

Juanita Navarro had run a first-rate band program for years. Her students' performances were well-received, and the community offered strong support for her groups. Ensembles she directed frequently received high marks at festivals and critical acclaim locally. Navarro, however, had never composed anything outside her college music theory courses and had not thought of using composition activities in her classes.

One day, a student asked her to listen to something he was trying to write. Navarro was impressed with how creative the student's piece was but could tell that he needed some guidance. She was surprised to learn that several other students also composed.

Navarro proudly told her principal about her budding composers but was surprised at the reaction. "For years," said the principal, "you've been telling me about the importance of the National Standards for Music Education--you even gave me a copy. According to the standards, shouldn't all your students be learning to compose?" She then realized that she needed to find ways to help her hardworking young musicians explore this area of music learning.

National Standard 4 calls for "composing and arranging music within specified guidelines." Composing requires teacher and students to work with a piece of music before they know its final form. Compared to performing, listening, and responding to music, the outcome of composition activities is less predictable. These activities may seem less tangible, and they may be harder for students to grasp.

You can demystify composition by providing concrete procedures and simple strategies. These steps, when used with age-appropriate materials, can help students of any age succeed in writing music. They can also help you teach principles that enhance students' listening, performing, and overall experience of music. Because composition projects develop problem-solving and communication skills, they also contribute to the broader goals of the entire curriculum.

The term compose means "to put together." A composer is simply a person who puts musical ideas together. Two important aspects of composition are inventing musical ideas and developing and connecting those ideas for a final product.

Inventing musical ideas can be a challenge for beginning composers. Some students get stuck trying to come up with just the right ideas. Many may feel as though they "don't get it" and often have trouble thinking of anything. Others string unrelated ideas together as if the goal were to say everything they ever thought in one piece. Having beginners focus on inventing ideas invites frustration and confusion. It's more important to students' overall musical growth to learn some of the ways to develop ideas.

Provide Musical Ideas

To ease the beginning phases of composing, give students ideas they can develop. An idea can be any short musical fragment--an echo-clapping rhythm, a measure to be played on an Orff instrument, a series of notes for recorder, a chord and finger-picking pattern for guitar, or a line of poetry set to a melody. Whatever it is, the idea must have one or more features that stand out (e.g., a distinctive rhythm, melodic shape, or use of timbre). Students must be able to recognize the idea when they hear it and to identify and describe its distinctive features (Standard 6: listening to, analyzing, and describing music). They should also be able to perform the idea or reproduce it technologically and have an appropriate way of notating the idea (Standard 1: singing, Standard 2: performing on instruments, and Standard 5: notating music, respectively).

Teach a Few Basic Principles

Comment [1]: This article must be from what would be a mentor's point of view. In such case, learning theory by myself would make me my own mentor on this subject for now.

Comment [2]: Many classes lack the ability to allow students to express their creativity during the class.

Comment [3]: Needing a starting point prevents random note music.

Comment [4]: This can be seen as many songs use sampling.

Comment [5]: This is how many artists create their own identity in their music

Comment [6]: This activity could be done by a future mentor.

Even if it were possible to list all the ways to organize and develop musical ideas, the list would be too long to be of any use. It's better to have students follow a few rules of thumb and adjust the results during revision. The following guidelines apply to a wide range of music:

- * **An idea must be repeated to be significant.**
- * The more you repeat an idea, the more you need to vary it.
- * Eventually, you may need to introduce a different idea.
- * If you introduce a different idea, you will most likely return to your first idea.

[FIGURE 1 OMITTED]

These principles apply to all levels of structure--motives in phrases, phrases in sections, sections in pieces.

How you vary an idea depends on its nature. For example, you can transpose a melodic fragment to different pitches, but with a piece involving only unpitched percussion, you'll have to vary something else, such as rhythm or dynamics. **Changing the timbre** of an idea is not very effective when the range of available tone colors is small. In any case, changes must add interest without destroying the identity of the idea; some of its features must be left intact. Here are some simple ways to vary ideas:

- * Change one thing throughout the idea while keeping all other things constant.
- * Take some aspect of the idea and do the opposite.

Figure 1 Simple ideas varied

Original Idea	One Thing Changed	One Thing Opposite	Feature Exaggerated	Feature Isolated
Claves	Dynamics	Rhythm Reversed	Shorter Notes All Shortened to Sixteenth	Rhythm of Beats 2 and 3 Repeated
Voice	Unvoiced Consonants Changed to Voice	Dynamics Reversed	Dynamics More Extreme and Varied	Final Sounds Fill Measure
Xylophone	All Notes Transposed Up One Step	Melody Descends (Pitches Reversed)	Upward Steps Become Upward Leaps	First Two Beats Repeated

- * Exaggerate a feature.
- * Isolate and develop one part of the idea.

Figure 1 applies these techniques to a rhythm for claves, a series of vocal sounds, and a melodic fragment for an Orff instrument.

Lay the Groundwork

When you begin a composition activity, present the basic ideas to be used. You need only two or three. For the project to be meaningful, students must internalize the sounds they are **manipulating**. Have them perform each idea, then discuss and describe its distinctive features. Present some variants of the idea, and have students compare them to the original. Finally, guide the class in creating, performing, and notating additional versions to generate a palette of choices for their individual work. Save the ideas and variants in a written or electronic idea bank to which students can refer.

Provide a Framework

A useful preliminary activity is to present a phrase with its measures out of order. Ask students to put the parts back in order and explain their choices. This can help them learn how to begin and end their assignments. For very inexperienced students, you can do the same thing with the phrases of a

Comment [7]: Like a chorus of a song.

Comment [8]: After having an idea, you develop it into your own.

Comment [9]: This is an interesting way to think of it! Manipulating an idea.

short piece that they already know. As students gain experience, they will need fewer and less-specific instructions.

The next step is to arrange the ideas and variants into sensible pieces. Keep early assignments short. It's enough to begin with single phrases. At first, students need specific guidelines for organizing their pieces. Figure 2 shows two examples of instructions for creating a four-bar melodic phrase.

Figure 3 shows two ways in which these instructions might be realized in short melodies for recorder.

Figure 2 Instructions for creating a four-bar melodic phrase

MEASURES	1	2	3	4
Example 1	State a one-measure idea	Repeat the idea	Change the idea	Repeat the first version of the idea
Example 2	State a one-measure idea	Repeat the idea with one or two changes	Use a different idea	Repeat the first idea

You can also use the procedures for writing phrases to complete a short piece. Figure 4 shows a simple example.

You can start with a phrase written by a student or supply a phrase, but it's important to specify the opening phrase and help students learn it and analyze its features. Figure 5 is a possible realization, again for recorder.

There is no need to restrict compositions to simple melodies or traditional forms. Figure 6 contains the instructions and realization of a piece for two-part speaking choir using the vocal sounds from Figure 1.

Figure 3 Recorder realizations of the composition instructions

Example 1

Example 2

Give Feedback, Require Revision

A composition project has little value if students don't hear their work, critique it, and make revisions. In deciding what and how to revise, students develop critical and artistic thinking and practice problem-solving skills (Standards 6 and 7). At first, you'll need to suggest specific alternatives for the students. As they progress, you can merely indicate where alterations are needed. More experienced students can self-edit, but you should require them to explain their choices. The job is not done until students have made at least two versions of their pieces.

Comment [10]: Getting opinions from an ear that is not your own may help to improve your music and make it more tangible universally to the ears.

Figure 4 Instructions for writing a short piece

State a phrase	Repeat the phrase with a different ending	State a new phrase based on an idea from the first phrase	Repeat the first or second phrase
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[FIGURE 3 OMITTED]

[FIGURE 5 OMITTED]



[FIGURE 6 OMITTED]

Integrate Composition with Performance and Listening

Figure 6 Instructions and realization of a piece for two-part speaking choir

1	2	3	4
Present the original idea	Gradually change something about the idea	Exaggerate the idea, and expand on its features	Bring back the original idea, but change something

15 secs. Start together, then allow individuals to go their own speed.

One by one performers change to this:

On signal, each part performs together. Slowly get louder and more emphatic.

All together, softer and softer: 15 secs.

If students can immediately hear their works, composition is much more tangible and accessible. Link composition projects to their work in performance. Plan projects they can perform in class without too much rehearsal (Standards 1 and 2). A recorder unit and a melodic composition unit are a natural pairing in an elementary or middle school general music class. Secondary performance students can write for their own media if you include some class time for composition. Use selected student works in listening exercises for the entire class, and include student works in concerts when appropriate.

Some Practical Suggestions

Students can learn a great deal from class critiques of their work, but keeping individuals engaged during class discussions can be challenging. It helps to guide the discussions with specific questions:

- * How much did the composer use repetition?
- * Were there variations and contrasts?
- * Was there a good balance between repetition and contrast?
- * What do you think the composer intended to express? Did she or he succeed? How?

Have all students respond in writing before calling on individuals. Periodically collect student papers to assess their participation and understanding. When possible, provide a simple guide sheet for class discussions so students know exactly what they are to respond to. This will also make it easier

Comment [11]: It seems that starting small and taking each assignment step by step is the way to go without being overwhelmed.

for you to peruse their work. When you coach students doing individual composition work, sheets from previous discussions can help you assess how well they understand the task.

Short pieces based on the same guidelines will not hold students' interest for long. Spread out composition projects over several sessions and include other activities. When presenting student work to the class, select just a few examples. Look for different and interesting solutions to the exercise, not just those that reproduce standard approaches. Have the class discuss and critique student works. Because most of the pieces will not be performed, it's important to monitor each student's work individually. Circulate among students as they work on their own, and give personalized feedback.

Never accept "I like it" as a reason for a compositional decision. Music is about communicating to others. When discussing revisions, insist that students describe the effect or feeling they wish to convey, and help them assess the appropriateness of their choices. If a student wants to convey excitement in a percussion piece and decides to write long, even timpani notes that soften and slow, you need to guide the student to new strategies or help redefine the goal of the piece. Either way, the student can learn something about communication.

Enhance the Experience

Aside from its intrinsic value as a uniquely human activity, composing can help students learn to look for the main ideas in pieces they hear and play as well as think about how composers develop and organize them. This enhances the listening experience and leads to greater insight in performance. Considering the effects of compositional choices on communication and solving composition problems can help reinforce skills needed throughout the curriculum.

Juanita Navarro started her students on the precomposition and composing exercises described here. There was some resistance at first, but having the band play students' compositions helped to overcome it. Students warmed quickly to hearing their ideas come to life and became curious about each other's work. Eventually, Navarro's band students became quite adept at manipulating and creating musical ideas. Students who had never composed before began to do so outside her classroom. A spring talent show at the school featured three works by student composers, and at least one is considering composition as a college major.

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Figure 2 Instructions for creating a four-bar melodic phrase

Comment [12]: Music is much more than the overall tune.

Comment [13]: It is interesting to see the relationships in instruments and emotions. It shows how music affects our minds.