

Leaving Cert Music

Guide to the Composing Paper



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Ellen O'Brien got a H1 in her Leaving Certificate Music Exam. In this guide she shares her top tips and tricks for the Composing Paper.



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Introduction

The composing paper is often underestimated, students are usually left to figure it out for themselves. The paper itself is worth an equal number of marks to the listening paper, half of what the practical exam is worth. It is not a section to be forgotten, dismissed or “made up off the top of your head”. If the listening paper goes wrong or you freeze during your practical, what is going to save your grade? You guessed it, the compositions. Treat the composing paper with the time and respect it deserves, and it will reward you.

It can be difficult to mark a musical composition. Similarly to the English written paper, examiners are advised to use their own intuition and personal preference. Many teachers suggest singing a melody out loud or playing the harmony line on an instrument. For the experienced musicians among us, this may be helpful, but for a novice it is not so easy. Perhaps a student had no choice but to take music as a subject, or their only musical experience is playing the tin whistle in primary school!

In this guide, I will break down the key elements of a spectacular composition, both melody and harmony sections. “Attacking” is a fitting description for the way of going about a musical composition. I like to think of it as a mysterious sentence to be taken apart and investigated for clues, before being slowly rebuilt into a perfect paragraph. Too much? Maybe. But it is an exam after all, we might as well have some fun while we’re doing it!

Pre-Flight Checklist

Before you take off on your composition journey, there are a few essential things you should be aware of and keep in mind throughout. Think of these as safety procedures, demonstrated by you, for the benefit of your fellow passenger. The Examiner.

Key Signatures: Save time by knowing which keys have what sharps/flats. Write out the scale on rough work paper and label notes with their solfa name (Do, Re, Me etc.)

Relative Majors/Minors: Each major key has a relative minor and vice versa. You may think a melody is in a major key until you spot a rogue accidental in the opening bars.

Time Signature: Important to note for grouping purposes and for melody writing.

Progressions: For harmony writing, you should have a list of both good and bad chord progressions (ask your teacher about this.)

Patterns: Identify any sequences/patterns in the opening bars or the harmony.

Phrasing: Essential in melody writing, may include sub -phrases.

Instruments: Know the range of your chosen instrument, this is a rookie mistake to make. By choosing an unsuitable instrument (e.g: piano for the melody question), you are practically shooting yourself in the foot.

Anacrusis: Up-beats are common in melody questions and can be tricky to navigate. Ensure the upbeat is kept throughout the phrases. ALWAYS mark the four bar phrases before you start, it makes life much easier. Phrases go in the order of A, A1, B, A2. The A phrases must be similar whereas the B phrase must be different.

Dynamics: Melody composition should contain scattered dynamics, this shows flair and a good understanding of music. But don't make the dynamics too dramatic!

Modulate: In major melodies, you must ALWAYS modulate (it will ask you to in the question.) This means that you must briefly move into another key before returning to the original key. A minor key doesn't ask you to modulate, but I would recommend doing it anyway. This way, you follow the same structure for both major and minor melodies (less to remember.)

Chord Bank: I would always try to write out a chord bank for both the melody and the harmony question. These are the chords of the first six notes in the scale Remember that we never use chord three or seven under any circumstances

Remember!

The page before the harmony question will always contain a space for rough work and chord banks. Use this space.

C Major Chords

1. C	C E G
2. Dm	D F A
3. Em	E G B
4. F	F A C
5. G	G B D
6. Am	A C E

Part One – Melody Writing

Let's start at the beginning (a very good place to start!) In this guide, I am going to use the **Q1 melody from the LC 2018** composing paper:

Q.1 CONTINUATION OF A GIVEN OPENING

- Continue the opening below to make a 16–bar melody.
- Add appropriate performing directions (phrasing and dynamics) to the melody.
- Choose a suitable instrument for your melody from the following list:

oboe violin trumpet flute



Step 1

Identify the key signature. This is perhaps the most important step, as it determines the entire melody. Choose your instrument: Violin.

Pro Tip:

Read the instructions. A major melody will always ask you to modulate, whereas a minor melody will not. *Don't take this as a given however, always double check by looking at bar four.*

Bar 4 should contain (or lack) a helpful accidental. In this case, we see a D sharp. We know that the major key with only one sharp is G major, its relative minor being E minor. G major only uses F# but E minor uses both F# and D#. Therefore, we know that this melody is in E minor. If there was no D# accidental, the melody would simply be in G major.

Step 2

Work with what you've already got. The first four bars contain all of the information you could possibly need. Break it down bar by bar. Draw out your chord bank and write the Em scale with its tonic solfa.

Remember!

The tonic solfa of the Em scale does not start with Doh! It starts with La. Although we are in the key of Em, its relative major is G. G = Doh, E = La. The tonic solfa will start with La and go to high La.

E	F#	G	A	B	C	D#	E
L	T	D	R	M	F	Se	L



Example: Bar 1 : Phrase

We already know that the melody is in E minor, so first we write out our chord bank. It should look something like the E Minor chord example on the left.

E Minor Chords

1. Em	E G B
2. F#°/A	F# A C
3. G	G B D#
4. Am	A C E
5. B /B7	B D# F# / A
6. Em	E G B

By identifying the notes in bar 1 (E D# E B A G), we can say that the bar itself makes up the notes of the chord E minor, not counting the passing notes. Therefore, we know that the first bar of phrase A1 and A2 contains notes of the chord Em, whereas bar one of phrase B doesn't.

Pro Tip 1

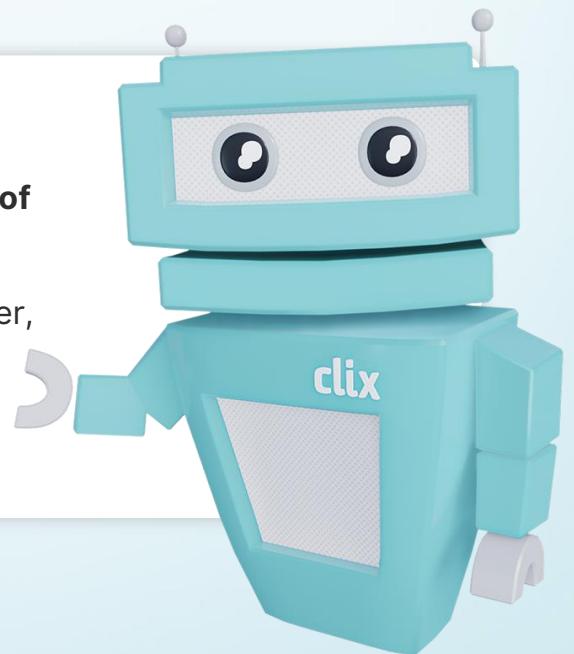
Note the direction in which the notes are going and invert it in bar one of phrase A1. E.g: E steps down one note to D# then back up to E, before falling to B, A, G. Through inversion, whichever note you start on in bar one of phrase A1, the next note should go up a step and then back down to the original note, all while keeping the same rhythm as bar one of phrase A. (Tricky I know, but it shows skill.) If this seems too complicated, stick to just keeping to the same rhythm as bar one in A and notes of the chord Em.

Do this with the first two bars: Identify notes of a chord, sometimes there may be two in one bar, and try to replicate it in the same bars in phrases A1 and A2. Don't mess with the rhythm too much, you'll just end up confused. If in doubt, use a bar of rhythm from the original bars but with different notes.

Pro Tip 2

For bar two of the A1 phrase, **reverse the rhythm of the notes but keep within the same chord notes.**

E.g: If the original bar two contains crotchet, quaver, 3 quavers, start bar two of the A1 phrase with 3 quavers, quaver, crotchet.



Step 3

Modulate. As we're in a minor key we don't *technically* have to modulate. However, I would recommend doing it if you're looking for those extra "wow" marks. The modulation ALWAYS takes place in bars 7 and 8. I would advise you to ask your teacher if they have a set sequence for the major and minor modulations.

Major Key: We modulate to the dominant (the fifth note.) So we use a sharp, flat or natural sign, depending on the dominant. In the case of C major, we would use F# in bar seven, as the dominant is G major, which contains an F#.

Minor Key: You simply don't use an accidental in bar 7. In this case, our accidental is D#, so we use the note D but we don't sharpen it. As G major only has an F# and no D#, we have successfully modulated back to our relative major! Make sure to use an F# and a natural D in bar 7.

Step 4

The B phrase. While each of the A phrases are similar (inversions, rhythm etc.) , what are we supposed to do with the B phrase? "Wing it" ? No, we must build the B phrase using sequences. Sequence, in music, a melodic or chordal figure repeated at a new pitch level (that is, transposed), thus unifying and developing musical material. Basically, a group of notes at a certain pitch repeated at a different pitch.

Pro Tip

Take a bar of rhythm from the opening bars that you have not already used in A1 or A2, and change the notes.

These notes should not make up any specific chord, just roll with it. This is your Mozart moment. Will you be remembered for hundreds of years for composing some random sequence? No, probably not. But you feel like a musical genius in the moment, let me tell you. The trick is to repeat the sequence in the following bar, either up a step or down a step.

Caution!

The tonic solfa of the Em scale does not start with Doh! It starts with La. Although we are in the key of Em, it's relative major is G. G = Doh, E= La. The tonic solfa will start with La and go to high La.

L - Si - L	E - D# - E
T - Si - L	F# - D# - E
M - Si - L	B - D# - E

Ask your teacher about this, they may have additional ways of placing the 7th.

Step 5

Saying goodbye. Every teacher has a different method of finishing off a melody or adding cadence points. Obviously, there are some guidelines but other than that, each melody ending will be different.

Major Melody: Your teacher should have a set solfa pattern for bar 15, which leads into a final note of Doh in bar 16. E.g: In a C major melody, the final note will be a long note on C. If you're feeling fancy, you can incorporate an octave jump with two long notes; high C to low C, or low C to high C.

Minor Melody: Similarly, your teacher should have a set solfa pattern for bar 15, however it should lead into a final long note of La in bar 16.

Caution!

Be aware of the time signature when using long notes. This is another rookie error that could cost you marks.

Step 6

Finishing touches. Before you say goodbye forever, make sure to add your final mark grabbers. These include:

- Dynamics** Add a 'mf' at the start, or crescendos around your modulation.

- Phrases** Mark the end of your phrases (A, A1, B, A2) with a comma AFTER the final note. Your sequences should be marked as sub-phrases.

- Solfa** Remember, 'T' always goes to 'Doh.' Sometimes the given bars end on T, you're expected to spot this and start the next phrase with 'Doh.'

- Unessentials** Never use two unessentials (passing notes) together. It defeats the point of being 'unessential.'

- Markings** Rub out any markings on your melody such as solfa or little reminders for yourself. Make that examiner work for it!

- Big steps** Avoid big steps or leaps in your melody, try to keep it within a small range. Melody should ~flow~.

- Grouping** Depending on the time signature, notes must be grouped in a certain way. For 6/8 time, quavers must be grouped in threes, whereas in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, quavers can be grouped in twos.

- Accidentals** Ensure they're used correctly and in the right places.

Melody Conclusion

I hope you're not too confused! Use this guide when you're doing your melodies. Practice makes perfect, you will always learn from your mistakes. If you have time, I recommend doing mock paper questions. They're much more challenging than proper exam questions, but they'll prepare you for whatever the SEC decides to throw at you in June.

Happy composing!

Part Two - Harmony Composing

If I'm being really honest, I was never a huge fan of the harmony writing question. I'd spend hours and hours on the melody writing question, but somehow, I always ended up doing just as well (if not better) in the harmony question. More good luck than good management, I think! After a frustratingly long time, I accepted the harmony question and just got on with it.

This question can be particularly tricky if you don't know what you're looking at. As I mentioned before, there is a space before the question for a chord bank. This helpfully tells you what key the composition is in and leaves space for you to fill in the rest. Start there. I would use a rough work page for working out chord progressions etc.

I will be using the **2018 Q5 Harmony question** as an example

Q.5 COMPOSING BASS NOTES AND CHORD INDICATIONS TO A GIVEN TUNE

PREPARATORY WORK

- Plot the chords available in the key of G minor, either in the chord bank grid or on the staff below.

Notes of chord	D B \flat G	E \flat C A	F \sharp D B \flat				C A F \sharp
Chord symbol	Gm	A $^{\circ}$	B \flat $^{+}$				F \sharp $^{\circ}$
Roman numeral	i	ii $^{\circ}$	III $^{+}$	iv	V	VI	vii $^{\circ}$

i ii $^{\circ}$ [III $^{+}$] iv V VI [vii $^{\circ}$]

2018 Q5 Harmony question continued:

- Study the piece of music below.
- Insert suitable bass notes and chord indications in the style of the given opening.
- Do not use the same chord in the same position in adjacent boxes.
- You may use either chord symbols or Roman numerals, but not both.

(60)

Step 1

Fill in the table above. As with the melody composition, we **NEVER** use chord three or chord seven. *Ever.* For your own sanity and mine. Don't do it.

The finished table should look something like this:

Notes of Chord	D B ^b G	E ^b C A	F# D B ^b	G E ^b C	/C A F# D	E ^b G B ^b	C A F#
Chord Symbol	Gm	A ^o /C	B ^b	C	D/ D7	E	F#
Roman Numeral	i	ii ^o	iii	iv	v	vi	vii

Step 2

Chord progressions. Ask your teacher for a list of the good, the bad and the ugly chord progressions. Some progressions work, some just...don't. Below is a list of chord progressions that you should **NEVER** use in both a major and a minor harmony question.

Never use:

Chord Progression	Sample Gm
2 → 1	A ^o /C → Gm
5 → 2	D → A ^o /C
5' → 5	D' → D



As mentioned earlier, there are different chord progression patterns that you can use. I usually move in falling thirds and fifths, and in rising twos.

For Example:

Chord	Really Good Progressions
8. Gm	Fall three to E flat. Fall five to C minor. Rise to A°/C
7. F#	Never
6. E^b	Fall three to Cm Fall five to A°/C
5. D	Fall five to Gm (Perfect Cadence) Rise to E flat (Interrupted Cadence) Any chord to D is an Imperfect Cadence (except chord 3, 7, and 5 ⁷).
4. Cm	Fall three to A°/C Rise to D Fall to Gm (Plagal Cadence)
3. B^b	Never
2. A°/C	Fall five to D
1. Gm	Fall three to E flat. Fall five to C minor. Rise to A°/C

Once you don't use any of the 'never' progressions, you are free to continue. Above, you can see the preferred progressions, but they are not always possible. Go with what works best for you.

Step 3

Identify notes in the bars. The harmony chord in the box is based on the notes below it. As you can see, the accompanying chord is Gm because the notes in the bar are; G, B flat, A, B flat, D. A is used as a passing note, hence the bar is based on Gm.

Pro Tip:

Go through each bar and write the name of each melody note below it in light pencil. This will help you to choose the best chord/chords for each box.

Step 4

Find your cadences. We know that there will be a cadence at the end, usually a final cadence but sometimes it may be non-final. There should also be a non-final cadence at approximately the halfway point, however this is not always the case.

Only concern yourself with the last cadence. The rest of the cadences will automatically slot in, provided you choose the right chords for the boxes.

Pro Tip:

Chord symbols above the melody line: i Gm, iv Cm, i Gm, iv Cm, V D, ib Gm/B \flat , V D.

Cadence points usually have a long note or a clear 'breath' in the melody.

Empty boxes above the melody line for identifying cadence points.

Minim – Long note identifies cadence point

Step 5

Choose your chords. Ensure it is the best fit for the bar, taking into account notes in the bar, chord progressions and also the bass notes that are given.

Step 6

Composing the bass line. This is perhaps the most difficult step. Every teacher has different ways of teaching this, so you should probably start there.

However, if you're looking for inspiration, this is my way of doing it:

- Take the bass notes that are given in the opening bars.
- Identify what notes of the scale they are based on the chord above the bar.
E.g: Bar one uses G minor. We have; **G , B flat, D, G, B flat.**

Therefore the style of the base goes;

G	Root of Gm
B flat	Third of Gm
D	Fifth of Gm
G	Root of Gm
B flat	Third of Gm

Use this pattern in the first bar in the second phrase, the first bar you must fill in the bass.

Do this for each of the bars that have a given bass and repeat the pattern in the bars that follow. This shows your understanding of the instruction “*in the style of the given opening.*”

Pro Tip:

Use long notes at cadence points but ONLY if you're sure of where they are. Definitely use one long note at the final cadence point, or two if there are two chords in the bar.



Step 7

Finishing touches and cautions.

- Only use root position chords at cadences, no inversions.
- In a minor key, the 7th note is always raised by a semitone in the bassline, except when it is used as an unessential note.
- Only use the chord 5^7 if the 7th note is actually in the bar.
- Never end an imperfect cadence on 5^7 .
- Maintain given bass throughout where possible, some adjustments may be required.
- Never use two unessentials together.

Harmony Conclusion:

This question is more about your interpretation skills than your composition skills. You must go in with your eyes wide open, there are a lot of traps to fall into. And you will fall into them, nobody is perfect no matter how much practice you have. However, the more traps you're aware of, the less likely you are to fall into them.

In a stressful exam situation, when our brain feels as if it's blocked, we rely on our subconsciousness to step up to the job. Writing a melody should be like drawing a picture to you, it may only be a stickman on a bike but a picture nonetheless.

Happy Harmonising!

Final Thoughts and Tips

I took music as my eighth subject for the leaving cert, so the only time I had to do my composition homework was on a Friday night after school. I would push all other homework aside and put my time into my melodies and harmonies. This way, I didn't feel as rushed to get through them and I could afford to take my time. Don't get me wrong, some Friday nights my eyes would be closing as I was writing out tonic solfas and chord banks! But thanks to a Bruce Springsteen album on repeat in the background and a steady supply of tea, I got through it.

I'm not assuming that you have that sort of time to spend on music, or even if you have the interest. I enjoyed the composition paper and was fortunate enough to have an excellent teacher, but it's not for everyone. However, like I mentioned earlier, this paper is a hidden goldmine of marks. Treat it with respect and it will reward you and ease a small bit of pressure. You got this.

Happy Composing!