

ENG 1302: Composition II

Writing About Music

Section 01 · Tuesday / Thursday 9:30–10:45 AM · Fall 2026
Sul Ross State University

Professor: Stephen Hager, Ph.D.

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Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday 2-3:30

Email: shager@sulross.edu

Course platform: Blackboard

Course Description

This course will help you develop your ability to write clearly, purposefully, and persuasively. Throughout the semester, you will practice writing as a form of critical inquiry. That means writing as a way to learn, reflect, and advance your thinking. Regular writing will help you ask better questions, respond to other voices, describe with precision, and build more thoughtful arguments.

Our subject is music, and the possibilities and problems of writing about it. No prior experience writing about music is necessary, and you do not need to read music or know any theory. What you need is an open mind and a willingness to engage seriously with complex questions about music, media, and personal taste. We will read published attempts to describe, interpret, and evaluate a range of musical works, from Beethoven to OutKast and from Céline Dion to Miles Davis, and in response we will write essays that analyze particular songs, albums, and the debates that surround them.

The course is built around five questions:

- What makes writing about music clear, vivid, and worth reading?
- How can writing put into words something as hard to pin down as musical sound?
- How do our own tastes shape what we notice, value, and dismiss?
- How does learning about a song's or album's context change the way we hear it?
- How can an album create meaning beyond any individual song?

We move through these in three units (Descriptive Writing, Tastes, and The Album), each culminating in a formal essay.

Course Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- **Describe music in precise, vivid language**, anchoring claims to specific, locatable moments in the sound rather than to vague impressions.
- **Analyze how other writers work**: how a piece of criticism translates sound into words, builds an argument, and persuades.

- **Examine your own tastes critically**, understanding how they shape and limit what you hear, and practicing a “sympathetic hearing” of music you resist.
- **Make an argument about a whole album** as a shaped artistic object, not merely a collection of songs.
- **Write flexibly and purposefully**, moving beyond formula toward writing as genuine inquiry, and revise your work in response to feedback.

English Student Learning Outcomes

- Students will develop critical thinking skills to include creative thinking, innovation, inquiry, and analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information.
- Students will develop communication skills to include effective development, interpretation and expression of ideas through written, oral, and visual communication.

How the Course Works

Student writing will be at the center of the course. Your writing, and that of your classmates, will be discussed regularly, in small groups and as a class. By the end of the semester, every student will have work shared for class discussion, so your audience includes not only me but your classmates as well.

In general, **Tuesdays** focus on the songs, albums, and readings we are studying; **Thursdays** are devoted to discussion of your writing. In practice, you will complete the reading and listening before Tuesday's class, then draft and submit that week's Weekly Writing by 5:00 PM Wednesday on Blackboard, so I can read it before Thursday. For Unit Three, we will switch things up a bit.

Early in the semester you'll be placed in a small Peer-Review group of three or four. Over the term you'll practice giving and receiving feedback that is specific and useful. Reading your classmates' work closely will make you a stronger writer and help bring us together as a community of thinkers.

Assignments

Detailed instructions for every Weekly Writing assignment and Writing Project will be posted on Blackboard.

Weekly Writing (10 points total)

Each week you'll write a short response (usually 250–500 words) to what we read and hear. These are exploratory rather than formal. Think of them as a space to test ideas, raise questions, and begin working through what we'll discuss in class. Weekly Writing 1 will be completed in class; unless otherwise noted, the others are due on Blackboard by 5:00 PM Wednesday.

To encourage exploration, Weekly Writing submitted on time and meeting the basic requirements earns full credit. Late or incomplete work receives half credit. Rather than commenting on every response individually, I'll often share writing in class so we can discuss your ideas together.

Writing Projects (25 points each; 75 total)

You'll write three essays, each read and evaluated by me and your classmates:

- **Writing Project 1 — Describing Music** (due Sep 22)
- **Writing Project 2 — A Sympathetic Hearing** (due Oct 27)
- **Writing Project 3 — The Album as Form** (due Dec 1)

I am not interested in formulaic five-paragraph essays or stiff introduction-body-conclusion structures like they ask for on standardized testing. One of the main goals of this course is to help you move beyond formula into more flexible, thoughtful inquiry, so that writing becomes a way of deepening your understanding rather than defending a claim you already hold. I'll judge your work by the seriousness, precision, and imagination with which you pursue the questions at hand.

Revision

I'll respond to each essay with written comments focused on revision. Over the semester you'll have the opportunity to revise two of your three essays, and a strong revision can raise the grade by up to three points.

Attendance & Participation (15 points)

This course depends on discussion of shared readings, listening, and your own writing, so showing up and contributing matters. Participation includes speaking in class discussion, engaging seriously in your peer-review group, and being present for the albums we listen to together in Unit Three — Kind of Blue, Revolver, and Blue are each played once, straight through, in class, and that experience can't be recreated afterward.

You begin the semester with full credit. You may miss up to two class meetings without penalty. Beginning with the third absence, each additional absence lowers this grade by 3 points, to a floor of zero at the seventh absence. A seventh absence also results in failing the course, regardless of your grades on other work. University-approved absences and accommodations will be handled according to university policy.

Grading

Component	Points
Attendance & Participation	15
Weekly Writing	10
Writing Project 1	25
Writing Project 2	25
Writing Project 3	25
Total	100

To pass the course, you must complete all three essays and at least 9 of the 11 Weekly Writing assignments.

Letter grades: A = 90–100; B = 80–89; C = 70–79; D = 60–69; F = below 60.

If you are ever unsure about your standing in the course, please ask.

Materials

Your reading and listening materials are on Blackboard on a week-by week basis, in line with the syllabus. I've included a link to Spotify playlists, but if you don't have Spotify please use the Youtube links.

One book anchors Unit Two:

- **Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste* (Bloomsbury, expanded edition)**

Course Policies

Late work. Weekly Writing submitted after the 5:00 PM Wednesday deadline but before Thursday's class receives half credit; because this writing prepares us for Thursday's discussion, it will normally not be accepted after class begins. Writing Projects lose one point for each calendar day they are late. All three Writing Projects must be completed to pass the course. If circumstances will prevent you from meeting a deadline, contact me as soon as possible.

Technology. Laptops and tablets are welcome in class for accessing readings, taking notes, and completing course-related work. Please keep phones put away unless we are using them for a class activity. During class, use your devices only for work related to the course; unrelated browsing, messaging, and social media are distracting both to you and to the people around you.

Communication. The best way to reach me is at shager@sulross.edu. I'm usually quick to respond.

Artificial intelligence. The use of generative artificial intelligence is prohibited for any writing you do in this course. This includes Weekly Writing, Writing Projects, drafts, outlines, revisions, and any other written work submitted for class. The work of this course is learning to hear something clearly and find your own words for it. That is built by doing it, badly at first, and it is the part of this course that will still be yours in ten years. Text generated or substantially rewritten by ChatGPT, Claude, or any similar system is not your writing.

Any submitted work that has been generated or substantially written by AI will receive a zero for the assignment and may also be handled under the university's academic integrity policy. Your writing will regularly be shared and discussed in class, so you should only submit work you are prepared to claim as your own, discuss with your classmates, and explain how you wrote. Do not put yourself in the position of having to defend writing that you did not produce.

If you are unsure whether a particular tool or use is permitted, ask me before using it. Asking is never held against you. If you are stuck, come to office hours or email me. A rough paragraph you wrote yourself is worth more to me than a polished one you did not write, and it is worth far more to you. I cannot teach you to write better if what I am reading is not yours, so please do not waste both of our time.

University AI data-privacy notice. Separate from this course's policy above, the University requires that students be informed of the following: the University does not recommend or endorse any specific AI tools or resources. Many generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot) store user input and may use this data to train future models; students should never

upload or share personal, confidential, or identifiable information into any generative AI platform. When using AI tools, students should verify whether the tool complies with student privacy standards as indicated by the University. The University is not liable for any adverse experience or impact when students interact with these tools.

Required University Statements

- **Students with Disabilities (ADA) / Accessibility Services:** Sul Ross State University (SRSU) is committed to equal access in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1973. It is SRSU policy to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. It is the student's responsibility to initiate a request each semester for each class. To help protect confidentiality, students seeking accessibility/accommodation(s) services must submit the Accommodation Request Form located on the SRSU website. Students are welcome to call the Office of Accessibility Services at 432-837-8203 or stop by Ferguson Hall Room 112 if they have any additional questions regarding the process. Mailing address: PO Box C-122; Alpine, TX; 79832.
- **Student Responsibilities:** All full-time and part-time students are responsible for familiarizing themselves with the Student Handbook and the Undergraduate & Graduate Catalog and for abiding by University rules and regulations. Additionally, students are responsible for checking their Sul Ross email as an official form of communication from the university. Every student is expected to obey all federal, state, and local laws and to familiarize themselves with the requirements of such laws.
- **THECB Marketable Skills:**
 - Students will communicate effectively in writing and speaking.
 - Students will use different research strategies to address problems and develop ideas that engage a variety of perspectives.
 - Students will recognize how social and cultural contexts shape meaning and language.

Course Schedule

Unless a week says otherwise, Tuesdays take up that week's listening and reading, and Thursdays are given to discussion of your writing. Weekly Writing is due on Blackboard by 5:00 PM Wednesday.

Unit One — Descriptive Writing

What makes writing about music vivid, precise, and persuasive?

Week 1 · Aug 25 and 27 · Writing from the Music You Love

Listening: OutKast, “ATLiens,” “Wheelz of Steel,” “Wailin’,” “West Savannah,” “Da Art of Storytelling” (Pt. 1 & 2)”

Reading: Kiese Laymon, “Da Art of Storytelling” (A Prequel)”

Weekly Writing 1: completed in class Thursday; no Blackboard submission.

Week 2 · Sep 1 and 3 · Turning Sound into Feeling

Listening: Beethoven, first 6 minutes of Symphony No. 3 (“Eroica”), I. Allegro con brio

Reading: Leonard Bernstein, from *The Infinite Variety of Music*, pp. 195–210. You don't need to read music; see the reading note on Blackboard.

Weekly Writing 2: due Wed. Sep. 2 by 5:00 PM

Week 3 · Sep 8 and 10 · Annotating a Song: Two Vantage Points

Listening: Sleater-Kinney, “Call the Doctor,” “I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone,” “I'm Not Waiting,” “Male Model”; Katy Perry, “Teenage Dream”; Rosalía, “Pienso en Tu Mirá”

Reading: Owen Pallett, “Skin Tight Jeans and Syncopation”; Carrie Brownstein, from *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*, pp. 106–111

Weekly Writing 3: due Wed. Sep. 9 by 5:00 PM

Week 4 · Sep 15 and 17 · Description as the Ground of Everything

Listening: The National, “All the Wine,” “Apartment Story”; Van Morrison, “Astral Weeks,” “Cyprus Avenue,” “Madame George”

Reading: Peter Coviello, from *Long Players* (“Apartment Story”); Lester Bangs, “Astral Weeks,” pp. 152–154

Weekly Writing 4: due Wed. Sep. 16 by 5:00 PM

Week 5 · Sep 22 and 24 · Writing Project 1

Tuesday: Writing Project 1 due. Bring four copies. We share essays in class and you write an evaluation of your own.

Thursday: revision and peer review; bridge into Unit Two.

Unit Two — Tastes

How can a critical examination of our own musical tastes help us write more thoughtfully about music?

Week 6 · Sep 29 and Oct 1 · Where Do Our Tastes Come From? (Powers)

In class Tuesday: bring an annotated list of five songs that represent your taste, three copies.

Listening: Aretha Franklin, “Don't Play That Song Again”; The Shirelles, “Dedicated to the One I Love”; Jim Croce, “I'll Have to Say I Love You in a Song”; Dinah Washington, “The Song Is Ended”

Reading: Ann Powers, “I'll Have to Say I Love You in a Song”

Weekly Writing 5: due Wed. Sep. 30 by 5:00 PM

Week 7 · Oct 6 and 8 · The Rebuttal (Hornby)

Listening: Bruce Springsteen, “Thunder Road”; Nelly Furtado, “I'm Like a Bird”; Led Zeppelin, “Heartbreaker”; Rufus Wainwright, “One Man Guy”

Reading: Nick Hornby, from *Songbook*, pp. 3–27

Weekly Writing 6: due Wed. Oct. 7 by 5:00 PM

Week 8 · Oct 13 and 15 · You Didn't Choose Your Taste (Wilson)

Listening: Céline Dion, “It's All Coming Back to Me Now,” “Because You Loved Me”

Reading: Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love*, ch. 1 (“Let's Talk About Hate”) and ch. 3 (“Let's Talk in French”)

Weekly Writing 7: due Wed. Oct. 14 by 5:00 PM

Week 9 · Oct 20 and 22 · Sympathetic Hearing (Wilson)

Listening: Céline Dion, “My Heart Will Go On”; Selena, “Como La Flor,” “Amor Prohibido,” “Dreaming of You”

Reading for Tuesday: Wilson, ch. 7 (“Let's Talk About Taste”) and ch. 8 (“Let's Talk About Who's Got Bad Taste”); Bourdieu, and why we're most confident about our dislikes

Reading before you write: Wilson, ch. 11 (“Let's Talk About Let's Talk About Love”), where Wilson finally writes the review

Weekly Writing 8: due Wed. Oct. 21 by 5:00 PM

Week 10 · Oct 27 and 29 · Writing Project 2

Tuesday: Writing Project 2 due. Bring four copies. Workshop and self-evaluation.

Thursday: discussion of sample essays; bridge into Unit Three.

Unit Three — The Album

How does an album create meaning beyond the single song?

Three albums in three weeks, then the last essay. These weeks run differently: we listen to each album together in class, straight through and without interruption, on its Tuesday. Read for these weeks after that class and before you write on Wednesday.

Week 11 · Nov 3 and 5 · The Album as Sustained Mood

In class Tuesday: Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue*, straight through, about 46 minutes. Listen again on your own before you write.

Reading before you write: Bill Evans, “Improvisation in Jazz” (1959 liner notes); David Byrne, “Creation in Reverse,” ch. 1 of *How Music Works*, entire chapter.

Weekly Writing 9: due Wed. Nov. 4 by 5:00 PM

Week 12 · Nov 10 and 12 · The Album as Studio Craft

In class Tuesday: The Beatles, *Revolver*, straight through, about 35 minutes. Listen again on your own before you write.

Reading before you write: Geoff Emerick, from *Here, There and Everywhere*, “Innovation and Invention: The Making of *Revolver*.” Emerick was the Beatles' recording engineer, 21 years old when these sessions began. He is a participant with a stake in the story, so read him accordingly.

Weekly Writing 10: due Wed. Nov. 11 by 5:00 PM

Week 13 · Nov 17 and 19 · The Album as Intimate Confession

In class Tuesday: Joni Mitchell, *Blue*, straight through, about 36 minutes. Listen again on your own before you write.

Reading before you write: Ann Powers, “Joni Mitchell's *Blue* at 50” (NPR, 2021)

Weekly Writing 11: due Wed. Nov. 18 by 5:00 PM

Thursday Nov 19: Writing Project 3 album approval. If you want to write on an album of your own rather than one of ours, bring an index card with the album, one sentence on why it was made as an album, and one sonic event in it you could build on. No approvals after this date.

Week 14 · Nov 24 · Writing the Essay

No class Thursday: Thanksgiving holiday.

Tuesday: Writing Project 3 workshop. This is the last class before your essay is due and the only one where a draft can still change. Bring one page: your thesis in a single sentence, and the three strongest things you heard that support it. A full draft is welcome but not required. We workshop the argument, not the prose. Use the break to draft.

Week 15 · Dec 1 · Course Conclusion

No class Thursday: Dead Day.

Tuesday: Writing Project 3 due. Bring four copies. Our final meeting: workshop the essays, and look back across the whole course: from a single sonic event, to our own tastes, to the album as a whole.