

Confession time: I love teaching but I hate grading, especially when I have 50 students writing a paper on the same topic. I confronted this problem several years ago when I was an adjunct who had far more students than I have now (I often taught seven or eight classes per semester). I had just joined Twitter and came across a conversation about something called “The Un-Essay.” The title intrigued me and I clicked on the link that I found from historian Cate Denial.¹ After more exploring, I found out that the un-essay was being used in so many different disciplines. After scouring prompts, I began to think about what this would mean for music history classes and how having the choice of topic and medium would not only benefit students, but also benefit my sanity in a semester where I had around 250 final projects to grade. So, in Fall 2019, I began my un-essay journey.

This essay will discuss my use of the un-essay in music history classes. It is important to note that this is just one way to embark on the un-essay; chances are, if you ask any of my music history colleagues, they would have slight or complete deviations from how I structure it. I will discuss the un-essay’s design through the use of Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). I will then provide details for how I use the un-essay. I conclude with a discussion of outcomes and challenges that the un-essay has brought to music history classes. Ultimately, however, the un-essay provides benefits for assessing in a discipline that is both writing and performance based.

TILT, UDL, and The Un-essay

To best understand my approach to the un-essay, having access to the prompt is necessary. The appendix contains the general un-essay prompt that I use and modify depending on the class.² The first important thing to note about this assignment is that Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles are at its core.³ Using both of these pedagogical methods as the backbone for the assignment informs how I—and by extension—the students, think about the goal of the project in the context of the course goals.

The most important functions of TILT are that it “(1) clarifies to students the instructor’s choices for lesson plans and (2) specifies how those choices relate to course goals.”⁴ With TILT pedagogy, students are given every detail of the assignment: why they are doing it (in my assignment the purpose), what they have to do (the task), what they will achieve, and how to achieve the best results (the criteria). More often than not, this includes a step-by-step roadmap, project guide, or checklist for what to do in the assignment from beginning to end. In the un-essay, this must be a bit more vague than more standard project because students have a great deal of choice about what kind of project to do and the topic of the project. However, in every case I provide a project outline covering the basics such as how student will choose and topic and the project medium and finding materials in the library. TILT also connects with active learning in that it helps students to fully participate in

¹ Cate Denial, “The Un-essay,” April 26, 2019, <https://catherinedenial.org/blog/uncategorized/the-un-essay/>

² My prompt was inspired by and adapted from Marc Kissel’s prompt. See “The Unessay,” *Mark Kissel*, May 7, 2018, <https://marckissel.netlify.app/post/on-the-unessay/>

³ I would be remiss to not acknowledge the Quality Enhancement Fellowship at Columbus State University and its participants in Spring 2021 for aiding me in adjusting the assignment to be in its final form here. For more about TILT, see Mary-Ann Winklemes, “Introduction: The Story of TILT and Its Emerging Uses in Higher Education,” in *Transparent Design in Higher Education Teaching and Leadership*, edited by Mary-Ann Winklemes, Allison Boye, and Suzanne Tapp (Sterling, VA: Stylus Press, 2019), 1–14. For more on Universal Design for Learning, see CAST, “About Universal Design for Learning,” 2022, <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl>

⁴ Alecia D. Anderson, Andrea N. Hunt, Rachel E. Powell, and Cindy Brooks Dollar, “Student Perceptions of Teaching Transparency,” *Journal of Effective Teaching* 13, no. 2 (2013): 38.

the process of learning, which can only occur when the meaning of and reason for learning activities is clear to them.⁵

One of the reasons the un-essay is so successful in maximizing students' ability to achieve the learning outcomes of each course that it adheres to the basic principles of UDL: optimizing individual choice and autonomy; optimizing relevance, value, and authenticity; varying demands or resources to optimize challenge; activating or supplying background knowledge; offer ways for customizing the display of information; maximizing [information] transfer and generalization; illustrating [knowledge] through multiple media; varying the methods for response and navigation; and using multiple tools for construction and navigation.⁶ But, the arts work especially well with UDL given that "arts education has always encouraged, and taught, expression through a much wider range of media."⁷ For this reason, many music courses, like music theory, are at a disadvantage if one of these senses is impaired.⁸ As a result, UDL permits the leveling of the playing field among *all* students and helps them to engage with the material using the senses and learning methods most appropriate for them. Granted, arts histories like music histories are not often as performance-based as other arts classes, they are dealing with a medium that explores multiple senses—vision (reading sheet music, seeing performances), hearing (listening to performances), touch (handling the instruments and feeling the keys and valves)—rather just one—vision found in non-arts classes.

Because music is such a multi-sensory discipline, I teach music history using active learning strategies, partially as a means to enact TILT and UDL principles but also partially because it just helps students learn better and retain and transfer the information more easily.⁹ The un-essay facilitates students in carrying over these strategies in how they engage with the course material and allow them to choose how they use these strategies. Providing the students with choice, as Maryellen Weimer notes, has two benefits:

The first is motivational—when students select the method they will use to master the material, they can pick an option they think they'd like to complete. And if an assignment option looks appealing, that increases the chance that students will spend more time working on it and more learning can then result. Second, the practice confronts students with themselves as learners. With teacher guidance, they can be challenged to consider why they find some assignments preferable. They can be encouraged to consider what skills the assignment involves and whether those are skills they have or need to work on developing. A strategy such as this moves students in the direction of autonomy and maturity as learners.¹⁰

These are skills we want to foster in our students. However, as we know from research, assignment choice facilitates learner-centered academic work, leading to increased student engagement, improved academic outcomes, and higher satisfaction levels in courses.¹¹ Especially in music history courses, where students do not

⁵ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 105.

⁶ For more on all of these and other aspects of UDL, see CAST, "UDL Guidelines," <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>.

⁷ Don Glass, Anne Mayer, and David H. Rose, "Universal Design for Learning and the Arts," *Harvard Educational Review* 83, no. 1 (2013): 110.

⁸ Bruce W. Quaglia, "Planning for Student Variability: Universal Design for Learning in the Music Theory Classroom and Curriculum," *Music Theory Online* 21, no. 1 (2015), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.15.21.1/mto.15.21.1.quaglia.php>

⁹ John Biggs and Catherine Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 4th ed. (Berkshire, England: Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press/McGraw Hill, 2011), 125.

¹⁰ Maryellen Weimer, "Adding Choice to Assignment Options: A Few Course Design Considerations," *Faculty Focus*, February 20, 2014, <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/adding-choices-assignment-options-course-design-considerations/>

¹¹ See Cheryl Hanewicz, Angela Platt, and Anne Arendt, (2017). "Creating a Learner-Centered Teaching Environment Using Student Choice in Assignments," *Distance Education* 38, no. 3 (2017): 273–287.

always see the connection between their work as performers and studying music history. The un-essay is a kind of self-design, which “put[s] the students more directly in charge of their learning, encourage self-reflective and independent thinking, and help them better achieve—and often *surpass*—their learning goals” (italics in original).¹² Inherently, self-design modules are flexible, allowing students to have choice in the projects upon which they embark.¹³ Having the choice in an un-essay allows students to use their skills to bridge the divide and experience how the two disciplines connect.

Using the Un-essay in the Music History Classroom

To be blunt, many music students do not often want to take the required music history sequence. Often, this is because they do not see the connection between their lives as performers and teachers and studying the history of music, say, from the early church or Elizabethan courts.¹⁴ This is one obstacle that I and many music history professors frequently face and must overcome. One way to do this minimize this obstacle is to show students how they can use their knowledge of music history in these lives. The un-essay is helpful in this regard.

The un-essay has been shown to be valuable for a variety of reasons, one of which is for public engagement and this is especially clear in the music history classroom.¹⁵ Public musicology, or music history for the public, is analogous to the discipline of public history and becoming increasingly important, with my own university implementing the first public musicology undergraduate certificate in the nation in fall 2022. Students must learn to engage with the public and speak about music in terms that the average listener can understand. As Patrick Sullivan writes: “Disciplines such as history, art, and the human sciences offer us very different, unique, and valuable ways of looking at the world.”¹⁶ Thus, using the un-essay in a class that combines history and art—music history—is ripe for engaging with these different ways to view the world and think deeply about them in a manner that the discipline encourages and even necessitates. But it also helps students to think in terms of how they can use their knowledge in the world. Can they compose music in a period- or composer-specific style? Can they arrange a piece of music that can only be found in a sketch? Can they write blog entries about a subject? Can they even write an *Onion* article that uses their knowledge of music history?¹⁷ The un-essay can allow them to connect the “real world” and the music history classroom in ways that the traditional essay cannot.

As the prompt in the appendix shows, the un-essay is structured while still open-ended. Students are not relegated to focusing on topics studied in the course. If they want to study something we have not covered but it is within the realm of the course, they are welcome to do so. For instance, one music education student embarked upon a project on women’s musical education in seventeenth-century Venice, something that I only

¹²Brian Alegant and Barbara Sawhill, “Making the Grade (Or Not): Thoughts on Self-Design, Self-Assessment, and Self-Grading,” *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy* 1 (2013), <http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents/alegantSawhill.html>

¹³Aam Hamdani and Amay Suherman, “Self-Design Project Based Learning: An Alternative Learning Model for Vocational Education,” *Journal of Technical Education and Training* 13, no. 3 (2021): 76.

¹⁴J. Peter Burkholder, “The Value of a Music History Survey,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 5, no. 2 (2015): 59.

¹⁵Rhiannon P. Jakopak, Kavin L. Monteith, and Bethann Garramon Merkle, “Writing Science: Improving Understanding and Communication Skills with the ‘Un-essay,’” *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America* 100, no. 4 (2019), <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/bes2.1610>

¹⁶Patrick Sullivan, “The Un-essay: Making Room for Creativity in the Composition Classroom,” *College Composition and Communication* 67, no. 1 (2015): 23.

¹⁷I began including the *Onion* article option in the Un-essay prompt after one particular article was released, which demonstrates that students would have to know about the genre of the cantata to write something like this. See “Fauci Warns Public Against Holding Any Large-Scale Celebrations Commemorating February 1708 Release of J.S. Bach’s Cantata ‘Gott Ist Mein König,’” *The Onion*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.theonion.com/fauci-warns-public-against-holding-any-large-scale-cele-1846198177>

alluded to briefly in class. Another student who was a double major in music and math did a video essay on the physics and math of music in ancient Greece. This allows the students to study something in detail that they are interested in and can directly connect to their career paths, one important goal of music history curricula.¹⁸

Students can also work individually, in pairs, or in small groups (no more than four but the largest group I ever had was three students). While some instructors may frown upon having groups embark on a semester-long project such as this, it has several benefits. First, it alleviates grading for large classes. Second, “groupwork is also one of the most expedient ways—along with work placements—of ensuring that students develop transferable skills for life-long learning (teamwork, leadership, project management skills, communication skills).”¹⁹ But having the option to conduct the project as a group also benefits those students who work better with others than alone for a variety of reasons. Because students must submit their own statement with the final project and actively present, there is no room for “winging it.”

On the whole, I scaffold my version of the un-essay assignment so that students must propose a topic with a bibliography that I approve their project before they begin the work. They must also present the project in class on the day that they would have had a final exam (I no longer test in my classes). The un-essay project is a work in progress, as I would like to scaffold it even more in the future, including requiring students to complete one more lower-stakes assignment between the proposal and the final product. Ultimately, the assignment of the un-essay comes after a class on how to “do” history; that is, what it means to construct or reconstruct a history of something through creating, writing, producing, performing, and imagining in the discipline and the discussion that there are many histories of a subject.²⁰ What it means to do history is important in all of histories subdisciplines, with students participating in this activity as early as their freshman year of college.²¹ So, why should we limit the doing of history to class time when we can expand it outward? The answer to this is the un-essay.

I have used this assignment in my music history sequence courses (ancient to modern), music in television course, and music in gender courses at several universities. The projects and their presentations are ungraded, which means that through a self-assessment and self-reflection process, students reflect on how they approached the assignment, whether it adhered to the stated parameters, and provide a grade to themselves.²² I, in turn, provide feedback rather than a grade.²³ The un-essays in my courses have resulted in one-person plays, mock interviews with dead composers, video essays, lecture-recitals, designs of historical opera costumes created in cross stitch, flip books, mini graphic novels, building of existing (and functional!) instruments using hardware store materials, songs and pieces in various genres, arrangements of pieces of music and editions of pieces only available in piano reductions, concept albums with original art, even recreating the “healing” cookie recipe of composer Hildegard von Bingen by examining primary sources and finding out what ingredients

¹⁸ Melanie Lowe, “Rethinking the Undergraduate Music History Sequence in the Information Age,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 5, no. 2 (2015): 66.

¹⁹ W. Martin Davies, “Groupwork as a Form of Assessment: Common Problems and Recommended Solutions,” *Higher Education* 58 (2009): 564.

²⁰ Mark Donnelly and Claire Norton, *Doing History*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 4.

²¹ Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker, “From Learning History to Doing History: Beyond the Coverage Model,” in *Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*, edited by Regan A. R. Gurung, Nancy L. Chick, and Aeron Haynie (Sterling, VA: Stylus Press, 2009), 20-21.

²² Accurate assessment can be especially difficult when working with creative projects, especially in the arts. For ideas on how to create rubrics and handle assessment in this context, either through traditional grading or ungrading, see Natasha Hagnes, Hoag Holmgren, and Martin Springborg, *Meaningful Grading: A Guide for Faculty in the Arts* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2018).

²³ On ungrading see Susan D. Blum, ed., *Ungrading: Why Ratings Undermine Student Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (West Virginia University Press, 2020); Jesse Stommel, “How to Ungrade,” [JesseStommel.com](https://www.jessestommel.com), March 11, 2018, <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>

would have been available in her time. Many—if not all—of these projects and others directly involve active learning. Yes, I still receive some written essays, but having those interspersed with other media makes the grading palatable and, dare I say it, something I actually anticipate happily and enjoy doing. This is incredibly important for our own well-being since the pandemic has strained so many of us and increased so much of our workloads. Anything that we can do can make our labor more rewarding and pleasurable should be a top priority and encouraged! This also helps students who may be stressed about the idea of writing a final paper. By incorporating UDL into the un-essay framework, we are able to release some of the stress that can inhibit student performance, create a welcoming environment for all students, and allow them to create a final product that they actually want to do.²⁴

The presentation component occurs during the final exam slot in a live class and students have a short time slot in which to present their projects to the class. They can bring their projects to class if they are tangible (constructed instruments or cookies), discuss their project including playing parts of interviews or videos, or perform if their project involves music making. In an asynchronous online class, students post video presentations. Students will have to watch all of the presentations and like the rest of the semester, students will comment on the presentation using their method of choice—written post, video, or audio file—consistent with UDL's tenet of multiple means of expression.

Interestingly enough, most of the students who I teach are music majors or minors and are overwhelmed at the prospect of being creative or having so much choice in the topic and medium of their final project. This is one of the obstacles that I face. Students can find too much choice overwhelming, leading to increased cognitive load.²⁵ Instructors looking to create inclusive classrooms must offer choice and autonomy, even though nontraditional structures can reinforce inequity and exclusion without sufficient structure and support.²⁶ This choice, which leads to inclusion, helps to create equitable classrooms, which “ensur[e] that everyone has what they need in order to be successful.”²⁷ Employing this kind of assignment can also be challenging for those who do not fulfill the stereotype of what a professor looks like, namely women, persons of color, those who look young, and disabled professors, to name a few.²⁸ Despite the anxiety of choice, at the end of the semester, students express appreciation for the ability to consider something related to the course based on their own interests in on their own terms. The assignment covers the same parameters as a traditional research paper, especially given that students choose their own topics. The difference is that they can express their creativity, with which assignment choice has been correlated and connected to critical thinking skills development.²⁹

²⁴ For more on how UDL can help student stress, see Andratesha Fritzgerald, *Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning: Building Expressways to Success* (Wakefield, MA: CAST, 2020), 35.

²⁵ David S. Ackerman, Barbara L. Gross, and Kirti Sawhney Celli, “Having Many Choice Options Seems Like a Great Idea, But...: Student Perceptions about the Level of Choice for a Project Topic in a Marketing Course,” *Journal of Marketing Education* 36, no. 3 (2014): 222.

²⁶ For more on this, see Joan Dabrowski and Tanji Reed Marshall, *Motivation and Engagement in Student Assignments: The Role of Choice and Relevancy* (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, 2018), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED593328.pdf>

²⁷ Mirko Chardin and Katie Novak, *Equity by Design: Delivering on the Power and Promise of UDL* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2021), 14

²⁸ For more about how to handle this, see the essays in the forthcoming volume, *Picture a Professor: Interrupting Biases about Faculty and Increasing Student Learning*, ed. by Jessamyn Neuhaus (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2022).

²⁹ Elizabeth Betsy Lasley, “Giving Students A Choice in Assignments Can Boost Creativity and Motivation,” *Faculty Focus*, September 19, 2013, <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/giving-students-a-choice-in-assignments-can-boost-creativity-and-motivation/>

Conclusion

Ultimately, the un-essay, which I discovered after teaching as instructor of record for thirteen years, changed how I think about assessment. It also changed how I teach. For many years, I thought of teaching music history as an exercise in coverage rather than skills acquisition. To be fair, music history—and really any kind of history—is a little of both. We want our students to think critically and analyze the historical material that we give them.³⁰ However, I—and my students—have learned that creativity can be a catalyst for critical and analytical thinking and skills, especially within historical context. The results of the creative endeavors of the un-essay facilitate those skills and engagement with history in a way that most essays cannot. And seeing my students engage with the material in new ways makes grading actually enjoyable.

³⁰Reba A. Wissner, “Active Images: Teaching Students Critical Thinking and Analysis Skills with Picture Postcards,” in *Innovative Approaches in Pedagogy for Higher Education Classrooms*, edited by Enakshi Sengupta and Patrick Blessenger (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Group, 2022), 68.

APPENDIX

GENERAL UN-ESSAY ASSIGNMENT PROMPT

FINAL PROJECT: THE UN-ESSAY:

PURPOSE: Creativity makes us human, so it is ironic that by the time we reach first grade, creativity begins being educated out of us in school—and even discouraged! The main project for this class will be an un-essay, a creative project that allows you to engage with the course material in any way you deem appropriate. The un-essay is a way for you to explore the course material in a way that interests you and that you might be able to apply to your future career and/or current interests or hobbies. It also conforms to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in which course material and demonstration of skills and knowledge can be optimized for students' individual strengths. For instance, the un-essay conforms to the following UDL guidelines: Optimizing individual choice and autonomy; optimizing relevance, value, and authenticity; varying demands or resources to optimize challenge; activating or supplying background knowledge; offer ways for customizing the display of information; maximizing [information] transfer and generalization; illustrating [knowledge] through multiple media; varying the methods for response and navigation; and using multiple tools for construction and navigation (for more on all of these and other aspects of UDL, see <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>).

TASK: The first step is to decide what you would like your topic to focus on. Over the first few weeks of class, use the syllabus and think about a topic of relevance to the course that you think is interesting, important, and relevant to you. In other words, you can choose your own topic as long as it can be associated with the course material. To do this, consider the following questions: What aspects of the course interests you? What would you like to know more about? What do you think others should know more about? Feel free to connect your own knowledge, interests, and experience with the topic you choose to make it more meaningful. Remember that there is a wide spectrum of music beyond what and who we study, so feel free to branch out to something we've either discussed in detail, minimally, or not at all, as long as it concerns [course topic]. You can start looking at what topics might be out there through a Google search, but only as a first step. The sources you'll need to consult for the project will be scholarly and found through the campus libraries.

Once you've chosen your topic, think about how you want to conduct it. You can do your project any way you please (written word, illustrations, music, video, cross-stitch, invented and built instrument, etc. ANYTHING!!). Think about your strengths, hobbies, and interests. Do you like building things? Are you a doodler? Do you compose for fun? Is cross stitch your stress relief? You can work in groups or on your own, depending on the scope of the project. Some possible examples:

- Make a video, video essay, or podcast about some aspect of the course
- Create a new musical instrument or notation system
- Make a series of pieces or songs in the style of a composer or period we've studied
- Create a series of cartoons or a comic book that illustrates something associated with this class
- Create a website about a topic related to the course
- Collect specific data and analyses and present it in a unique way
- Make a series of BuzzFeed style listicles (with a clickbait headline!) or Onion articles
- Embroidery, knitting project
- An 80s-style fanzine
- An interview and discussion with a composer or musician
- Regular essay/research paper

I am happy to meet with you individually if you need help deciding on a topic or medium. The most important thing is that you use what skills and interests you have to present a project on something you'd like to explore more that you can be proud of (without being stressed out!).

As part of the project, you will submit a proposal, do the project, write a 1–2-page statement (1 full page minimum) on your motivations and approach, and deliver a 5–7-minute presentation on the scheduled day of the final exam.

Project Proposal (Due September 27): You will submit a short proposal outlining your topic, thesis, its relevance to the course, and the medium in which you will present your un-essay. In the same document, you will also submit a bibliography of 5–10 sources that will help you to complete your project. The purpose of the bibliography is two-fold: 1) For you to start doing research to see what information is out there (if nothing or very little exists, it might be a good signal that this may not be a good course topic) and 2) To show me what sources you've been looking at so that I can make suggestions if I see something important missing. For help with finding sources and using the library, refer to the screencasts on the course website under the Screencasts tab in the Table of Contents of the Content tab that will guide you through using the library and databases. **If your proposal is not approved the first time you submit it, you must resubmit it until I approve it.**

Un-essay Project and Presentation (Due December 6): When you submit your final project, include a short explanatory essay ('The Statement') that explains what you did, why you did it, and how you went about producing the un-essay. This will give me insight into your creative and intellectual process. If you chose to do a standard essay/paper this can be your place to be more open about the process you used to create the piece. This statement should be 1–2 pages long. If working in a group, everyone should submit their own statement that reflects their personal views on the project.

Assess your work on three criteria (see rubric):

1. Deadlines met (for proposal and un-essay)
2. The full synopsis is well-written and shows clear thought and a plan
3. The content and presentation of the un-essay

CRITERIA: You will be successful in your un-essay and presentation if: a) you submit your proposal on time for approval, b) your project shows critical and active engagement with the course material, insight, and creativity and demonstrates time and effort devoted to creating something thoughtful, c) the chosen medium works persuasively with the design and polish of the un-essay, d) the project's structural and formal elements productively serve the core concept of the un-essay, e) the un-essay includes a clear and insightful connection and reflects a convincing and nuanced thesis, f) shows an effort to creatively evaluate the information with clarity, g) contains a clearly-written and grammatically correct 1 full page minimum, 2 full pages maximum statement with the project, h) has a clearly-organized 5–7-minute presentation that shows the class your project and discusses your approach and findings.