

Using Music in Teaching

Why Music?

It is said that Thomas Jefferson used music to help him focus when he was writing the *Declaration of Independence*, playing his violin while drafting the text, which, it is claimed, helped him to conjure up the right words and transfer them from his brain to his paper. In literature, Sherlock Holmes was known for sawing away on his violin while ruminating on the facts and theories of a particularly perplexing case.

Now, you're not going to hand out violins to each student in your class, but you can provide music to help to guide them in their learning, especially while they are writing or reflecting.

An online article called "Music and the Brain, Music Power" (O'Donnell, 2008) notes that music affects our memory by activating the left and right sides of the brain simultaneously, resulting in an increase in the brain's capacity to gain knowledge and retain information. O'Donnell maintains that if students listen to music such as "Mozart's Sonata for Two in D Major" or "Handel's Water Music" prior to and during test taking, their average scores will ultimately be higher than when testing under conditions that do not provide a musical atmosphere. O'Donnell also relates that studies prove that neurons that trigger relaxation in the body are released when a person listens to Mozart's style of music.

Introduce your students to the idea of music in the classroom, discussing the differences between music that calms, energizes, or inspires. Explain that you will use music that calms and inspires when they are required to write and create, and music that energizes when it's time to get the blood flowing after a long period of quiet or study.

Selection of Music

Careful selection of music is vital. The current consensus on using music in the classroom is this:

- Use instrumentals, not vocals, for the background. Vocals can distract, causing students to concentrate on the words rather than on their own thoughts and reflections.
- Classical music is excellent for prompting atmosphere and reflection. Music suggestions include Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Handel, Vivaldi, and Mussorgsky.
- Use vocals only if you wish to use the music to prompt thought and reflection based on a particular song. It is important to listen to any song before you play it, however, to verify that there are no questionable words or meanings that could distort the listening experience.
- Make sure the music is predictably repetitive.

Music for Various Purposes

1. **While reading or writing** Play Baroque-era music or slow Mozart music while students are reading or writing. This helps them to help focus their attention and keeps them on track for longer periods of time.

Suggestions Relax with the Classics: Volume 1 or 2, Vivaldi's The Four Seasons, Handel's Water Music, Baroque Music for Learning and Relaxation, Classical Harmonies (Mozart), Liszt, Dvorak, or Grieg. Also very good is Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition."

2. **For low-energy times of day** Play upbeat Mozart while students are reading or writing. This helps them to stay energized and interested.

Suggestions Vivaldi, Mozart, Copeland, Gershwin, Bernstein

3. **During projects or at learning centers** Play focus music quietly in the background to hold students' attention while working at learning centers or on projects.

Suggestions Vivaldi, Mozart, Copeland, Gershwin, Bernstein

4. **To refresh and re-energize** Play an upbeat selection of music during the break time to refresh and re-energize.

Suggestions *Hooked on Classics, Earth Tribe Rhythms, Funny 50s and Silly 60s, Gershwin*

5. **While journaling** Play music quietly as students are journaling or writing. This helps to enhance their concentration and reduce talking.

Suggestions Music from classical (calming), ambient (calming), or piano categories



Silence Is Golden

Anything can become saturated. Use music selectively and purposely. In most classes you might use music for about 10 to 30 percent of the total learning time. There are two exceptions to this guideline:

1. If music is the whole focus of a class, more may be fine.
2. You may use environmental noise or music, like waterfalls, rain forests, or oceans, for a longer time than other selections.

Keep a CD player in the classroom, with your CDs in a safe, clean binder or storage unit. Always keep the CD player and CDs well secured.

The following sources were helpful in writing this article:

www.songsforteaching.com/ericjensen/1.htm

www.songsforteaching.com/makingthecaseformusicintheclassroom/research.php

www.songsforteaching.com/brewer/welcoming.htm

O'Donnell, L. (1999). "Music and the Brain, Music Power."

www.cerebromente.org.br/n15/mente/musica.html

