

Part of My Grading Policy That Turned Out Better Than I Expected!

by Sally Wagner

Each marking period, my students are asked to complete a "Major Project" for 10% of their grade. This project can be any of the following:

A. Concert Attendance - Go to a concert (at another high school, sibling's school, community orchestra, military band, piano recital, etc.) and bring back a program. While listening, write two paragraphs about one of the pieces you heard. Include topics such as:

1. Why you liked or disliked the piece
2. The contrasts the composer used to provide interest (dynamics, style, timbre, tempo, etc.)
3. Some things the performing group did particularly well
4. Some things the performing group could have done better
5. The mood of the piece (did it make you think of anything in particular, did it tell a story, was it relaxing, agitated, humorous or depressing and how.)

Often, students just write their paragraphs on the program!

B. Concert Report - A brief paragraph written on h piece of music in televised concerts or recordings. Length of listening must be 90 minutes. For multi-movement pieces, a paragraph on each movement is required. Paragraphs should include the 5 topics listed above.

C. Attend an All-Day Workshop for your instrument or a related instrument. Attend several clinics and sessions. Bring back a printed program. Write 2-3 paragraphs summarizing what you learned and how it will help your playing.

D. Music Technology Project (This must be approved, in advance, by the instructor.) This can include original compositions, completion of computerized theory programs, multi-track recording projects, etc.

Most students choose option A or B because they are more accessible. (These are also the focus of this article.) Hidden benefits of this assignment include the following:

Students engage in music criticism Based on their know!edge level, they comment on the nuts and bolts of the performance by judging the successes and shortcomings. This reinforces what they are learning in class - how to successfully end phrases, how to communicate articulations and dynamics and still maintain a balanced sound, how to shape a phrase, plus concepts of rhythmic accuracy and intonation! They may start by commenting on contrasts ('the piece began softly before increasing to fortissimo' or 'the

first section was slow but the second section was fast') but they eventually end up writing about how the music makes them feel or the images they find in certain pieces.

They become wonderfully creative as they become comfortable with the process. (Sometimes the first major project of the year takes place during class as a guided listening assignment. This helps orient them to the process.) I love to read their evaluations of other groups at County Festival. I learn that they've really been listening in rehearsals!

Students go to concerts This is perhaps the best of all! Considering the options, more students make the effort to attend concerts rather than listen to 90 minutes of recorded music. They go to concerts at other schools, or to hear younger/older siblings perform. They go to each other's piano recitals or to professional concerts in the area. They are learning to attend live performances. Students who have gone on to college tell me how great it is to go to a concert and not have to write anything. (Did you hear that? They're going to concerts!)

This element of my grading policy began many years ago because of my need to include objective elements for grading. As curriculum guidelines changed and a nationwide focus on reading and writing emerged, my bands already included writing as part of the grade! But it is so much more than an assignment following the dictates of a curriculum. It is the opportunity for students to put into words the aesthetic effect that music has on them. It allows them to react verbally to an aural art. It lets them express their own ideas about music as a form of communication. It gives them freedom to write creatively, knowing there is no wrong answer.

I thoroughly enjoy reading these assignments. It gives me insight into my students' creative abilities that I can't access any other way. I am thrilled every time they comment that a group's 'phrasing was really effective' or 'the crescendo didn't stay balanced' because I know I have really taught them to listen.