

## What is the purpose of writing program notes?

Program notes enhance your audience's listening experience by providing meaningful context about your pieces and their composers. They are a chance to share any particularly interesting information that may add to their overall understanding and appreciation of what they're about to hear. Incidentally, these are all things you yourself should already know about your pieces—things without which you cannot truly 'know' or understand the repertoire you intend to perform. And lastly, this is an opportunity for you to develop the essential skills of writing good program notes—something many of you will find yourselves having to do again in your future careers as professional musicians.

## What makes a good program note?

Program notes are very much like pre-concert remarks in that they point out interesting and relevant facts about your pieces in a concise, well-organized way that is engaging to read and easy to understand.

Components of effective program notes include:

- **Historical and social context for the piece and/or composer**
  - DO include when and where the piece was written, and when and by whom it was first performed (if known).
    - *Example:* Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time was written while the composer was being held in a German prisoner-of-war camp during World War II. The quartet was first performed on January 15, 1941 by Messiaen and his fellow POWs.
  - DO mention if the piece was written for a specific person, or inspired by (or in reaction to) a specific thing or event.
    - *Example:* Handel wrote his Dettingen Te Deum, HWV 283, to mark the victory of the British army over the French at the Battle of Dettingen in the War of the Austrian Succession.
  - Do NOT include biographical details for composers that are 'household names,' and devote the valuable space instead to talking about the music itself.
  - For composers that may not be as familiar to the audience, DO include a few lines of biographical information.
- **Interesting and relevant things to help "guide" your listener through the piece**
  - DO describe musical structures/patterns and/or unique instrumentation that may help listeners better understand the piece, e.g. ground bass, da capo aria, rondo, fast-slow-fast movement scheme.
  - Do NOT include technical terms like crescendo/diminuendo, forte/piano, sonata form, etc. unless absolutely necessary.
  - If you have to use them, DO assume that your readers will not be as musically literate as you or your fellow music school peers, and do them the courtesy of **explaining any technical terms in the simplest way possible**. If you can't define a technical term in fewer than two sentences, leave it out or find another way of saying the same thing.
  - **Avoid mentioning specific keys or tonalities** unless there is some direct relevance to the point you're making in your notes.
    - *Example:* Do NOT just say, "The second movement is in the key of E major." This matter-of-fact statement is meaningless to most readers and contributes nothing to enhancing their listening experience.
    - *Example:* DO say, "In this aria, Bach chose the remote key of E-flat minor to illustrate the suffering of Christ on the cross." This helps your listener interpret the meaning of what they are hearing.
- **Proper formatting and style**
  - Program notes should be engaging and concise, and kept to a **minimum of 400 words, and a maximum of 1000 words**.
  - Formatting-wise, a good strategy is starting with a few sentences that provide historical/social context and biographical information, followed by pointing out some interesting and relevant highlights about the piece.
    - Highlighting one to three of the most interesting points about each piece or composer is sufficient. There will always be more to say than there is room to include, and that's okay—you're not writing a comprehensive exam paper here.
    - If there is too much information to present in one paragraph, separate these two components (historical context and biography, and interesting highlights) into two paragraphs.

- Program notes are not research papers, so **do NOT include citations**. But take care that direct quotations must still be correctly attributed to their source.
  - If the source of the direct quotation might not be familiar to the general public, DO provide some additional context to give the reader some idea why they should care what this particular person said.
    - *Example:* “According to the noted musicologist and Handel scholar, Ellen Rosand, this oratorio represents...”
- DO keep your notes concise by sticking to objective facts.
  - Do NOT use such subjective descriptions as, “The slow movement is followed by an Allegro of great difficulty and virtuosity.”
  - What you consider to be ‘difficult’ or ‘easy’ may not be so to others.
- DO write from a third-person point of view, and AVOID using “I” or “my” whenever possible.
  - Your personal assessment of the piece, or the fact that you may consider a certain piece to be ‘my favorite sonata or aria,’ is not relevant to the reader.

## Grading

Program notes comprise 25% of a student’s final recital grade. Program notes will be graded on content and timeliness of submission based on the criteria outlined on this [rubric](#).

Program notes submitted more than 6 days late will automatically receive a 0. If your program notes are submitted more than 6 days late, we will determine if there is enough time to proofread the notes and include them in your printed program. Students that neglect to turn in program notes will also receive a 0.

Students who receive a 0 on their program notes will receive at most a 75% on their final recital grade, which equates to a C letter grade.

## DePaul Writing Center

Whether you’re a seasoned writer or someone in need of writing help, we highly encourage EVERYONE to use the [DePaul Writing Center](#), a FREE on-campus resource available to all DePaul University students, alumni, faculty and staff. The Writing Center’s peer writing tutors will work with you at any stage of your writing process, even when you’re just getting started, so you don’t need to have a draft or even an outline.

The Writing Center offers both in-person and virtual appointments to help you plan, draft, revise, and/or polish your work. Visit <https://condor.depaul.edu/writing/> for more information on the services they provide, or to schedule an appointment.

## Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is THEFT and defined in DePaul’s [Academic Integrity Policy](#) as using “words, ideas, or work products attributed to an identifiable source, without attributing the work to the source from which it was obtained, in a situation where there is a legitimate expectation of original authorship in order to obtain benefit, credit, or gain.”

In the context of program notes, this includes (but is not limited to):

- Copying and pasting material directly from Wikipedia or other websites without attributing the content to their original sources
- Copying someone else’s already-written program notes found online or in a printed booklet and submitting them as your own original work.

The point of writing program notes is for you to do your own research and organize this information IN YOUR OWN WORDS for the benefit of your audience and readers. Direct quotations must be properly attributed to their sources, and under no circumstances are you allowed to simply “quote” someone else’s program notes in their entirety and use them as your own program notes. Program notes written by ChatGPT and other Artificial Intelligence platforms are also considered plagiarism.

Plagiarism is unethical, and as a violation of the University’s [Academic Integrity Policy](#), carries serious consequences: any program notes found to be plagiarized will be automatically given a zero, and the student will receive an F for the program notes portion of their recital grade.

If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes plagiarism, please carefully read the University’s [Academic Integrity Policy](#), or make an appointment to consult with one of the peer writing tutors at the [DePaul Writing Center](#).