

How to Prepare for Graduate Theory at Murray State

Please read before you begin planning your course of study

Welcome to the graduate program at Murray State. Your graduate faculty is committed to providing you with a robust educational experience and to your success in our program. In that spirit, it is beneficial for you to have a thorough understanding of the theory component of your degree before you begin. Particularly if you struggled with the subject as an undergraduate, you will want to plan accordingly to give yourself the best chance at success.

Music theory is a technical subject built on cumulative knowledge that, for some, has faded significantly since the last time they took a theory course. That is perfectly normal; the MUS 610 Advanced Music Theory takes that into account by devoting a significant portion of the course to review of undergraduate material. Despite the review, if some of the music fundamentals are not in place by the time you begin MUS 610, your workload as a student (and, for many, as a teacher) may prevent you from ever catching up. Depending on how much you use the subject in your daily life or when you last took a theory course, you may want to review *and practice* some fundamentals before taking the course. Here is a short list of topics that are expected of incoming students and will not be covered in the course:

- Intervals (recognizing and writing)
- Chord qualities (recognizing and writing) – nine of them in tonal music
 - major triad
 - minor triad
 - diminished triad
 - augmented triad
 - major seventh chord
 - minor seventh chord
 - major-minor (or dominant) seventh chord
 - half-diminished seventh chord
 - fully-diminished seventh chord
- Key signatures for major and minor keys
- Major scales
- Minor scales – three types
 - natural minor
 - harmonic minor (raise scale degree 7)
 - melodic minor (raise scale degrees 6 and 7 *on the way up only*)

The concepts behind these topics are not particularly difficult, but one's ability to *apply* them diminishes if those muscles are not regularly exercised. For the analysis we do in MUS 610, one must be able to quickly and easily process the above information in order to make more significant observations. For many, that application requires some practice before taking the MUS 610 course; speed is important.

There is a website called www.musictheory.net that can help you practice all of the above with the exception of seventh chords (which the website allows one to only practice aurally). Click on “Trainers”, then select “Key”, “Interval”, or “Triad Trainer.” This is a fun way to practice these skills, perhaps for a few minutes every day. It is also a good resource for anyone in the education field – the website also has application for note reading in different clefs as well as instrumental fingerings. Among the fundamentals, seventh-chord qualities are the most important (and arguably the most difficult); they will require your attention in some other capacity.

As long as your fundamentals are strong, the pace of the MUS 610 course should be manageable. Reviewing your old theory textbook (if you still have it) cannot hurt, but I would sooner devote my energy to knowing the fundamentals quickly. The rest of the material will be well-covered in the course.

If you are particularly concerned about theory, please try not to save it until the end of your program. The sooner you take MSU 610 after your undergraduate degree, the better off you will be.

In addition to the music theory course (MUS 610), you will also take a comprehensive exam in theory at the end of the program. It is a “take-home” exam that you will have 48 hours to complete; a sample outline has been included on the next page.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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Music Theory Comprehensive Exam Study Questions (D'Ambrosio), Summer '09

Take-Home, Questions and Scores Provided at Start of 48-hour Period

1. The exam includes a written portion to be completed:
 - Be prepared to demonstrate a thorough understanding of harmony in the “common practice” period – this includes chords (diatonic through chromatic), non-chord tones, cadences, modulation, modal mixture, etc. Your class notes from MUS 610 will prove invaluable here
 - Be able to identify or write any of the diatonic church modes, hybrid modes (lydian-mixolydian and dorian-phrygian), pentatonic scale, whole tone scale or octatonic scale.
 - From a given collection of pitches, be able to determine its normal order, prime row, and interval-class vector. Also, be able to find other presentations of that collection in a given excerpt of music.

2. Provide a formal analysis of a sonata form movement from a sonata, string quartet, or symphony. The analysis should include:
 - exposition (theme 1 [group], transition, and theme 2[group])
 - development
 - recapitulation (theme 1 [group], transition, and theme 2[group])
 - slow introduction (if present)
 - coda (if present)

The student may be asked to also provide harmonic analysis of certain excerpts from the work, including those that modulate. The score will be provided at the start of the 48-hour period and the recording will be accessible on the internet.

3. Student will be asked to do one of the following:
 - Write a brief essay describing sonata form, rondo form, and how sonata-rondo form incorporates elements of both.
 - Describe Oliver Messiaen’s term *mode of limited transposition*. Provide 3 examples: two can be well-known but design the third one yourself.

4. Analyze a serial piece (or an excerpt of one). The score will be provided in advance and the student will be told where to find the prime row. Be able to construct a 12x12 matrix and know how to label the rows [prime row = P^0]. Then find and label tone rows in the music – use order #s for rows with tones presented simultaneously.