



## Composition in Any Classroom

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Nebraska Music Educator's Association

Friday, November 17, 2023 – 1:15 P.M.

WMB 105, Lincoln, NE

### Background

Composition is a national standard of music education, and has been since 1994.

- It is still part of the revised standards (2014) as a subset of “create.”
- It is still listed under the “Ensemble” standards.

Composition instruction is notably absent in large ensemble settings due to:

- Teacher discomfort
- Lack of time
- Logistical challenges

Below are some strategies to:

- Simplify* the compositional process and it make it *easy*.
- Apply* composition to *relevant* ensemble skills and content knowledge.
- Generalize* instructional methods so they are *practical* in a variety of contexts.

### Simplify

What is composition?

- Composition need *not*:
  - Be comprehensive
  - Result in a “finished work”
  - Involve music notation
- Composition, in its simplest form, is the act of making musical *decisions* about pitch, rhythm, timbre, form, etc. These decisions can be thoughtful, they can be imitative, and they can even be arbitrary! **Providing students the opportunity to make decisions is more important than *how* they are making them.**

## Apply

What is the *purpose* of composition instruction?

The *craft* of composition involves too many moving parts to meaningfully address in a large ensemble setting.

- In K–12 music, the purpose of composition instruction is rarely “to develop more skilled composers.” Composition instruction need *not*:
  - “Measure” the “effectiveness” of a work
  - Prescribe revisions
- In K–12 music, the purpose of composition instruction is often *to develop more sensitive and expressive individuals*. Composition instruction *can*:
  - Clarify intent
  - Describe effects
  - Provide alternatives
- Composition activities can also be used to reinforce and assess relevant ensemble skills and content knowledge.

## Generalize

How can this be *practical*?

- Relax your definition of composition. See above.
- Make realistic goals. Start by taking 1 day a year to compose as a class. This is most easily done on days following performances, particularly towards the end of the school year.
- Refer to scale degrees and/or solfege, and construct and learn compositions by ear. Using conventional notation is impractical, especially in a concert band with transposing instruments.
- Work on compositions as a group. Students can discuss potential ideas as a class and contribute to decisions by vote.
- Free yourself from the burden of assessment. Composing with a large number of students is too time-consuming if we always require each student to complete a formal assessment. At the very least, you can use composition to assess *other* skills.
- When possible, play student works so that composition isn’t completely removed from everyday ensemble activities.