

Guidelines for Written Evaluations

The aim of written evaluations is to nurture students, affirm their achievement, provide constructive criticism, and encourage them to keep composing.

- **Use a supportive and optimistic tone of voice in assessing student work.**

The tone should evoke the character of a person-to-person conversation, and the evaluator should seem more like a collaborative artist than a judge.

- **Remember how you felt when you were the age of the composer.**

Composition is quite personal, and most students are very vulnerable to criticism. It is easy for students to become discouraged.

- **Begin and end with positive comments.**

Most students begin reading their evaluations with a feeling of anxiety, so the evaluator should break the ice. Especially with very young composers, positive comments should outnumber critical points.

- **Focus on the future.**

In most cases, the composition being evaluated feels to a student like part of his or her past, so it is helpful to spin learning toward the next composition. Particularly when serving as an outside evaluator, include statements like: "You may have already tried this, but in a future piece you could..."

- **Clearly differentiate between objective and subjective elements.**

For example, it is an error to write outside the range of an instrument, but it is not required that a first theme return in the tonic, or even return at all. For subjective points, helpful phrases include: "you may wish to" or "you might consider."

- **Phrase comments in the form of questions sometimes.**

This approach avoids sounding overly judgmental, and it encourages the student to think and wonder. For example, if there is no chance for a singer or wind player to take a breath in a phrase, ask the student where the best place for a breath would be.

- **Explain the terms you use.**

Most students have a limited grasp of technical terms. If the composers are not your own students, encourage them to discuss the terms with their teacher.

- **Teach each student his or her own composition.**

Many students compose intuitively, so it is helpful for the evaluator to embed an analysis of the form and technique of the composition within the evaluation.

- **Highlight emerging shoots of success when addressing problems.**

For example, if the composition lacks variety, find a few examples where the student *does* achieve variety and explain how those techniques could be extended.

- **Include musical notation in written evaluations.**

It is often helpful to musically illustrate comments and suggestions and to demonstrate correct notation.

- **Recognize your own spheres of expertise and limits of knowledge.**

For example, you may not be the best judge of a hip-hop composition or big band jazz chart, so you should seek guidance when needed.

- **Suggest musical repertoire for study.**

Guiding the students to relevant scores and recordings can effectively support the written evaluation by providing models that nurture and encourage their creative growth.