

# Writing Essays for Sonic Arts Students

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20.09.04

Artists' writing is not separate from their practice but the thoughts, concepts, strategies and opinions, etc., worked out in their writing form part of their studio practice: the writing is informed by and informs the development of artistic practice.

An essay aims at proposing, investigating and finally suggesting a conclusion to a particular problem. There are different ways in which this can be done. The following document proposes two different approaches, which we believe to be useful in the context of Sonic Arts. These two have many aspects in common, however, whilst the first facilitates the writing of what we call an Evaluative Essay, the second offers a more appropriate approach to Critical Essays. Either strategy outlined here is just that — a strategy — and aims to facilitate and support rather than dictate and limit your approach to essay writing.

An Evaluative Essay is an essay that discusses the production processes and/or final appearance of a piece of work in relation to its technological, material and/or conceptual creation. Such an essay seeks to investigate the (aesthetic, conceptual, technological, etc.) value and or meaning of your piece of work in relation to its (technological, material and/or conceptual) processes. It does this in relation to historical and current examples of work/working processes produced by other artists. Subsequently this analysis and comparison is relayed back to your own work and a conclusion is articulated in respect to the current realisation and possible future development of your work.

## Evaluative Essay Format:

**Introduction:** states what you will be discussing and what methodology (what texts, artworks, authors, ideas, etc.) you will be using to do so. Be careful not to pre-empt the argument of the essay here. Do not discuss as yet, but simply say what you will discuss and how. This is somewhat like a menu in a restaurant where you get told what there is to eat and what it is made from, but you are not eating it yet.

**Context:** describes the (technological, conceptual or material) processes and/or appearance of your work and brings it into the historical and/or current context it exists in relation to: examples of work/working processes that influences you, that you compare your practice to, that has inspired you or helps you to understand your own work, etc. In a sense this is a description of your practice and a survey of the context your work and/or working processes exist in.

**Evaluation:** seeks to reach an evaluative understanding of your work and/or working processes via a comparison of your use of these processes in relation to the examples introduced earlier.

**Conclusion:** summarises and argues the value of your work in response to the investigation undertaken the context and evaluation sections, and may lead to proposals for future work or working processes.

Of course 'the Context' of your work and your 'Evaluation' of it can become one main part of the essay. The issue is that you understand the relationship between describing

what you do in your own work and how the evaluation of that happens always in relation to its context: other artists working in a similar field, with similar technology, materials, concepts, etc.

**Critical Essays** focus less on the processes of production and more on the contextual and conceptual framework. There are two different approaches to writing a critical essay dependent on whether they are written in relation to a practical piece of work, or whether they propose a strictly theoretical investigation.

A Critical Essay which is written in relation to a practical piece of work is an essay that proposes to investigate your work in relation to a particular (aesthetic, ideological, conceptual, technological, etc.,) problem that has arisen in the conception, production or perception of your work. You start off by proposing and outlining this problem, and how it has manifest itself in relation to your practice. Subsequently you investigate and argue your views on the problem in relation to historical and/or contemporary investigations (artistic or theoretical) of the same issue. Finally you reflect these investigations back onto your own work and articulate a conclusion on the relevance and treatment of the problem in your work in relation to the works by other artists/theorists discussed.

In short, you are analysing and contextualising your practice in relation to existing artistic expressions that you feel also deal with a particular problem that arose in your own practice.

A Critical Essay which treats a particular problem via a written investigation only, starts with an outline of this problem. Subsequently this problem is investigated via an argument of different ideas, histories, works, texts, etc, relevant to this particular issue. Such an argument is a process of staging and comparing different ideas articulated by other authors and artists in order to articulate your own ideas. Finally you are drawing your findings together and writing a conclusion, which proposes your solution or at least your reflections on the problem, articulated in the beginning of the essay.

### **Critical Essay Format:**

**Introduction:** outlines the issue to be discussed and the methodology (what texts, artworks, authors, ideas, etc.) to be used for this discussion.

**Main part:** briefly re-states the problem and investigates it in relation to historical and/or current articulations (practical and theoretical) thereof. If this problem has come out of your practice make this link apparent. You can for example include a discussion of your work or working processes in relation to the issue discussed. Subsequently, by writing about and comparing different ideas on the problem outlined you arrive via argument (agreeing and disagreeing with the examples used) at the articulation of your own ideas.

**Conclusion:** summarises the findings of this investigation and concludes the argument.

In the case of a practice-based essay you conclude the argument in relation to your own work. (This can be very useful as it clarifies to you your own working practices and influences.)

In the case of a written piece, you conclude the argument in relation to the topic discussed and the examples chosen for your discussion.

## Some general thoughts relevant to all forms of essay writing

The process of essay writing is not dissimilar from producing a sound work. You start from an initial idea, subsequently you record/research, collect and gather the material needed, then you start working on the composition/the text by drafting, editing and re-editing, going back to the beginning and readjusting the end, until you like the over-all expression of the work/the text and you feel it communicates what you want it to. In other words, you can never sit down and write it out in one go. It is important that you give yourself enough time to work in this way.

Do not be vague. Do not use sentences beginning ‘It could be argued’, ‘it has been said’. Instead tell us who articulated what and how you interpret and agree or disagree with their ideas. Give examples, use quotes, paraphrase, etc.

Paraphrasing means to explain somebody’s ideas in your own words. You have to be clear in acknowledging the author of these ideas. This can be more useful than a quote at times because you can directly juxtapose the ideas of somebody else with your own opinion and thoughts on these ideas.

Quotes are there to help you locate where your ideas come from and to demonstrate your understanding of them. This is why simply quoting is of limited use; you need to respond to quotes and interpret what they are saying so you can connect your own ideas with those articulated in the quotes. It is crucial that you reference quotes adequately and consistently so your reader understands where something is your own writing and where you are using somebody else’s words and so he/she could go and look up the text the quote came from. (For guidelines how to reference quotes please see below.)

You need to ‘own’ your argument. This means that when something is your argument signal this by saying ‘I am suggesting...’ ‘I am following Cage in saying..’, ‘I argue...’, ‘I disagree with Neuhaus when he states...’, etc. On the other hand, when something is not your argument but somebody else’s make this clear as well, by attributing the ideas to their author.

## Bibliographies and referencing

Whenever you refer to the work of others within your writing you must provide a reference to that work. You should not only reference the writing of others but also any other type of work (e.g. composition, performance, CD, film, exhibition). In addition to this, references are used not only when you quote directly from others’ work but also when you paraphrase or summarise the work.

There are a number of different reference systems but the one that we recommend you use is the Harvard System. In the Harvard System you compile a list of references — or bibliography — which is presented at the end of the main body of your writing. This list provides the details of the work to which you have referred (e.g. author, date of publication, publisher, title) in order that someone else may find the original work should they wish to refer to it as well.

## Writing a bibliography

A bibliography using the Harvard System looks something like this:

- Hunt, A. and M. Wanderley. 2002. "Mapping performer parameters to synthesis engines." *Organised Sound* 7(2): pp. 97-108.
- Levitin, D., S. McAdams and R. Adams. 2002. "Control parameters for musical instruments: a foundation for new mappings of gesture to sound." *Organised Sound* 7(2): pp. 171-89.
- Norman, S. J., M. Waisvisz and J. Ryan. 1998. *Touchstone* [online]. Amsterdam: STEIM. Available from <http://www.steim.org/steim/texts.php?id=2> [Accessed 26 October 2004].
- Roads, C. 1996. *The Computer Music Tutorial*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Rumsey, F. 1994. *MIDI systems and control*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Focal Press.
- Wishart, T. ( S. Emmerson, ed.) 1996. *On Sonic Art*. Reading: Harwood Academic Publishers.

The bibliography may contain works to which you do not refer specifically but are important to the subject under discussion.

In works you read you may see slight variations of the style shown above (e.g. brackets around the year, or different use of punctuation) but the key factor is consistency. You may see the format is different for various types of publication. The different types of publication are not divided into separate lists but combined into a single list in alphabetical order by surname. The most common sources are books and journals. You may think that the Internet is also quite common but you will notice that serious authors avoid the use of references to Internet pages. The many reasons for this will not be discussed here but try not to overuse the Internet as a resource; books and journals are simply more reliable.

The format for a book is:

Author. Year. *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher.

The information you need may be found in the first few pages of a published book. The details for the fourth item in the bibliography listed above are:

<b>Author</b>	C. Roads
<b>Year</b>	1996
<b>Title</b>	<i>The Computer Music Tutorial</i>
<b>Place of publication</b>	Massachusetts
<b>Publisher</b>	The MIT Press

Listed in our bibliography this becomes:

Roads, C. 1996. *The Computer Music Tutorial*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Notice that in the bibliography the author's name is listed with the surname first followed by their initials and the title of the book is italicised. In some bibliographies you may see the year placed in brackets (i.e. "Roads, C. (1996). *The Computer Music....*") you may do this but be consistent.

The format for a journal article is:

Author. Year. "Article Title." *Journal Title* Volume and part numbers: Page range.

You will often find the information you need on the first page of the article. The details for the first item in the bibliography listed above are:

<b>Author</b>	A. Hunt and M. Wanderley
<b>Year</b>	2002
<b>Article title</b>	Mapping performer parameters to synthesis engines
<b>Journal title</b>	Organised Sound
<b>Volume</b>	7
<b>Part</b>	2
<b>Page range</b>	97 to 108

Listed in our bibliography this becomes:

Hunt, A. and M. Wanderley. 2002. "Mapping performer parameters to synthesis engines." *Organised Sound* 7(2): pp. 97-108.

Notice that where there are multiple authors only the first author needs to be listed with the surname followed by initials, the others may be listed with their initials followed by their surname (see the second item in the bibliography for an example with three authors). Also note that the article title is placed in quotes and it is the journal title that is italicised. A journal volume is one year's worth of journal publications and there may be several parts to this volume (published monthly, quarterly or other time-period). The style adopted to present the volume and part numbers in the bibliography above is the volume number followed by the part number in brackets (i.e. "7(2)"). But you may write "Vol. 7. Part 2." if you wish, again it is most important to be consistent. The page range tells us the pages on which the article is to be found within that volume and part of the journal.

The style adopted to present the page numbers in the bibliography above is the abbreviation "pp." (meaning "pages") followed first page and last page separated by a dash (i.e. "pp. 97-108"). Notice in the second item in the bibliography the page range is "pp. 171-89" this clearly means "pages 171 to 189" but it is unnecessary to write "pp. 171-189".

The format for a web page is:

Author. Year. Title ["online"]. Place of publication: Publisher. "Available from" URL

[“Accessed” date accessed/downloaded].

The words shown in double quotes appear literally in your reference. Much of this information is often quite difficult to ascertain for a web page, and this highlights one of the problems of using the Internet as a source in academic writing. However, you should try to give as much information about the source as you can discover. The details for the third item in the bibliography listed above are:

<b>Author</b>	S. J. Norman, M. Waisvisz and J.Ryan
<b>Year</b>	1998
<b>Title</b>	<i>Touchstone</i>
<b>Place of publication</b>	Amsterdam
<b>Publisher</b>	STEIM
<b>URL</b>	<a href="http://www.steim.org/steim/texts.php?id=2">http://www.steim.org/steim/texts.php?id=2</a>
<b>Date accessed</b>	26 October 2004

Listed in our bibliography this becomes:

Norman, S. J., M. Waisvisz and J. Ryan. 1998. *Touchstone* [online]. Amsterdam: STEIM. Available from <http://www.steim.org/steim/texts.php?id=2> [Accessed 26 October 2004].

The most common pieces of information you will find difficult to discover are the year of publication and the place of publication. If you cannot discover the year put “No Date”. If there is no apparent author use the name of the web site (and you will probably use this as the publisher). The “date accessed” information is very important due to the transient nature of the Internet.

Finally, if there are two items by the same author in the same year they should be distinguished by placing an “a” after the year of one item and a “b” after the year of the other. For example, if the following item was added to our bibliography we would need to use this convention:

Rumsey, F. 1994. “New Dimensions: 4D audio recording at Deutsche Grammophon.” *Studio Sound* 36(1): pp. 27–32.

The two items, both by Rumsey and both published in 1994 need to be distinguishable (as will become apparent in the next section). The two items by Rumsey in 1994 would need to look like this in the bibliography:

Rumsey, F. 1994a. *MIDI systems and control*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Focal Press.  
 Rumsey, F. 1994b. “New Dimensions: 4D audio recording at Deutsche Grammophon.” *Studio Sound* 36(1): pp. 27–32.

In the following section all references are to the bibliography at the start of this section.

## Referencing your bibliography

Within your text you refer to a work listed in the bibliography using only the author's surname and the year (with any letters to distinguish between works by the same author in the same year as discussed above). Exactly how you do this depends on whether you are quoting or summarising and precisely how you fit the reference into your text.

If you are quoting from a work it **must** be in your bibliography, however there might be other works in your bibliography from which you did not quote directly but which you feel have been critical for the development of your arguments and thoughts in a more indirect way. These bibliographical references are included to present the field of research consulted when writing the essay.

Quotes must include a page reference in addition to the reference to the work. To reference a quote (long or short) the format is:

(Surname Year, Page)

The way in which you present the quote depends on its length. A long quote of more than three lines is given a separate paragraph without quotation marks and it is indented and with smaller spacing, as shown in the following example:

Curtis Roads discusses some problems with using rule-based systems for simulating musical styles:

A scientist may be justified in building a rule system (or *style template*) for a compositional style based purely on the logical relations in the scores of a style period. The surface of any music can be encoded into such rules. But no one would mistake the logic of a style template as anything resembling the actual process of human composition. (Roads 1996, p. 909)

You should try to make your wording before and after the quote work with the wording of the quote. You must not change the wording of the quote (nor must you change any punctuation) unless the changes are minor (i.e. the author's meaning is not misrepresented) and you make it clear that you have made a change. One type of change is to change or insert words, this is indicated by the use of square brackets as shown in the following example:

Curtis Roads questions a scientist's approach to algorithmic composition where

[the] scientist may be justified in building a rule system (or *style template*) for a compositional style based purely on the logical relations in the scores of a style period. The surface of any music can be encoded into such rules. But no one would mistake the logic of a style template as anything resembling the actual process of human composition. (Roads 1996, p. 909)

Here the word "the" substitutes "A". It is common to use this technique where the quote contains a "he", "she", "it" or "they" and you need to substitute the name of the person or thing in order to make the quote make sense.

You may also find a particularly useful quote where the beginning and end are very useful but the middle gives too much detail for the context of your work. In this case you may omit words or sentences by including an ellipsis (i.e. "...") but you must ensure the quote still makes sense and that you are not modifying the meaning intended by the author. You may need to use the technique above for substituting words to help you. The following example illustrates:

Curtis Roads questions a scientist's approach to algorithmic composition where [the] scientist may be justified in building a rule system (or *style template*) for a compositional style based purely on the logical relations in the scores of a style period ... [but] no one would mistake the logic of a style template as anything resembling the actual process of human composition. (Roads 1996, p. 909)

(Notice in the original "But" has a capital "B".)

A short quote of less than three lines uses the same rules but is presented within your current paragraph, between quotes, as shown in the following example:

Mapping in the field of electronic musical instruments may be defined as 'taking real-time performance data from an input device and using it to control the parameters of a synthesis engine' (Hunt and Wanderley 2002, p. 98).

Since there are two authors in the above example, both authors are listed. (An example below illustrates what to do where there are more than two authors.)

You will not always want or need to quote from the work of others but you may need to use the ideas of others to build your own ideas or to construct an argument. In this case you are still required to reference the work even though you presenting the work (i.e. the ideas) of others in your own words, i.e. you are paraphrasing.

In this case the name of the author may or may not fall within your sentence, as the following alternatives illustrate. The first example does not use the author's name within our sentence:

It is well known that all sounding bodies emit sonic radiation in their own unique pattern (Roads 1996).

The format for this is very similar to a quotation without any page number information:

(Surname Year)

An alternative to the above example using author's name within our sentence might be:

Roads (1996) points out that all sounding bodies emit sonic radiation in their own

unique pattern.

The format for this is the same except the author's name does not appear within the brackets. Where there are more than two authors of a work (as in the second item in our bibliography where there are three authors) do not list all of the names when you reference the work in your text (although you must list all names in the bibliography). You should list the first author's name followed by "et al" as shown in the following example:

Levitin et al (2002) opted to label the three temporal stages of a musical event *beginning*, *middle* and *end* in favour of the more conventional terms *attack*, *sustain* and *release*.

It is often appropriate to reference several works — using semicolons to separate the references — as shown in the following example:

Whether for a musical instrument, an audio console, a video mixer or computer game, the choice of mapping scheme is highly important (Hunt and Wanderley 2002; Levitin et al 2002).

### Further Information

This guide is intended to get you started rather than being a comprehensive document. For further information on reference systems and essays writing please consult Middlesex University Library (on using the Harvard system) and the following texts:

Clanchy, J. and B. Ballard. 1992. *How to Write Essays*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Watson, G. 1987. *Writing a Thesis: a Guide to Long Essays and Dissertations*. London: Longman.

Johnson, R. 1996. *Writing Essays: Guidance Notes for Students*. Manchester: Clifton Press.

Williams, K. 1999. *Writing Essays*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

Turley Marggraf, R. 2000. *Writing Essays: a Guide for Students in English and the Humanities*. London: Routledge Falmer.