

**Princeton University Department of Music**

**Undergraduate  
Independent Work Guide  
2024-2025**



## **Department of Music Independent Work Guide**

The Department of Music at Princeton University is a vibrant and eclectic community that engages with music in many ways: composing it, performing it, analyzing it, researching it, and communicating about it. The undergraduate major cultivates a curiosity and passion for music through these varied approaches. Faculty members endeavor to activate multiple forms of engagement while encouraging students to consider their interrelation.

In broad strokes, students in the department have historically identified themselves either as “composers” (people who write music) or “musicologists” (people who write about music). This distinction is heuristically useful to some extent, and this guide will employ those terms for the sake of clarity and convenience. The distinction is not official, however: transcripts simply state “concentration in music” (any emphasis or specialization within “music” is unofficial and informal). In recent years, we have also witnessed an increasing number of students working between composition and musicology, exploring methods and material from other disciplines, and integrating their experience as performers into their independent work. We welcome such omnivorousness, while simultaneously providing an environment for students who wish to write or write about music in a more conventional manner.

Because of our commitment to a plurality of approaches music, we avoid generalizations under the banner of “a portrait of the discipline of music.” Instead, students work closely with experienced advisors, who help them shape their projects into singular products. For a selection of recent senior theses, see the series on our website “Advisee Stories.” A selection of recent junior paper topics is available upon request from the Director of Undergraduate Studies.

### **Goals**

Irrespective of methodology or approach, music majors may consider the following set of general goals. As music majors, students:

- Develop technical proficiency. This proficiency can take many forms, but we expect students to develop skills and techniques necessary to carry out a project. Examples range from capacity in orchestration and counterpoint, to knowledge of other languages and facility with computer languages; other examples are familiarity with empirical research processes, and archival and ethnographic methods. Note well: “skills” should never be trivialized as “too applied.” Studying counterpoint or audio engineering is, at least in part, about developing and enriching a music practice—one that has concrete intellectual challenges and requires solid knowledgebases.
- Learn how to apply skills or techniques appropriately to the project at hand. Over the course of junior and senior years, students will hone skills as needed to complete independent work, while simultaneously shaping projects according to existing skill sets.
- Learn how to position independent work within the history of music. For example, a recent senior thesis on experimental music included as essay on the history of the

practice, situating experimentalism within the contexts of improvisation and Black radicalism.

- Conceive how independent work is situated within a domain of specialists.
- Cultivate the ability to imagine critical responses to work. Students need to be able to dialogue with critics in an informed manner.
- Learn to manage the inevitable frustrations and roadblocks that arise, while carrying out independent work.
- Engage closely with the methods learned in coursework and familiarize themselves with relevant music and/or literature.

To put this in more prosaic terms, we want our majors to discover a passion for what they are doing, while also learning how that passion aligns with abilities (this, in turn, often means *discovering* what one's abilities are!).

A senior thesis is typically not so much a linear process but a reiterative one. Students may finish a middle section only to realize that they need to hone a particular skill to improve an earlier part. It is very important students to pace themselves in conducting their independent work. Our experience has been that the more time a student is able to dedicate to their project, the more likely it is to be of higher quality. Many seniors plan their coursework throughout their career so that they need only take a light course load for their final semester, allowing them to concentrate on their theses. Students should plan to do work on their thesis regularly and avoid writing it all at the last minute.

### **Independent Work**

During their time at Princeton, students produce two year-long independent projects: a junior project (JP) and a senior thesis. Projects can take many forms, including research and writing about a topic of interest, composing new music, or a combination of the two. Even within that range, there is enormous flexibility: essays might focus on performance practices, cultural studies, historical research, analytical or theoretical studies, and more; while composition projects might take the shape of, for example, an album of songs, a string quartet, an instrument-building project, a music-theater work or scenes from an original opera, an orchestral piece, or improvisation-centered work. Hybrid projects that combine written work with compositional work (in the broadest sense) are also possible and encouraged.

#### Junior Seminar (MUS 300)

Students begin work on junior projects during the Junior Seminar, a for-credit course taught by an experienced faculty member in the Department of Music.

The function of the Junior Seminar is to introduce students to key methodological, technical, creative, and disciplinary issues entailed in the study and making of music. The seminar involves making, writing about, and analyzing music. It has three additional institutional functions. First, it is intended as a space for music concentrators to convene and collaborate. Second, it provides an opportunity for students to meet department faculty and to get a sense of the department as a whole. Third, students begin work on their Junior Project, identifying a faculty advisor and

developing a working plan/proposal for the year-long project. The proposal consists of a summary of the project aims and context, an outline, and references to related work (bibliography for research papers, associated repertoire for compositions, and other material as appropriate to the project).

### Proposal for the Junior Project

In the Junior Seminar, and toward the end of the Fall semester of the junior year (early December), students complete a proposal and secure an advisor for the junior project. Note that the junior project is considered a year-long endeavor, beginning the moment students begin the Junior Seminar. Students might consider the proposal a halfway point and as the culmination of the seminar, and of the final product (due in the Spring) as the culmination of the entire junior project.

Proposals vary depending on the nature of the project. Specifics should be determined in consultation with an advisor. Students should also feel welcome to discuss JP proposals with the Director of Undergraduate Studies as well as the instructor of the Junior Seminar. Here are some broad outlines:

**Musicologists:** Write a proposal of 3-4 pages outlining your thesis and methodology. Make sure to clearly explain the stakes of the project. In addition, prepare an annotated bibliography of at least four sources.

You will learn how to build a bibliography in your field in the junior seminar. Consider familiarizing yourself with the following resources:

- *Grove Music Online*, a comprehensive encyclopedia, with sections dedicated to American music, jazz, and opera, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>
- *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, an encyclopedia for the musics of the world, with sound samples.
- RILM, the music research index, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.princeton.edu/rilm/>
- Scholarly journals on music, such as *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, *Music Theory Spectrum*, *Ethnomusicology*, *Popular Music*, *Perspectives of New Music*, and many others. Current issues are in the periodicals reading room in the Mendel Library, and many can be read online on JSTOR or Project Muse.
- Handbooks on certain fields, such as the Oxford Handbook series (e.g., *The Oxford Handbook of Computer Music*), Cambridge Companion series (e.g., *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*), or Cambridge Histories series (e.g., *Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*)

**Composers:** Write 2 pages of prose describing the piece you plan to write. You may write about aspects such as:

- The motivation behind the project.

- Stylistic elements. What kind of harmonic and/or melodic language will you deploy?
- Medial / technical considerations. What instrumentation do you plan to use? Do you plan to use electronics and, if so, what DAWs, programming languages, or other devices will you make use of?

In addition to the 2 pages of prose, include 2-4 pages of musical sketches—these may be notated melodies, harmonic outlines, pictorial representations, or any other notational system you think is more appropriate for conveying your ideas. Alternatively, you may submit between 2-10 minutes of recorded music to provide a sense of the kinds of musical materials and ideas you will pursue in your Spring Junior independent work.

Email your proposal to your Spring Junior Project advisor as well as the Director of Undergraduate Studies by **December 6, 2024**. In many cases, the faculty member responsible for teaching the Junior Seminar will also request a copy.

Again, these are broad outlines; specifics differ from project to project. Theses also need not fall on either side of the musicology / composition divide. We encourage students to be innovative and to approach music simultaneously as a creative and critical endeavor.

### The Junior Project

Junior independent work is due in the spring semester of the junior year and is developed in consultation with a faculty advisor identified during the fall semester of the junior year (see previous section). For reference, past projects have consisted of a research paper of approximately 30–40 pages, or an original composition of roughly 6–10 minutes (which would typically include a short paper detailing motivations and context for the composition). These are only guidelines, and the eventual scale of the work will depend on its nature. For example, students in past years have composed cycles or albums of shorter songs. For student composers, the paper accompanying a composition may also vary greatly in length: some projects may warrant something more like an essay while others prefer a text more along the lines of a brief program note. These details should be worked out in consultation with the advisor.

The due date for junior independent work is **April 29, 2025**.

### ***How Do I Choose an Advisor for My Junior Project?***

You should start thinking about an advisor for your Junior Project in the first few weeks of the Fall semester of your Junior year. Although there are some exceptions, in principle you may ask any full-time faculty in the Department of Music to advise your thesis. (Note that studio instructors are typically not eligible.) You may either ask a faculty member you have taken classes with during your first two years at Princeton, or you may ask a faculty member whose work you are interested in and would like to get to know better.

If you are having trouble finding an advisor for your Junior Project, feel free to reach out to the Director of Undergraduate Studies for help.

Once you have secured an advisor, it is a good idea to receive confirmation in the form of an email. (The email can be a single sentence from the advisor, simply saying, “Sure, I am happy to do it.”) Forward the confirmation email to the Director of Undergraduate Studies and Greg Smith by no later than **October 11, 2024**.

It is fine to ask the same faculty member to advise both your Junior Project and your Senior thesis. This is not required, however. Note that the options for Senior thesis advisors are somewhat more limited.

See the *Standards and Evaluation* section below for an overview of how Junior Projects are graded. Students and advisors should discuss individualized criteria for their project early on in the process, while recognizing that these criteria may need to adjust as the scope and focus of the project evolve.

#### Style and Structure of the Senior Thesis

The senior thesis is a year-long project devised by the student in conjunction with a faculty adviser, presented as a research paper of approximately 60–80 pages, or an original composition of roughly 12–20 minutes (including a short accompanying paper). As with junior independent work, these parameters are only guidelines, and the eventual scale of the work will depend on its nature. In recent years, students have completed genre-bending theses, such as a sound installation in conjunction with a notated composition, and coding for an algorithm that produces catchy melodies.

The topics for junior and senior independent work are often related, though they do not have to be.

#### How Do I Find a Thesis Advisor?

By the time you approach your senior year, you will have a good sense of the department and its personnel. You will quite likely already know who you would like to advise you on your thesis.

The same faculty member may advise a student on their junior project and senior thesis. Alternatively, it is also completely fine to ask a different faculty member to advise your senior thesis after completing your junior project. (For some reason, it’s more common for students to ask a different professor to advise their junior and senior theses. It is nice to get a different perspective. There is no rule about this, however.)

If you are having trouble finding or deciding upon a thesis advisor, feel free to be in touch with the DUS for a recommendation.

#### Working With Your Advisor: Successful Practices

Successful completion of the senior thesis requires regular contact with the advisor. Students should meet with their advisor at least a few times in each semester of the senior year (the exact amount and duration will be determined by the individual advisor). Meetings work best when students are:

- courteous in scheduling meetings. Always address the professor properly (i.e., “Dear Professor X,” and not “Hi!”). Make sure to conclude your email with a word of gratitude and by signing off formally (e.g., “Thank you for your consideration. Kind regards, X.”)
- gracious in dealing with advisors. You may try something along the lines of, “I really enjoyed taking a class with you last year, and I feel like I could learn from you.” (Less good would be: “Everyone else I asked said no, so can you advise my thesis?”)
- punctual and prepared. Make sure to show up to meetings five minutes early. Come ready with work to show or questions to ask.
- willing to take the time to learn about their advisor’s work. It’s always a good idea to listen to some music by your advisor or read some of their work so that you better understand their approach to music.

In short, your senior year will go much more smoothly if you cultivate a respectful and intellectually robust relationship with your advisor. If you really don’t know something, ask—never underestimate the power of asking about something when you don’t know! This goes for logistical as well as musical and theoretical issues. But asking a question does not mean asking an advisor to do the work for you. Rather than asking something like, “Please tell me the five best texts on this topic,” you may say something like, “Could you please direct me to a place where I could learn more about this topic?” Make sure to follow-up on your advisor’s suggestions. While you obviously don’t have to do everything your advisor suggests, a good relationship is one where you at least take suggestions and advice seriously by engaging it.

As mentioned earlier in this document, the Music Department views a senior thesis not so much as a linear process but a reiterative one. Put simply, this means a back-and-forth with your advisor, and to do this you need to pace yourself. Make sure to begin the process early and allow for enough time to receive comments, think about them seriously, follow-up on them, and make revisions. Ideally, you would go through this process several times over the course of the year.

#### Who Can be an Advisor for Senior Theses?

Below is a full list of faculty members in the Department of Music who are eligible to advise theses:

Tyondai Braxton  
 Donnacha Dennehy  
 Wendy Heller  
 Nathalie Joachim  
 Andrew Lovett  
 Steven Mackey  
 Elizabeth Margulis  
 Simon Morrison  
 Ruth Ochs  
 Jamie Reuland  
 Juri Seo  
 Jeffrey Snyder  
 Gavin Steingo  
 Daniel Trueman

Dmitri Tymoczko  
Anna Yu Wang  
Rob Wegman  
Barbara White

Of course, a faculty member reserves the right to deny the request to advise a thesis. Note as well that faculty members on leave do not advise theses.

Only in rare cases would a music concentrator ask a faculty member outside the Music Department to advise their thesis. This is, however, possible strictly speaking. As always, contact the Director of Undergraduate Studies when in doubt.

Students should secure a thesis advisor by **October 25, 2024**. Once you have arranged an advisor, please inform the Director of Undergraduate Studies as well as [Greg Smith](#) via email.

### Second Readers

In addition to an advisor, all students require a second reader for their thesis. Second readers typically join the project a little later and are invited after a discussion with the primary thesis advisor. Students should confirm their second reader by **April 25, 2025**. Make sure to inform (by email) the [Director of Undergraduate Studies](#) and [Greg Smith](#) of your second reader.

What do second readers do? Second readers typically provide comments to students on their final theses. Ideally, second readers are present at senior thesis presentations. In some cases, second readers are more involved, helping students shape their theses and acting as mentors along the way.

Grades for senior theses are assigned by advisors and second readers together, who consult to come up with a single grade. See the *Standards and Evaluation* section below for an overview of how independent work is graded. Students and advisors should discuss individualized criteria for their project early on in the process, while recognizing that these criteria may need to adjust as the scope and focus of the project evolve.

Senior theses are due on **April 28, 2025**.

### Senior Thesis Presentation Exam

We no longer have a written senior exam in the department. That has been replaced by a senior thesis presentation (for bureaucratic reasons, this component of your degree is referred to as an “exam,” although the word is somewhat misleading). Your senior thesis presentation is an opportunity to speak about your final thesis to an audience of faculty and peers. Composers often talk about and play excerpts from their compositions. Musicologists provide an overview of their theses (including main arguments, research methodology, and so on). The thesis presentations will take place on **May 7, 2025**, in Woolworth 102. You are expected to arrive at least 45 minutes prior to your scheduled time (you will receive a detailed schedule closer to the date). We strongly encourage you to be there to support other students, so please consider staying for the duration of the exam day. Friends in other departments are also welcome to attend. We typically provide lunch for presenting students and faculty advisors.



The format is as follows:

30 minutes presentation

10 minutes Q&A

5 minutes changeover

Please time your presentation and make sure it does not go over 30 minutes. Students who go over the time limit will be cut off.

### Standards and Evaluations

As independent projects in music vary greatly in type and orientation, each project will be judged according to its own criteria. Nonetheless, certain criteria apply in most cases. Good projects typically exhibit:

- Creativity and diligence. The student has good ideas, but also pursues those ideas steadily, building a substantial project over the year.
- A combination of resourcefulness and flexibility. The student starts with a clear idea of what they want to work on and pursues that idea while adapting to new information or ideas.
- A good understanding of the project within the *longue durée* of music history.
- A deep, analytic engagement with the subject matter.
- Evidence of care, consideration, and sustained work over the independent work period.
- Most faculty advisors view commitment to the process as more important than the quality of the result. In other words, students are encouraged to pursue ambitious and creative ideas; the entire year's work will be taken into consideration when it comes to grading.

Students and advisors should discuss appropriate criteria for evaluation early on in the process, typically early fall semester for Senior Theses, and late fall or early spring semester for Junior Projects. These criteria may evolve along with the projects, though advisors have the final say on what the appropriate criteria are for a particular project.

### Grading Standards

An **A** or **A-** is awarded for exceptional work that displays conceptual and/or creative ambition coupled with a mastery over materials and technique. The final product—whether it is a scholarly contribution, a composition, or something else—evidences a long and sustained engagement with some aspect of music. Theses receiving an **A** or **A-** frequently resemble work at the graduate level. Chapters from musicological theses are often publishable in some form. Compositions are on a level close to those done by composers in their first years of a PhD program. That said, the Music Department prioritizes consistent and creative work over product, so what we really wish to see, for example, is less a text that is ready for the printer than something that is substantial and innovative enough to be published after revision. Or, on the compositional front, we look for the development of a robust creative practice over how polished the final score is. Evidence of expertise in some domain or a mature compositional voice would be possible criteria.

**B+**, **B**, or **B-** theses are good, but they miss the mark in some way. Here again, process is prioritized over product. For example, a **B+**, **B**, or **B-** may be awarded to a thesis that, although it

is impressive as an end result, was obviously done in a compressed amount of time (e.g., the student only began in earnest in the Spring semester of the senior year). Theses of this sort, while of high quality, are less deep or rigorous in their engagement with materials than A theses. Another example of a thesis in this grade range is one where a student has obviously done the work, but the thesis is nonetheless excessively conventional or limited in scope.

A C+, C, or C- thesis exhibits a clear problem. Theses in this range may be disorganized or may suffer from conceptual problems. A thesis receiving less than B- may indicate that the graduating student has failed to garner adequate technical skills to complete a substantial composition, or that other skills (e.g., language, writing) are lacking.

A D thesis does little more than check the boxes—everything is in place, but serious problems are evident on the level of technique, style, or concept.

An F thesis is one where the student has not developed musical and/or scholarly competence.

## Resources

### Who Should I Contact?

For logistical issues, your first stop should always be Greg Smith ([gsmith@princeton.edu](mailto:gsmith@princeton.edu)). You may email Greg or set up an appointment to meet with him. In most cases, Mr. Smith will be able to help you. If not, he will point you in the right direction.

The Director of Undergraduate Studies Wendy Heller ([wbheller@princeton.edu](mailto:wbheller@princeton.edu)) is available to help you if you need advice about selecting courses. She can also help match you with an advisor for your Junior project or Senior thesis. Prof. Heller's role is to help you in an academic or mentoring capacity.

### Academic Planning Form

You should endeavor to always fill out your academic planning form (APF) before the due date. Students typically work with both the Director of Undergraduate Studies and residential college deans for advising about courses.

### Funding

All music concentrators are eligible to receive funding for research or project costs. In the past, students have used this money to hire musicians, to record their music, to buy specialist software, or to support a research trip. To receive this funding, please apply through [SAFE](#) (if you need assistance ask Greg Smith). A description of your project and a budget are required.

### Mendel Music Library

Familiarizing yourself with the Princeton library system—and especially the Mendel Music Library—proves very useful. Lisa Read, the Music Librarian, is available to help you. Composers and more scholarly-minded students may benefit from meeting with Ms. Read to learn about our collections (digital and hardcopy). If you are seeking a book, article, score, or

recording that is not in our collections you may request the item from Ms. Read or from Sara Hagenbuch.

### The Writing Center

Another resource on campus is the Writing Center: <https://writing.princeton.edu/writing-center>. All music majors can benefit from working with the Center. We encourage students to visit the Center's website and set up an appointment with a Fellow.

### Study Abroad

For the Royal College of Music program, please contact Michael Pratt ([mjpratt@princeton.edu](mailto:mjpratt@princeton.edu)). He will provide you with all the necessary information. You can see more here: <https://music.princeton.edu/prospective-students/royal-college-music-partnership>

For other study abroad programs, your first stop should be the Office of International Programs. That office will help you arrange your trip. The role of the Department of Music is mostly to approve courses that you wish to substitute for major courses.

### Composition Lessons for Undergraduate Students

The Department of Music offer lessons in composition, free of charge, to Princeton students. The lessons are taught by graduate student composers. You can learn about basic composing techniques; using software for notation or creating work; orchestration; song-writing; film-scoring; electronic or computer music. All musical styles are welcome and we especially encourage less experienced students who would like to start composing.

Students are encouraged to engage with the [Princeton Undergraduate Composers' Collective](#), which provides opportunities for performing and supportive discussion of work. Students are usually encouraged to take 3 to 5 lessons per semester. To register for the program and for further details, contact Dr. Andrew Lovett ([alovett@princeton.edu](mailto:alovett@princeton.edu)).