

Component 3: Composing music – assessment guide

This resource gives you technical guidance for Component 3: Composing music to help you prepare for GCSE Music (8271). There are no recordings to accompany this document.

The task

Students are required to produce **two** compositions with a combined minimum time of **three** minutes.

Composition 1 will be in response to one of four briefs. The briefs will be issued in the September of the year of certification. The briefs are loosely linked to the four areas of study but they are not genre based. Each brief will indicate a suitable audience and/or occasion that should be considered carefully by the composer. Students will be able to compose freely in any style and for any combination of instruments/voices/sound sources.

Composition 2 is a completely free composition. Students can compose freely in any style and for any combination of instruments/voices/sound sources. They do not have to indicate a specific brief but they must indicate a suitable audience/occasion for the composition. This can include occasions associated with recorded music.

For each composition the student will produce a programme note of approximately 150 words. This is not an appraisal but an information giving exercise in which the student can demonstrate how they have fulfilled the brief and composed music suitable for the suggested audience/occasion.

Teachers will assess both compositions. These assessments will be subject to moderation by AQA.

Approach and assessment

For both compositions Ofqual requires students to:

- make use of musical elements, techniques and resources to create and develop musical ideas with technical control and coherence; freely as the composer chooses, and responding to a brief or commission supplied by others
- compose music that develops musical ideas, uses conventions, and explores the potential of musical structures and resources.

For these reasons, the assessment of the compositions is focused on the extent to which the student can successfully use the musical elements in their work to produce music that is suitable for the intended audience/occasion. It is therefore vital that students are taught how to use musical elements and compositional techniques in producing their work. In learning how to use these techniques, students can apply them to the musical styles pertinent to their own individual talents and musical interests. This allows them to compose 'freely' as required by Ofqual. It's recommended that generic whole group tasks that are genre based, eg string

quartet/blues are avoided since it's unlikely that all the students will have similar experience/interest in these areas. It's also recommended that a holistic approach to the teaching of the course be taken. Wherever possible, this should attempt to integrate the three disciplines of listening, performing and composing, covering all of the areas of study. The exemplar schemes of work on the website show how this might be achieved.

Each assessment grid has a list of six elements. These have been deliberately grouped so that any kind of composition can be attempted in response to at least two elements from each grid. Many students' compositions may indicate strong use of several, if not all of the elements. It's perfectly acceptable to indicate all of the elements used in the composition(s).

Common guidance question and answers

Why isn't the composition to a brief published until September in the year of certification?

This is an Ofqual requirement. Both compositions must be completed and assessed in the year of certification. The 'free' composition starts at the end of the preceding year and can be completed/assessed during the year of certification.

Can the brief be modified?

No. The brief cannot be modified, but there will always be scope within the brief for a variety of responses. There will never be any restrictions placed in relation to genre, structure, instruments, voices or sound sources. The student can interpret the brief, responding in the manner in which they're accustomed to working. This means students will still be able to compose freely. If you refer to the exemplar material on the website, there are two very different responses to brief 1 in the paper 1 SAMS, these demonstrate how this can be done.

How will the programme note be assessed? What happens if my students don't complete it?

The programme note is not assessed. It is not an appraisal of the work like Unit 2 in the legacy specification. It provides important information about students' approach to the task and how they fulfilled the brief to ensure the composition is appropriate for the intended audience/occasion. It's designed to be helpful to you as the assessor and to AQA as the moderator. If your students don't complete it, the composition will still be valid for assessment, but you as the assessor and/or the AQA moderator may not be completely clear of your student's intentions. This could affect the assessment of the composition. There is a space on the CRF (Candidate record form) for the student to complete the programme note. This includes questions to guide them. There are also exemplars on the AQA website.

My students can't read music very well and find it hard to produce a written score. I've heard that if they do a lead sheet or aural guide they'll lose marks. Is this true?

No. First of all, it is important to recognise that students do not 'lose' marks. The assessment is made positively in relation to how well the student has fulfilled the assessment criteria. It is the composition that's being assessed. Compositions are often produced as scores for others to play, but increasingly musicians produce compositions they record themselves as performer/composer, perhaps using technology or other live musicians. There are examples of different kinds of scores,

lead sheets and aural guides in the exemplar section on the AQA website. Students should include a score, lead sheet or aural guide depending on which best suits the nature of their composition.

[What happens if my students do not submit a score, lead sheet or aural guide?](#)

The score, lead sheet or aural guide forms part of the composition submission alongside the recording and CRF. It is part of the documentary evidence and is an Ofqual requirement. If it is not submitted, the audio recording of the final composition will still be accepted. However, this will compromise how clearly the evidence supports the marks you have awarded. This could mean that your marks might be more likely to be adjusted at moderation.

[My students write songs but some of them can't sing, read and write music, or play any musical instruments apart from a bit of keyboard. They have written the words on paper and asked me to sing their songs and play piano for them. My musician friends want to come to school to layer guitar, bass and drum parts into the recordings, to make it sound more professional. Is this acceptable?](#)

It depends. If they have provided some kind of music for you to perform from, for example printing off a vocal melody or bass guitar part they might have played into a sequencing programme like Logic or Garageband, it may be possible to make an accurate assessment of their compositional work. However, they can't gain credit for contributions from other musicians that don't reflect their own compositional ability. It's not acceptable for students to simply ask others to contribute parts to the recording without providing evidence of how this has been done. If there's lack of clarity in this respect, your moderator may ask for additional information. This could mean your marks might be more likely to be adjusted at moderation if the evidence in the work doesn't accurately reflect the compositional abilities of the students. When making the assessment, be careful that you award marks for the actual compositional content of the student, not the enhancements from other musicians.

[One of my students has been ill this year and has only managed to complete the free composition. The piece is just over three minutes in length. Can she be awarded marks for this piece?](#)

Yes. As long as the piece is three minutes or more, it is valid for assessment.

[For many years, I have been getting all of my students to compose a waltz for piano. I would like to continue doing this but the guidance notes suggest this may not be a good idea. Why is this so?](#)

Ofqual requires that students be allowed to compose 'freely'. It is unlikely that all the students in a group will want to compose a waltz for piano because they will all have different musical skills and interests. Teaching students how to use musical techniques and devices in composing, perhaps utilising their individual performing skills and musical preferences is more likely to produce effective outcomes. The exemplar schemes of work on the website show how this might be achieved.

[One of my students has composed a piece for drum kit. The student has only selected one element \(rhythm\) from the first assessment grid and one element \(dynamics\) from the second assessment grid. Can I still assess the work?](#)

No. Students must select at least two elements from each assessment grid.

One of my students is a very able composer and has produced a song cycle that lasts twenty minutes. Will he be penalised for this?

No. There is no maximum time limit for compositions in the AQA specification. However, the submission of the whole song cycle would not perhaps, be necessary. A selection of songs, exceeding the minimum time but enabling the student to demonstrate their overall composing ability might be a good compromise.

One of my students has composed a piano piece for his free composition. Can he perform it live for his solo performance in Component 2?

No. Students can perform their own compositions for component 2 but it must not be one used for entry in Component 3.

One of my students has completed both compositions, but the total playing time is just two minutes and fifty five seconds. Can I knock a few marks off because they are just under the minimum time?

No. If the total time is less than three minutes the work is not valid as assessment evidence and cannot receive any marks. This is an Ofqual ruling.

How much time do students have to complete each composition?

Students can have as much time as they need. The work in performing and composing is now referred to as 'NEA', (Non Examination Assessment) rather than Controlled Assessment, as in the legacy specification. There is no controlled time or time limit.

One of my students has refused to do any composition work in class. Today she has brought me a composition that she says she has done at home, recording it on her own computer. I've not seen or heard any of it before and a lot of the recording seems to feature her heavy metal band. Can I still assess the piece?

No. It is your responsibility to sign the CRF to state that you are satisfied that the work is entirely that of the student. The circumstances you describe indicate that you do not know if the work is that of the student. You do not know how much of the work is hers. It could have been composed by her band so it would be difficult for you to verify the authenticity of the work. There is nothing to stop students working at home, creating and developing ideas, but there should be opportunity for you as the teacher and assessor to see this work develop in class so that you know it's genuine.

I am confused by the Indicative examples that appear in the assessment grids in the specification. Do the students have to use these in order to gain marks in those bands?

No. The Indicative examples are suggestions for the types of musical elements that might be featured in a composition typical of that particular assessment band. They're meant to guide you and your students but they're not compulsory. There will be many other valid techniques within the musical elements that could qualify for a particular assessment band.

This is our first year with AQA as we move into completing the new 1–9 spec this year. We are used to 'controlled assessment' conditions for compositions with another exam board and would just appreciate some clarification about the completion of compositions. We are fortunate that every child at our school has an iPad with Garageband on it. Due to controlled assessment previously we have not allowed the students to complete their coursework on their iPads as they obviously have access to this outside of the music classroom.

For the new 1–9 AQA GCSE spec, would it be permissible for students to complete their compositions on their iPads or, would it still be recommended to only do this on stand-alone computers in the school building?

While students will be able to do their work on their iPads, there must be sufficient control by the teacher such that it is absolutely certain that the work being submitted is completely that of the student. All work submitted must be recorded onto a CD and be capable of being played on a standard CD player.