

IF YOU CAN WRITE, YOU CAN COMPOSE

By Dr. Charles Rochester Young

HOW CAN MY WRITING EXPERIENCE HELP ME TEACH COMPOSING?

1. Music and writing have many structural similarities.

Both disciplines use the terms compose, meter, rhythm, phrase, cadence, tone, form and audience in similar ways. Creators in both disciplines write down their ideas.

2. Music teachers and students have been writing words longer than music.

Therefore, writing instruction can provide a less intimidating entry point for musical composition.

3. The creative process is much bigger than just composing.

Since school writing teachers already teach the creative process, they can help music teachers do the same. My students often say that composing music is more similar to writing classes than to other music classes.

4. Many writing teachers emphasize creative thinking over teaching how to write.

Writing classes aren't solely for training professional writers. Composition teaching isn't solely about training professional composers either.

5. Professional writers rarely teach public school writing classes.

Similarly, music teachers don't need professional composing experience to teach composing.

6. Teachers have taught writing to many students for many years.

Every student in every school takes writing classes, so writing teachers have seen just about everything you'll encounter. As a result, numerous writing exercises, teaching methods, lesson plans, and assessment rubrics have been developed. All can be adapted for composing music.

7. Writers have more books on the creative process than composers.

I use a writing book, *If You Can Talk, You Can Write* by Joel Saltzman, as the textbook for my university composition class. The following writing books are my favorites:

Writing With Both Sides of Your Brain—Henriette Anne Klauser

100 Things Every Writer Needs to Know—Scott Edelstein

The Right to Write--Julia Cameron

Writing Down the Bones—Natalie Goldberg

WHAT WRITING CONCEPTS CAN HELP MY COMPOSING STUDENTS?

1. If you're not sure how to start, start anyway.

A story can begin with a word, a sentence, or a mood. Similarly, a composition can begin with a single note, a chord progression, a rhythm, or just about anything else. You can even start by writing the ending or the middle!

2. Inspiration can only follow many hours of hard work.

Writer Jack London said, "You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club."¹

3. Make your first draft a "sloppy copy."

Brainstorm and throw as many words (notes) on the page as possible. Only revise after brainstorming an entire draft. Author John Steinbeck said, "Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on."² Writer James Thurber agreed by saying, "Don't get it right. Get it written."³

4. There is no single "right" way to write or compose.

Every piece and writer (composer) is unique. Some use pencil and paper. Others use the computer, piano or tape recorder. Some research or outline before they write. Others just start writing.

5. Good grammar doesn't automatically make it good writing.

If good grammar equals good writing, then the dictionary is thrilling. Good writers (composers) usually capture the spirit of an idea first and fix grammar (rules of music theory) later on. Author Hallie Burnett said, "I would rather you had something to say with no technique, than have technique with nothing to say."⁴

6. Revising is a normal and sometimes lengthy part of the process.

If you're constantly revising, you have distinguished company. Ernest Hemingway rewrote the ending to *A Farewell to Arms* 38 times and Beethoven revised the opening to his *Fifth Symphony* over 100 times. Poet Robert Frost said, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader."⁵

7. Mean what you say. Say what you mean.

Write more than you need, then eliminate everything that isn't meaningful. Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer said, "The writer's best friend is the wastepaper basket."⁶

8. You'll never insult your audience by writing too clearly.

Business writer Patricia Westheimer said, "Writing is to express, not to impress."⁷ If the audience doesn't understand what you're trying to say, make it clearer.

¹ Saltzman, Joel (1993). *If You Can Talk, You Can Write (1st Ed.)*. Page 169. New York: Warner

² Saltzman, Joel (1993). *If You Can Talk, You Can Write (1st Ed.)*. Page 16. New York: Warner

³ Winokur, Jon (1999). *Advice to Writers (1st Ed.)*. Page 145. New York: Random House

⁴ Winokur, Jon (1999). *Advice to Writers (1st Ed.)*. Page 165. New York: Random House

⁴ Saltzman, Joel (1993). *If You Can Talk, You Can Write (1st Ed.)*. Page 71. New York: Warner

⁴ Saltzman, Joel (1993). *If You Can Talk, You Can Write (1st Ed.)*. Page 116. New York: Warner

⁴ Gordon, William A. (2000), *The Quotable Writer ((1st Ed.)*. Page 52. New York: McGraw-Hill