

**Gradus ad Parnassum: Writing the DMA Document Michigan State University, College of Music
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The following is an incremental plan—like the steps to Parnassus—that should help you select a topic and write a proposal for your DMA document.

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

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

Ask yourself about its

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

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

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

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

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

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

- 3a. How might the question I have posed be divided into 3-4 subcategories of inquiry?
- 3b. Can any one of these subcategories be broken down further? Ideally, you will identify a manageable "problem." Around this problem, you'll form an *argument*, that is, a point of view.
- 3c. List any concerns or problems you might confront. Consider a possible advisor and committee.
- 3d. Don't overlook the personal. Keep asking: *why* does this topic appeal to me? Could I live with

it for many months? Do I have the necessary skills for this project? These include foreign languages, availability of sources, compatibility of your personal time-table with the demands of the topic.

Do this additional “narrowing” for each of your three topics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DOCUMENT PROPOSAL MODEL (written by Carol A. Hess, revised in 2018 by Sarah Ann Long)

Although there is no formula for writing a proposal, you might consider the following as a possible roadmap. *Introductory paragraph.* Explain your topic (research problem) in broad outlines.

Example [for a lecture recital featuring works of Charles Mingus]: “The boundaries between classical music and jazz have long confounded scholars and audiences alike . . .” You should end the paragraph with your thesis statement.

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

Note that footnotes are not given in the examples in this handout. Example [for a lecture recital featuring Isaac Albéniz’s *Iberia* suite] “To date, there is little detailed discussion on the pianistic writing in Albéniz’s notoriously difficult *Iberia*. The most reliable study, Walter Aaron Clark’s 1999 biography, discusses the suite largely in terms of its historical significance [footnote]. Earlier studies, such as those by Henri Collet and Gabriel Laplane discuss the work in picturesque terms but without reference to Albéniz’s sonic conception [footnote]. At the other extreme is the doctoral dissertation (in theory) of Paul B. Mast, in which the author analyzes vertical sonorities in terms of theoretical models current in the 1970s [footnote]. Yet no scholar has considered Albéniz’s use of texture in *Iberia* in any detail. Nor is there any study on the relationship between *Iberia*’s often dense textures and the challenges these pose to the interpreter.”

Paragraph 4. Enter—your lecture recital! At this point, you “announce” how you will explore the research problem stated at the outset.

Example: “My lecture recital will explore the presence of humor in Beethoven’s early rondos for chamber ensembles. Works to be considered will be the third movements of the Piano Trio in E-flat Major, op. 1, no. 1, the Violin Sonata in D Major, op. 12 no. 1, and the Trio for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano in B flat, op. 11. For each, I will discuss Beethoven’s use of dynamic contrast, register, and metrical shifts. I will then briefly explain how our concentration on Beethoven’s middle-and late-period works has tended to eclipse these early examples of his individual voice.”

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

PRACTICAL DETAIL:

Remember the $1/3 + 1/3 + 1/3$ formula (research, writing, editing). The final third, editing, is usually the least familiar to students. Yet you can save yourself a great deal of time if you print out and edit portions of your work before turning them in to your advisor.

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

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

LECTURE-RECITAL PROPOSAL: Checklist

1. proposal text, not to exceed three double-spaced pages, with footnotes in Chicago style
2. bibliography of twenty-five sources, unannotated or annotated, depending on committee's request and in Chicago style
3. verification of committee's approval of proposal
4. abstract, not to exceed 300 words