



## Student Perceptions on Music Journals for Extensive Writing in an Academic Writing Class

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**Abstract:** Extensive Journal Writing (EJW) in Academic Writing Classes (AWCs) has been shown to have a positive impact on students' writing ability (Ho, et al, 2022). This case study reports undergraduate student perceptions on the usefulness of writing about musical genres (a 'music journal'). Several major themes that surfaced from responses were: 1) an improved ability to express feelings; 2) an increased sense of awareness and connection to others; the idea that journals were 3) fun and motivating; and lastly, 4) increased English language production and writing skill. These themes indicate that music journals (MJs) may help reduce the stress of academic writing whilst meeting practical AWC production aims, and be seen as engaging alternative to more traditional EWJ formats.

**Keywords:** academic writing, extensive journal writing, music journals, reflection, AWC

### 1. INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive journal writing (EJW, also 'fluency writing') in academic writing classes (AWCs) has shown a consistency in both variety and duration over past decades. More traditional examples include: reflective journaling, used to clarify individual insights and practices, and dialog journals, used for "ongoing conversations" (Staton & Peyton, p.4) between professionals, but recent variations narrow its scope toward teacher-development (Denne-Bolton, 2013), among other less traditional student types (Langer, 2002). Also, transitory trends via use of blogging and social network services (Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) show a perhaps devolutionary persistence (Scerri & Scerri, 2020).

Hubbs & Brand (2005) asserted that reflective journaling finds its rationale "grounded in general learning theory, adult learning theory, (and) experiential learning theory" (, p. 61) with support from Roger's (1982, as cited in Hubbs & Brand, 2005) and Vygotsky (1986, as cited in Hubbs and Brand, 2005). While reflective journaling is thought to provide "a vehicle for inner dialog that connects thoughts, feelings, and actions" (Hubbs & Brand, 2005, p. 62), the same measure applies to extensive writing journals as students are, too, reflecting on these same elements.

Traditional journaling variations aside, a more specific focus is the use of EJWs in academic writing courses. While the approach and application may vary among classroom instructor aims and goals – fluency versus accuracy, for example - what is not in dispute is that EJWs do have a positive effect on student writing performance (Ho, et al, 2022). This is especially noticeable when fluency writing is used in AWCs, specifically in journaling about musical input.

Music journals (MJs) are an example of extensive journal writing about a music genre or an artist illustrative of a particular genre. (See Jobbitt, 2021 for the benefits of and tips on implementing this technique). Key questions this author had regarding the use of MJs were: Would students want to write about music instead of a typical question prompt?, and What types of reactions would arise from 1) this process, and 2) this type of input?

#### Participants

Several participants in a thirty-student undergraduate, mixed-level, international academic writing course at a metropolitan Seoul-based university were chosen for this case study. The students are in grades ranging from undergraduate freshman through senior level. Their English-speaking ability

ranges from low-intermediate to advanced level: CEF B1-C2 (Council of Europe, 2020). The majority of the class is made up of Korean students; several international students (L1 NES or L2 English speakers from countries where English is an official language) comprise the remainder. The course runs three hours a week for 16 weeks.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

Music journals are implemented over a 10-week period within a 16-week semester. This is an in-class process (face-to-face or online). The music played may be one of the following, depending on the length of the pieces selected: 1) a single song from an artist, or 2) several pieces of the same genre (K-pop, for example). The music selection is usually played at the beginning of the class, about which students seem to react positively, but can also be used as a ‘mental break’ activity bookended between more serious class work. Usually, this author plays music over a classroom public-address system, but audio links are made available if students wish to listen on headphones. Students write for approximately 10-15 minutes about the piece, usually producing about 300-400 words. Students may write about any aspect of the music: the vocals, the actual instruments, about what it makes them think, feel, or associate with as related to current or past events, either personal, observed, etc. In other words, students are connecting to elements either within or ‘outside of’ the music. Conversely, criticism about the music is appropriate, too. The format is very open in terms of response. This author encourages student to take the journal response in any direction that they desire. Journals are collected in class, after the set time has elapsed; if done on electronic devices, journals are emailed to the instructor. Out-of-class responses are not encouraged, as the focus is of an impromptu writing response, not to be overly polished.

### 3. RESULTS /STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF MUSIC JOURNALS

Writing about reflective journaling, Boud (2001) stated that, “Journal writing can be viewed through many different lenses: as a form of self-expression, a record of events, or a form of therapy. It can be a combination of these and other purposes” (p. 9). Boud’s observations apply to student music journals as journals are one form of self-expression in which students learn more about themselves by recording both the event and how they experienced the event. The musical genres heard and written in music journals were portrayed within several dominant themes. These themes were illustrated as: 1) feelings, or observations on feelings; 2) creating a sense of openness, sharing, or creativity in one’s writing; 3) the idea of journals being fun and motivating, and lastly, 4) a stronger production in English language expressions, vocabulary use and writing skill. This last theme was a very much interspersed element among the preceding three themes.

#### Theme I - Feelings

The first major theme was related to the expression of feelings, both objectively and subjectively. Student 1 offered a desultory optimistic observation on the state of feelings among the younger generation, tying these thoughts to a song by the rock band Greta Van Fleet (GVF), writing:

(The) world is still changing but in a different way. We have become numb to changes because almost everything is stucked (sic) in (a) digital world, and it does make us stucked (sic) in that world, too. I feel sometimes peoples seems (sic) like just have bodies in real world, even me. So, young people aren’t used to feeling ebullient and dynamic music such as rock and roll and it is getting faded. But Greta Van Fleet does such music. They are like the incarnation of energetic youth of the past.

In a more general yet personal observation, Student 3 said:

Music journals allowed me to express what I have in mind in English words. This practice made me think about how to elaborate (on) my feelings toward the song and even associate it with personal experiences in my life. For example, the rock music we listened to...really had me explain my passion in rock music in a concise essay format in English.

An explicit example of this is in Student 3’s music journal #4, with comments on rock vocals:

To begin with, I’d like to talk about the vocals in ‘Highway Tune’ (by GVF). This man’s voice was like a mix between Adam Levine from Maroon 5 and Patric Stump from Fall Out Boy. I absolutely loved it. I think the little cracking of the vocalist’s voice makes rock sound special: It is the cherry on top.

An additional comment from Student 2 relates introspective comments about the benefits of using music journals helping with expressing emotions and language choice. Student 2 noted that:

Another factor that helped me learn is music journals. I am now much better at honestly expressing my emotions, for I try my best to be honest with my feelings every time I listen to music for the journals. For example, “Ocean Eyes” felt very dreamy; however, the word, dreamy, could not describe my feelings well enough, so I pondered over more expressions like ‘powerful’ and ‘soulful.’

In her music journal #3, Student 2 gave a clear example of this related to an artist’s lyrics:

I love the metaphors she used in the lyrics. For example, even though she is scared when the character in the lyrics gives the “look” with the ocean eyes, she is literally falling into them. Sometimes, we all cannot help but fall into the fear that we are very afraid of. This metaphor is applicable to everyone, and I could relate to it so much.

Student 2’s analysis of the song seems to parallel her (above) search for language choice ideas:

When I first came across the term, ocean eyes, I could intuitively imagine the eyes that are so clear and blue. They, in my head, are so “deep.” The adjective, deep, is used for describing both ocean and eyes. I think the word choice is just perfect because it directly leads to the imagination that she intends the audience to think of.

The expression of feelings is clearly very important to students when journaling about music.

### **Theme II – Openness of Thought, Connection and Creativity**

A second major theme was about the perception of being able to write feely and to connect with others. Ismail (2011) notes that the journaling can be “seen as a process of discovery as the writers try to find their way while they are struggling to think, compose and put their ideas together,” and that this process is a more “cognitive, social and dynamic one” (p. 73). Since music journals (EJWs) are a fluency writing process in response to an acute listening experience, it is not surprising that students appreciate the flexibility to compose whatever comes to mind. Student 7 opined on this tractability, stating that the open response format allowed her to better appreciate the journal process:

First of all, I could express my thoughts about music in (a) free, logical way. There was no strict rule, so I reflected (on) my pure thoughts in each writings (sic). For example, I illustrated my opinion about a meaning of the lyrics that I interpreted in the first essay; in addition, I explained special features of Billie’s music that makes her different from other pop artists in the third essay.

Student 7 further commented on the theme of sharing the journal with the professor, stating:

I could share my thoughts with (the) professor by feedback. The feedback that I got from the professor made (the) music journal more enjoyable and fun. Not only sharing music, but also sharing the thoughts about music made this homework not just homework; it made it a little conversation between the professor and me.

Student 2 wrote about the experience of how listening to a music journal song with her mother was emotionally beneficial:

Music journals taught me that sharing a song is far more entertaining than listening to it alone. This lesson is exemplified by my experience of sharing “Ocean Eyes” with my mom. She and I had such a great time together, which adds more value to the song. By writing music journals, ...I learned that listening to music with someone else I love doubles the joy that I first feel (sic), listening to it by myself.

Student 1 also noted the creative challenge of writing the music journals:

Every writing is helpful, though what helps me most is to express my thoughts and opinions in (the) music journal. When I write something informative such as process essays there are many references about a topic I used and I am (sic) easily find out words to use and paraphrase. However, (for music journals) there is no reference to write what I think, because it is subjective. I have to make completely new sentences to write it. So I go through (a) more creative process when I write a music journal, which I put my thought into most...

One particular example of Student 1's creativity that struck this author was an observation on melody. Student 1 stated, "...some might be thinking the melody of the song is monotonous. But it was like a kind of spell to me. It sounded like the devil's whisper." A different response From Student 8 noted the challenge of being creative while not writing the same ideas for different journal entries. Student 8 commented that,

Both music and fluency journals are 'easy' in a sense that it is personal, but I have to keep in mind not to use repetitive materials. In the music journal's case, not only were the first two songs similar, but they did not acquire my tastes. Thus, I had to squeeze my brain to come up with different analysis and images. That consequently means it is proof of being a challenge. It is bothersome, yes, but it keeps me frequently on my toes, along with the deadline, to produce more creative writing.

A final student account notes the particular challenge of clarifying one's thoughts about the music, and then knowing both what to write and how to write it in the music journal. Student 4 observed the following:

I love every activity but there's one thing that burdens me. It's time for writing music journal. I can enjoy music that I've never heard in this activity. But at first, I had (a) hard time thinking what kinds or journals to write. It was difficult to record my feelings. After some hardship, I listed the things that come to my mind while listening and reacting fully to music. That made writing easier, and I'm still practicing.

The difficulty in organizing one's thoughts may perhaps be illustrative of the particular learning methodologies in Korean public schools. As noted above, Korean public schools are slowly incorporating a 'writing to learn' (Tynjälä, et al, 2012) approach. Student 9's comments may be an example of how "the very act of writing itself should...evoke knowledge construction processes that inevitably result in learning" (Nuckles, et al, 2020, p. 1090). In this case, though Student 9 initially struggled, through repetition and effort he was able to produce more cogent responses in the music journals and thus write better over time.

### **Theme III - The Idea of Journals being Fun and Motivating**

A third major theme related to the idea, to paraphrase Graham (2015), of journaling being an effective tool for students, "particularly in terms of motivation" (p. 39). This may have to do with the open nature of journaling itself. In a study exploring non-native English speaker's (NNES's) attitudes toward writing in English, including their perceptions of their writing processes, Petric (2002) found that writing courses should provide many opportunities for students to participate in "positive writing experiences" and that, "writing instruction also needs to create a space for attitudes and experience to be reflected upon, expressed, and exchanged" (p. 21). Music journals allow both the opportunity for writing practice and the repetition with which students may better develop these reflective processes, which were subsequently revealed in several student journal responses. Student 1 commented:

Listening to music is my biggest hobby; therefore, writing essays about music was enjoyable for me. Although there were some songs that were too artistic for me to understand, it was a meaningful process to research them. Music journal changed my thought that writing essays is boring. Thanks to it, I felt more familiar to writing.

Offering a variety of classroom writing activities may also have an impact on how students perform in an AWC. Student 9 stated how much the impact of doing music journals had on her classroom effort:

First, music journal helped me not to give up the class. I'm not good at English, so I can't understand all of the professor's word and there are so many students who can speak and write English well. That makes me nervous and sometime I just wanted to stop the class. But when I listened to the music and write essay (sic) about it, it's really fun. I can rest while listening the music and the memory of the class turns to be good. So, music journal (sic) helped me keep studying English.

Lastly, Student 10 commented on how classroom writing processes were motivating for her peers and herself:



The students were given opportunities to practice their English writing skills by doing music journals and fluency journals. The students were able to listen to new genres of songs, and express how they felt in English. These activities helped me to feel motivated and be interested to English writing, which helped me to further strengthen my English writing ability.

The second-to-last sentence about ‘feeling motivated’ is a clearly subjective personalization of the benefits of extensive writing. Dornyei (2001) notes that one aspect of personal motivation is “the impact of self-confidence and self-efficacy on one’s achievement strivings” (p. 30), and that personal motivation is void of sociocultural or ‘social’ context, allowing it an easy impart to EWJs. Hence, the very personal nature of extensive journaling and its impact on these students’ attitudes and English writing development clearly connects the two.

### **Theme IV– Improvement of English**

A final theme was how the use of music journals helped students increase English expressions and writing skills. In comments on journaling, Heimstra (2001) stated that it is “typically... one of the most complex of all forms for recording personal changes and insights. For many students, the process of maintaining a journal helps them become more organized and focused on the areas they are studying.” The repeated EWJ practice in this AWC may be one reason why students felt improvement in these two areas of expression and skill. Student 5 expounded on this process, observing that:

To write MJ, I had to analyze the components of each songs (sic) and tried to explain how (I) was feeling. So, I had to find expressions in English and this process made me know about more expressions than before. For example, when I listen to “Ocean Eyes”, I had to figure out what expressions will be great to someone who I loved. Through this work, I can use more expressions when I speak English or writing English essays.

Student 1’s comment on how the difficulty of expressing feelings about the music due to word choice became more developed due to music journaling:

To me, translating feelings was (a) much more hard (sic) process because the words that have meaning of subjective things such as feelings are not clear. But music journal improved my writing skills because of it. I could widen my ranges (sic) of vocabularies (sic) because I had to find a lot of words to express what I want to in music journal.

Likewise, Student 6 offered an opinion, yet about overall writing volume:

To start, the journals allowed me to significantly improve my writing skills. First, the fact that we were required to draft and submit music journals each week was a major contribution in the overall improvement of my English. Writing (a) minimum (of) 350 words per journal has helped with no doubt (sic).

It is not surprising that these students felt gains in English writing ability, but there are no guarantees either. Multiple studies (see Ho, et al, 2022) have shown mixed results – some positive, some less so - on whether grammar, writing skills, confidence, and complexity, among other findings will derive from EJWs. Therefore, more definitive questions such as whether they benefitted from gains in fluency, accuracy, grammar, etc., need to be answered.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Hyland (2002) commented that writing research “provides no cut-and-dried answer” as to how best to teach writing, but offers that a teacher’s “best methods are flexibility and support” in response to the classroom context (age, language, experience) and instructional goals (peer work, feedback, guidance, etc.). By extension, these factors can be as relevant for EJWs as they are for genre-process writings. Although there are clear distinctions between student academic writing (audience, steps and objective assessment criteria), and extensive journaling (personal, more subjective or informal assessment criteria), both formats have merit in an AWC. In this author’s view, teachers have a responsibility to provide different writing assignments as applicable to the teaching context in order to help students, as eloquently stated by Mahn (2002), “develop the confidence that engenders competence” (p. 46). Such writing formats could have an accuracy and process-oriented approach, or a fluency and open-format approach.

It is easy to say that music journaling is only one simple type of extensive writing, and that music journals have a less-clear academic objective other than to have students produce writing volume over writing quality. Yet this is the challenge that students need – to produce voluminous amounts of writing in a less-restrictive manner so that it may contribute an underpinning of comfort and confidence toward continued academic writing success. It is important to remember that, aside from some recent (yet limited) exposure to writing tasks and feedback processes in public high school textbooks (Jobbitt, 2021), most Korean students do not have any public-school exposure to academic writing; that subject is primarily based in private academies (which may be too costly for most students). This lack of exposure does not necessarily mean a lack of interest, however, specifically in relationship to music education in Korea. In a large study focusing on public school music programs, Seog, et al (2022) show that although the pursuit of a musical-instrument major may be somewhat eschewed by familial stakeholders, Korean students’ “interest in music in school and outside of school remained relatively stable across (all) school levels” (p. 97). Therefore, it could be that in this AWC format, music journals may allow for writing about a topic that is still relevant, authentic, and of keen interest to this undergraduate student populace. The study by Ho, et al (2022), did yield gains in “students’ writing performance in both writing accuracy and fluency”, overall. Further research into these areas – the relationship to fluency journals, topics therein, whether music-based or otherwise - is of interest to this author, who will continue to administer varied EJW in future academic writing courses.

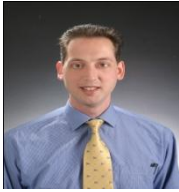
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