has charts of their most popular downloads; the information they provide is well worth downloading the free software and registering on their site. With the name of an artist or song, it is easy to listen to it free on the Internet. Most songs are available as audio or video files on YouTube, which requires no special software or registration.

Another helpful resource is the education section of the website for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, which includes assignment ideas that can easily be adapted to different ages or even to a different song or artist. However, the best way to find out what students are listening to is to talk to them. Ask students who their favorite artists are; have them freewrite about a concert they've been to or a song they like (or one that they are sick of.) When a student wears a concert

t-shirt to class, ask him or her about the show. If teachers make an effort to learn about and listen to today's music, they will find songs they can use in the classroom, and they might even find something they like.

It is true, however, that much of today's popular music, especially hip-hop and rap, includes explicit lyrics, making it problematic for classroom use, but not all popular artists release explicit material, and even those who do often release alternative "clean" versions of their songs, with potentially offensive words either changed or edited out. While students probably download and listen to the explicit versions of songs available on iTunes, they may also listen to the clean versions and would understand why clean rather than explicit versions should be played in class. Additionally, some of today's most popular artists are squeaky clean, such as country artists Taylor Swift and Luke Bryan. Other artists range from clean, such as Florence + The Machine and Zac Brown Band, to reasonably clean, such as Katy Perry and Lady Gaga, to sometimes clean and sometimes not, such as Usher and P!nk, to inappropriate, such as Lil' Wayne and Eminem.

Despite the popularity of pop and country music, rap and hip-hop are today's most mainstream genres, and teachers should decide their own level of tolerance for this music before assigning students a music-related essay or presentation. On June 11, 2012, eleven of the top twenty-five songs on iTunes singles chart were rap or hip-hop, with the rest of songs divided amongst a number of genres. Because rap and hip-hop are so popular, teachers at any university will encounter students who are rap music fans, and they should be aware that some students will write about hardcore rap artists, such as Lil' Wayne.

When deciding how to address the issue of explicit songs, teachers should consider a number of factors. They should avoid a knee-jerk negative reaction to music that is so popular

among their students. If students are limited to writing or presenting only about certain artists, their interest may wane. Including music in the curriculum probably requires at least a minimum level of acceptance of rap lyrics. I have found that students are respectful when choosing pictures or videos to include in presentations they make to the class, but assignments should make clear to students what is acceptable. When writing an essay about an artist, students will likely want to quote lyrics, so they need to know whether they can quote verbatim or need to clean up the language.

Kermit Campbell advocates for accepting rap, even “ghetto rap,” the way it is, without cleaned-up versions of songs. He asserts that the popularity of hip-hop and rap has “made suburban youth aware of the lived experience...of their inner-city counterparts” (329) and that middle-class standards in the composition classroom “reinforce a normative that...punishes or renders powerless students of every social class” (331). Campbell discusses several rappers at length, including Jay-Z, one of the top rap artists of all time. Jay-Z has spoken out in defense of rap in interviews and in his book, *Decoded*, where he describes his philosophy and the inspirations behind his lyrics. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Jay-Z praises rap by saying that it has “blended cultures” by appealing to both blacks and whites. He maintains, like Campbell, that people who dislike the subject matter and profanity in rap “just don’t get it.”

Rap has moved well past being a music genre into being a cultural phenomenon, affecting everything from clothing to language to attitudes, especially of young men. The attitude inherent in rap and hip-hop is called “swagger,” according to Lisa Bloom, a lawyer who has written about social issues. When swagger is taken to the extreme, Bloom calls it “thug culture”; she maintains that the most popular rap artists “reinforce and perpetuate” thug culture and that swagger and thug culture are negatively impacting young men of all races and backgrounds (69).

Ultimately, then, just as composition students are taught to consider their audience when writing, teachers should consider their audience when teaching. Students will write better if they are engaged with their topics, and engaging them with something they already know and like is a gateway to engaging them with more difficult material. Literature teachers have understood this for years, and it is time that composition teachers understand it, too.

## Chapter Five: Music-Based Writing Assignments

Strong, pedagogically sound assignments about popular culture and music involve much more than writing about a movie or an episode of a television program. As long as the assignments are well designed, using popular culture can encourage student involvement, perhaps leading them to be more open to new subjects in the future.

Fortunately, the same guidelines that help teachers create effective writing assignments can be applied whether or not the subject relates to popular culture. One source that explains in detail how to craft writing assignments that appeal to students is Cheryl Glenn and Melissa A. Goldthwaite's book *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*. Not only does this book include a chapter on how to create successful writing assignments, but it also is targeted specifically to first-year composition teachers.

For these assignments, I have endeavored to find publications by critics and writers that can be used as resources to create writing assignments. These range from collections of reviews and criticism such as *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates* to rapper Jay-Z's *Decoded*, a book about the inspiration behind many of his well-known lyrics. Another valuable source is the education department at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, which provides assignments for teachers on their website. Some of these can be adapted for use in freshman composition classes. Collections by critics such as Greil Marcus, Lester Bangs, and Chuck Klosterman also provide material that can be used as resources to teach the writing process.

*The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates* includes reprints of reviews, interviews, and essays published in the music press, such as *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*, and in the general press, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, from the 1950s-2000s. It is organized by decade so it

is a useful resource for tracing changes in popular music and how critics originally reacted to bands such as The Beatles. Many of the “debates” covered in this material serve as the basis for assignments I’ve created.

Another valuable source I’ve used to create assignments is what songwriters have said about the writing process and the inspirations behind their own songs. In some cases, songwriters have published books of their lyrics with explanatory material. In his book, *Lyrics*, Sting, considered one of the better rock lyricists of the 1980s and 1990s, explains how disparate sources come together for him when he writes songs such as “Roxanne,” a classic by his band The Police. Rapper Jay-Z’s book, *Decoded*, not only offers information about the writing process, but also addresses the ongoing controversy over the subject matter and profanity and of many rap lyrics, an issue on the minds of many students and teachers. Jay-Z defends what he sees as the authenticity of rap and hip-hop and explains that it is only reflecting the culture of lower class African-Americans who often live in the projects, which is where rap was created. In essays for each included song, he also describes the inspiration and frequently, the writing process itself. While many teachers may feel uncomfortable playing such songs in class, the essays supply many ideas for writing assignments.

Even songwriters who haven’t published books about their lyrics have often addressed songwriting in interviews. Taylor Swift is an immensely popular artist among teenage girls in part because she writes her own songs. In interviews, she has spoken about how much effort is involved in writing a song, something that can be used to illustrate to students that writing is indeed a process and that writing well requires revision.

The Rock’n’Roll Hall of Fame website provides biographies of inductees and assignment suggestions for both history and literature. The Hall of Fame employs experts in popular culture

and education to write assignments and teach onsite. Although many of the assignments are designed for K-12 and are not directly related to writing, many of the ideas can be adapted to teaching composition. The sources listed on their website have been valuable in my effort to locate original sources, such as the work of rock critics Greil Marcus, Lester Bangs, Chuck Klosterman, and Anthony DeCurtis , which also serves as the basis for some of the assignments I've created. These critics are known for writing creative reviews and insightful essays about popular and rock music. While Marcus has been writing for many years, he still publishes relevant material, and although Bangs died in 1982, his reviews, which frequently turned into long essays with excellent commentary on popular culture, are considered classic. DeCurtis has reviewed the most influential album releases of the last thirty years, and Klosterman's ironic tone is classic Gen-X. The work by these four critics suggests many ideas for writing assignments and can be used in the classroom to teach writing in many ways.

## Personal Essays

### Music History Narrative

Write a narrative essay about the music you have liked throughout your life. Include specific memories and stories that you relate to a particular artist or song. Include at least three different ages or stages from your life, but no more than five.

Questions to consider:

- What is your earliest music-related memory?
- Many people's early taste in music is influenced by what their parents or older siblings listen to. What music did your parents or older siblings listen to and what was your connection to it?
- Who was the first artist you discovered via your peers or on your own?
- Are certain songs related to memories of singing or dancing classes you took?
- Do you play an instrument? If so, what memories are connected to your lessons or performances?
- Are certain songs related to sports events you attended or participated in?
- What was the first concert you attended? What do you remember about it?

*Note to instructor: This assignment can be adapted to an oral/visual presentation.*

**Last Five Songs**

What are the last five songs played on your music device on the shuffle setting? If you don't use the shuffle setting, what are the last five songs you played by choosing them?

List the songs and write a few paragraphs explaining what these five songs say about you and your taste in music.

Write two-three paragraphs about each song explaining why the song is important to you.

Questions to consider:

- Are the songs similar or do they reflect a variety of music? For example, what are the genres of the songs? When were they released?
- Do the songs reflect your current taste in music, or if they are songs from shuffle mode, are some of them songs you once liked but no longer care for?
- Most people have older songs on their devices, songs that they might find embarrassing. Are any of the songs embarrassing to you? Why?

*Note to instructor: This assignment can be adapted to an in-class activity. Ask students in advance to bring their music devices to class without telling them why.*

## **Favorite Artist Profile**

This essay includes two parts: your personal history and research.

Ideas for writing about your personal history:

- Who is your favorite music artist? Why?
- What are your memories about this artist?
- When and how did you discover this artist?
- Have you ever seen this artist perform live? If so, describe the experience.

Ideas for writing about the artist using research:

- What is the history of the artist?
- How successful has the artist been? Has the artist had number one songs or albums? Has the artist been on successful tours?
- Is the artist involved in charities?
- What has the artist discussed in interviews?
- What have critics written about the artist's work?

**TIP:** Rather than writing two separate sections of the essay, organize it thematically. For example, if you write facts about the artist's tours, include personal experience about attending one of their concerts in that part of the essay.

### **The Year I Was Born**

What was the number one song when you were born? What were the top ten songs the year you were born?

Interview a parent or other relative, asking what songs he or she remembers from the year you were born or in the time leading up to your birth. You may want to research the songs first, then do the interview, but find out what the person remembers before you remind him or her of the songs that were popular at that time.

Write up the interview as a short essay.

## Research Activities, Exercises, and Assignments

This section includes songs that include references to people, places, or events that can be researched. The songs should not be assumed to be factually accurate, as many times songwriters have used their artistic license to change things.

### History

#### **20th Century History**

*“We Didn’t Start the Fire,” written and performed by Billy Joel*

This song is unique because rather than being focused on one event, it includes references to forty years of American post-WWII history. The lyrics reference historical and cultural events from the 1940s to the early 1980s, in chronological order. All of the verses are in a list form; for example, “Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Studebaker, television/North Korea, South Korea, Marilyn Monroe.” The song is nothing but references so it provides many opportunities for you to research or write about.

#### Activities for Groups or Individual Students

- Working in groups, research the meaning of some of the song’s references, without using Wikipedia or any of the websites that provide interpretation of songs. Your instructor may direct you to specific websites.
- The song was written about 1985 so it doesn’t include events that happened since then. Update the song with post-1985 events and personalities, using the same tune and format as the song. You will need to research important events that have happened since 1985.

- Create new verses of the song based on national or world events you remember. Use the tune of the existing song or create a hip-hop beat.

#### Exercises for Individual Students

- Research the references in one line of the song, such as “Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Studebaker, television,” and write two-three paragraphs about the time period the lines reference. Alternatively, write a paragraph on each reference in the line, explaining the reference and why it was important enough for Joel to include in this song.

#### Essay Assignments

- Choose one decade referenced in the song (1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s). Research the important events, historical and cultural, from that decade, then narrow the topic to a particular event or year and research it in more detail. Narrow the topic to a research question you can answer in an essay.
- Choose two references in the song that are thematically related. For example, Elvis Presley (1950s) and punk rock (1970s), John Glenn (early 1960s) and the moonshot (late 1960s), or the two mentions of Richard Nixon (one in the early 1960s and the other in the late 1960s) and write an essay that includes research on both events. Try to discover a thematic connection between two events that initially seem unrelated.

## **The Cold War**

For a number of reasons, The Cold War between the United States and the USSR began to heat up in the 1980s, and many artists wrote about the possibility of war and nuclear annihilation. Any one of the following songs would be a good starting point for a research assignment. Begin by looking up names and other references in a song.

- *“Russians,” written and performed by Sting*
- *“Two Suns in the Sunset,” written by Roger Waters and performed by Pink Floyd*
- *“Cruise,” written and performed by David Gilmour*
- *“99 Red Balloons,” written by Uwe Fahrenkrog-Petersen and Kevin McAlea and performed by Nena*
- *“The Manhattan Project” written by Neil Peart and performed by Rush*

## **The California Gold Rush**

*“Sutter’s Mill,” written and performed by Dan Fogelberg*

This song is inspired by the story of John Sutter, whose mill in Northern California was where gold was discovered, leading to the Gold Rush.

## **Social Issues**

Since the early days of rock and pop, many songwriters have been concerned with social issues. There is no shortage of songs to use as starting points for research assignments on almost any social issue.

### **Self-Acceptance**

*“F\*\*kin’ Perfect,” written by Max Martin, Shellback, and P!nk and performed by P!nk*

### **Consumerism**

*“This Note’s for You,” written and performed by Neil Young*

*“The Ballad of Jenny Ledge,” written by Kevin Gilbert and performed by Toy Matinee*

*“Forget You,” written by Bruno Mars and Cee Lo Green and performed by Cee Lo Green*

### **HIV/AIDS**

*“Hey Ya!,” written and performed by Outkast*

*“Waterfalls,” written and performed by TLC*

### **Human Rights**

*“They Dance Alone,” written and performed by Sting*

### **Environment**

*“The Last Resort” performed by The Eagles*

*“Goodbye to a River” –written and performed by Don Henley*

*“Big Yellow Taxi,” written and performed by Joni Mitchell, popular cover version by The Counting Crows in 2002*

*“My City was Gone,” written and performed by The Pretenders*

### **Multiple Topics**

*“Sign o’ the Times,” written and performed by Prince*

## **1965-1975: History and Social Change**

There are probably more American songs about the Vietnam War and Civil Rights than any other topics. The following are just a few to use as a starting point to research and writing.

### **The Vietnam War**

*“Goodnight Saigon,” written and performed by Billy Joel*

*“Alice’s Restaurant,” written and performed by Arlo Guthrie*

*“For What It’s Worth,” written and performed by Buffalo Springfield*

*“Copperhead Road,” written and performed by Steve Earle*

*“Woodstock,” by Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young*

### **Civil Rights**

*“What’s Going On” written and performed by Marvin Gaye*

*“Pride in the Name of Love,” written and performed by U2*

### **Social Change**

*“The Times They Are A-Changin’,” written and performed by Bob Dylan*

*“Won’t Get Fooled Again,” The Who*

## Compare/Contrast Essays

The following song combinations can be used as the basis for compare and contrast essays.

*“Eleanor Rigby,” written and performed by The Beatles*

*“Lonely People,” written by Dan Peek and performed by America*

*Primary topic: loneliness*

*“Rockstar,” written by Chad Kroeger and performed by Nickelback*

*“Cover of the Rolling Stone,” written by Shel Silverstein and performed by Dr. Hook and the Medicine Show*

*“Life’s Been Good,” written and performed by Joe Walsh*

*Primary topic: “rock star” life*

*“Baba O’Reilly,” written and performed by the Who*

*“Smells Like Teen Spirit,” written and performed by Nirvana*

*“Subdivisions,” written by Neil Peart, and performed by Rush*

*Primary topic: teen angst*

*“Modern Love,” written and performed by David Bowie*

*“Modern Love,” written and performed by Matt Nathanson*

*The “Modern Love” Sunday column in the New York Times*

*Primary topic: the idea of what “modern love” is in the 1980s (Bowie) vs the 2010s (Nathanson and the NYT)*

## Argument Essays

*Clean vs explicit versions of songs: Which do you prefer? Why? What age should someone be to be allowed to download explicit material? Should parents block their children from downloading explicit material? If so, does it make the children want the material more?*

*Domestic Violence: Listen to the following songs and argue whether you think they encourage or discourage domestic violence.*

*“Goodbye Earl,” written and performed by The Dixie Chicks*

*“Delia’s Gone,” performed by Johnny Cash*

*“Love the Way You Lie,” written by Alex da Kid and Skylar Grey, and performed by Eminem and Rihanna*

*Hall of Fame Essay*

## Definition Essays

What is “popular music”?

Is rap really music?

What defines a certain genre of music: rap, hip-hop, country, pop?

## Evaluation Essays

*Find two reviews of one of your favorite songs or albums from when it was originally released. Which one is more positive? Why? How do the opinions differ? If the song or album is more than five years old, find a more current critique of it, and evaluate how the original reviews compare to a more recent review.*

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# Hall of Fame Essay

Rough Draft: 9/28

Revised Draft: 10/3

Final Draft: 10/5

## Objectives

The purpose of this assignment is for you to learn and utilize the parts of an argument-based essay, including *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. You will offer an argument, with appropriate evidence, to persuade your audience (our class) to accept your artist or band for inclusion in the English 1101 Music Hall of Fame.

## Requirements:

- 3 ½ - 5 pages, double-spaced
- MLA Format, including a works cited page; see your handbook for details.
- Clear, identifiable thesis, appropriately developed and supported with reasons; provide evidence and examples as appropriate
- An introduction and a conclusion
- Balanced use of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*
- You can use the first person (“I”).
- Use only acceptable sources, listed below.
  - The artist’s official website (no fan sites)
  - The Rock’n’Roll Hall of Fame website [www.rockhall.com](http://www.rockhall.com)
  - The *Billboard* magazine website [www.billboard.com](http://www.billboard.com)
  - Any article you find using GALILEO
  - You may also use interviews or videos from YouTube if they actually include the artist.

It is acceptable to *consult* other sources like Wikipedia or fan websites for background and ideas, but you may **not** use them as official sources for information in your essay. Some sites, such as Wikipedia, may list sources at the bottom of each entry’s page; you may be able to find and use some of these original sources in your paper—but ask me first if you are unsure of the credibility of the source or if it’s appropriate to use in your paper.

- You should bring in four unmarked copies of at least three pages of your rough draft on 9/28; it’s okay to not have an introduction and conclusion at this point. On 10/3, you should then bring in two unmarked copies of a *complete revised draft*. And you should also bring in two copies of your final draft—along with the copy of your rough draft that I signed and the copy of your peer-reviewed revised draft—on 10/5.
- Consult your syllabus for more specific grading standards. We will also work together to determine criteria that the bands and singers should meet in order to be inducted into our Music Hall of Fame. I will post our class’s consensus on criteria after we complete the activity in class.



6. Do you think you spent more time or less time on this assignment compared to the essay assignments you completed earlier in this course-English 1101? Why or why not?

7. What was the hardest part of completing this assignment?

- a. \_\_\_\_Deciding what artist to write about
- b. \_\_\_\_Researching facts about my selected artist
- c. \_\_\_\_Composing the essay
- d. \_\_\_\_Other (Write in below.)

8. How do you think this assignment could be improved?