

MUSIC WRITING

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In every piping exam there is a music writing component. The wording of the question is always something like: *“Write out neatly and correctly, from memory...”* and then the particular requirement of the tune to be written is spelled out. The words neatly and correctly are important for obvious reasons. If a tune is not written neatly and correctly it cannot be played properly by someone sight reading the tune.

This element of exams is sometimes completed very poorly and is the most common element failed by candidates. The difficulty in this element should be applying theory to a practical use, but unfortunately most candidates fail due to carelessness rather than a lack of understanding theory.

The syllabus defines what type of music you will be asked to write, so adequately prepare your answer before the exam and practice writing the tune out from memory.

Let's look at how a page of music should be written.

What should you bring?

You will need to bring a ruler, pencil and an eraser.

Rule up the page.

First of all your page must be prepared before you write the tune. The manuscript page should be divided into bars using a ruler. These should be of equal size, but allowing for incomplete bars at the start of parts for the anacrusis notes. Double bar lines should be added at the start and finish of each part and a treble clef written at the beginning of each line. This must be written beginning from the G line to identify that note on the staff.

The top of the page.

You should identify the tune with a title or name. This is added on top of the manuscript in the centre of the page. As this is an exam and you should have prepared a tune to write, it would not be unreasonable to expect the candidate to learn the name of the composer and add that to the top right corner of the manuscript. Next you should add the type of tune on the left side of the page. This is an essential instruction to the performer. Without this, the performer will not know if it is a March, Air, Hornpipe etc. Considerable marks are deducted for not showing this vital instruction.

Copyright and Plagiarism.

Claiming to arrange or compose an otherwise copyright tune is a breach of copyright law and will be an instant fail. Claiming to arrange or compose a public domain tune without significant alteration to

the musical theme of the tune will be considered plagiarism and will also result in an instant fail. It is important that we do not accept any breach of copyright or plagiarism.

Further performing instructions.

The treble clef at the start of the tune identifies note positions. As you should know the notes on the bass staff for example or differently positioned to those on the treble staff. Each line of music therefore should have a clef. Next should be a time signature. This tells the performer how many beats in a bar and to some extent the manner in which the tune should be played. Again this is a vital playing instruction and again considerable marks will be deducted for its omission.

Double bar lines and double dots.

Double bar lines should follow at the start of each part with double dots if each part is repeated. When you see double dots at the end of a line of music, you should return to the corresponding double dots at the beginning of the part and repeat. It is therefore important to have the corresponding double dots written at the beginning and end of the part of music to be repeated.

Your page at this stage should look something like this.

The image shows a handwritten musical notation template for a bagpipe tune. At the top, there are three labels: "tune type", "title", and "Composer", each followed by a horizontal line for writing. Below these labels are four staves of musical notation. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a 2/4 time signature, and a repeat sign (two vertical lines with two dots). The remaining three staves are empty, with the first staff ending in a repeat sign and the other two ending in double bar lines with double dots. The entire template is enclosed in a light blue border.

Positioning of notes and tails.

In bagpipe music the stems of all of the main notes point downwards. The stems of all of the embellishments point upwards. The purpose for this is ease of reading. Music should be able to be sight read quickly and due to the amount of embellishments in bagpipe music if note stems above B went upwards and below went down the music would be confusing to read and notes and embellishment could easily be confused. This is a very old tradition, works well and yes we know it does not fit into the mainstream musical trend. An exam is not the forum for you to attempt to change this trend and a few always seem surprised when they lose marks for trying to make this point.

Position the notes in each bar so that they are well spaced and the beats easily identified. Do not cram all notes into the first or last half of the bar and try to have a space between the beats, so that they are clearly identified.

Writing the actual notes.

The heads of notes should fit within the lines of the staff. At no stage should there be any doubt as to whether a note fits either on or between staff lines. This is a part of being able to present the music in a manner so that it can be sight read quickly. This is why the exam instruction is to neatly present your piece as this is of importance to the performer, when sight reading the music.

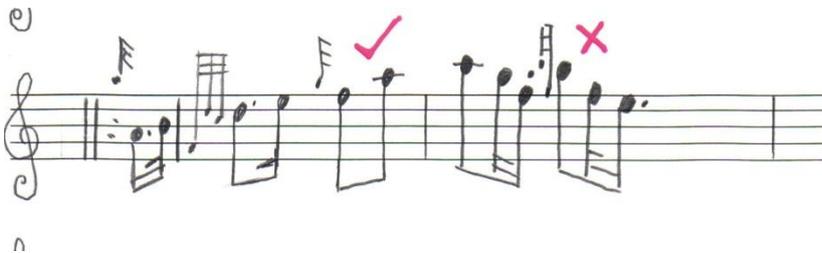
Grace notes and other embellishments.

Grace notes and embellishments are written with smaller heads than normal notes. Their stems all face upwards and they should be clearly defined from normal notes. They are generally written as demi-semi-quavers (although there are exceptions) and therefore if the correct numbers of tails are not placed on embellishments (three in most cases), you should expect a deduction of marks. The more you do wrong, the more marks you should expect to be deducted.

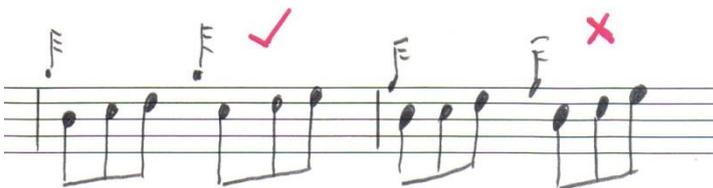
Musical theory.

There is an expectation that the principals of musical theory will be correct. Each bar must have the right value of notes as defined by the time signature. Incomplete bars at the end of parts must be allowed when an anacrusis is written at the start of that part. Correct use of tied notes must be displayed as to define beats etc.

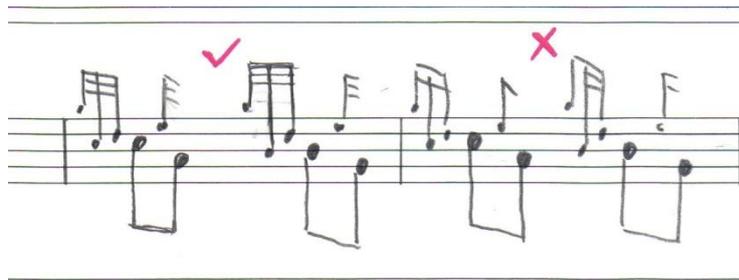
Examples of common faults.



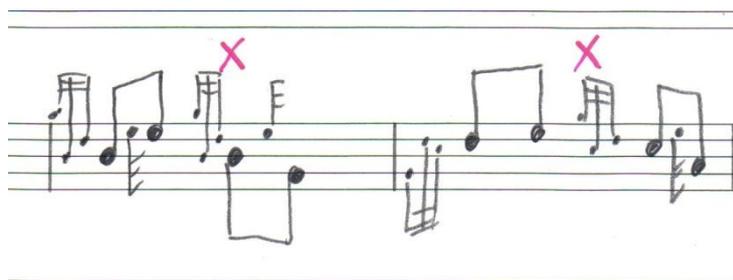
The above two bars show correctly spaced note groupings and poorly positioned note groupings.



The above two bars show clearly defined notes well placed on the staff as distinct from poorly written notes and grace notes with heads that do not clearly define the note.



The above two bars show correctly written grace notes and embellishments compared to careless or incorrectly written examples.



An example of incorrectly positioned note stems that creates confusion for the performer attempting to sight read the music.

These are some of the more common problems experienced by candidates. There is always a wide range of standards when exams are completed. These range from pieces of music that almost look like they have been extracted from a printed book as distinct from pages with bars crossed out, notes that cannot be read and tunes with no playing instructions such as type of tune or time signature.

You need to practice writing neatly and correctly and ensure that your music theory is correct throughout the written piece. Practice writing tunes out and compare them to books to ensure that your note spacing and tied notes look correct and are easy to follow. Remember what should be written on the top of the page (especially the performing instructions) and take some time to rule up and set the page up correctly before writing the musical notes.

More helpful information on piping can be found in "The Complete Pipers Handbook", available from: <http://www.schoolofpiping.com/handbook.html>

