Common questions about National 3, National 4, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher Music and associated freestanding units

Contents

Assignment

How accurate does a performance plan or score need to be?

A performance plan or score should reflect the accompanying audio file as much as possible. It should include sufficient information to clearly show the main features of a candidate's composition. While the performance plan or score itself is not marked, it gives essential information to a marker. Markers take all musical features heard in the audio file into consideration when marking.

A screenshot of a composition created by a digital audio workstation is acceptable, provided the candidate gives information about the structure of the composition, and instrumental and vocal parts. They must include details about any parts they have not fully created themselves, the keys they used and significant harmonic progressions.

Candidates can annotate screenshots of a digital audio workstation (DAW) to show this information. A screenshot of a DAW showing only the names of instruments and no further information is not sufficient.

How can candidates present details of their composition in a performance plan?

Candidates should ensure that there is sufficient information in a performance plan to clearly show the main features of their composition.

Candidates can present important aspects of their composition in a variety of ways. For example:

- lyrics with chords and details of the structure
- a timeline of the composition with key features listed
- paragraphs of prose under structural headings

Can candidates include TAB in their score or performance plan?

Candidates who choose to include TAB in their score or performance plan must ensure that all parts are notated in standard music notation. While it is not sufficient for any part to be shown in TAB only, it is acceptable to include a part in both TAB and standard notation. A candidate whose score or performance plan has any part in TAB only will be awarded 0 marks for the composition.

Are lyrics assessed in a composition?

No, the lyrics of a composition are not assessed. However, a candidate's overall song writing skills are assessed, which could include how well the chosen lyrics fit the rhythm and melody.

Candidates must show the lyrics and chords in their performance plan or score. The song does not need to be fully notated for the assignment.

Can candidates use generative AI to produce lyrics for a composition?

Yes, candidates can use generative AI to produce lyrics for a composition because the lyrics themselves are not marked.

Do candidates who choose to write a serial composition need to show how they have used their note rows?

Candidates must annotate their scores indicating which version of their note rows they have used throughout their composition. It is not sufficient to indicate none or only some of their note rows. Candidates who do not annotate all their note rows in their score will be awarded 0 marks.

Can candidates work on their compositions in groups after a workshop?

We do not recommend this as it is difficult to establish each candidate's contribution to the compositional process. Candidates should clearly identify their own input in their composition.

Is it mandatory to use the SQA templates for the composing review and analysis (Advanced Higher)?

Yes. Candidates must submit their review and analysis (Advanced Higher only) on the relevant SQA template. A centre-devised template that looks similar is not acceptable. The templates are available from the relevant Music subject pages.

Is there a recommended file naming convention when submitting candidate evidence?

Files should be labelled clearly so that each candidate's work can be easily identified. As a minimum, the label should show the candidate's full name and the part of the assignment, for example:

- Alex Smith audio.mp3
- Alex Smith score.pdf
- Alex Smith review.doc

What is the easiest and quickest way for a centre to submit candidates' assignment files?

Most centres use the digital coursework submission service to upload candidates' assignment files. Teachers and lecturers find it easier and quicker to use than submitting pen drives or CDs. We strongly encourage centres to use the digital coursework submission service.

Your SQA Connect administrator (usually your SQA co-ordinator) can set up multiple accounts on SQA Connect for the appropriate staff.

Where are Understanding Standards materials located?

The following table summarises the content and location of our wide range of Understanding Standards materials.

Title, format and date	Content	Location
N5–AH Assignment (collection of audio presentations — 2023)	There are four sections: • Information — assignment requirements, catalogue, advice and approaches • National 5 • Higher • Advanced Higher The following presentations contain a detailed overview for each assignment, the marks awarded and suggestions for improvement: • National 5 — five candidate examples • Higher — six candidate examples • Advanced Higher — nine candidate examples	Understanding Standards site
National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher Assignment 2025 (audio presentation)	The focus is on the updates to Music course documents at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher for the assignment, and further guidance and advice about the assignment.	Understanding Standards site
Support packs for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher levels (PDF documents and audio files — 2015–2024)	Compositions, arrangements (AH), reviews and analyses (AH) with commentaries detailing why marks were awarded.	SQA secure site

Title, format and date	Content	Location
Music assignment catalogue (Excel document)	This lists all available compositions, arrangements (AH), reviews and analyses (AH). It also includes the composition mark, review mark, score or performance plan if applicable, number of melodic lines, instrumentation, software, style, and where to find the candidate evidence.	SQA secure site

How can teachers and lecturers use the Music assignment catalogue?

The Music assignment catalogue, available from the Music Understanding Standards section of the SQA secure site, lists candidate evidence across National 5 to Advanced Higher levels, and includes marks and commentaries. There is a wide range of instrumentation, approaches and development of ideas in the compositions.

To fully engage with the Understanding Standards materials for the assignment, you must listen to the audio files alongside the score or performance plan, review and analysis (at Advanced Higher).

These materials could be reviewed at department or local authority network meetings to consider marks and comments about the published compositions, reviews or analyses.

Meetings could focus on compositions in a particular mark range, in a particular style, with particular instrumentation, or with a score or performance plan. Teachers and lecturers can apply filters in the assignment catalogue to find pieces.

Performance

Must performances be accompanied?

In general, performances must be accompanied unless it is stylistically inappropriate. For example, keyboards are not usually accompanied, and some classical guitar pieces may not have a published accompaniment. It is acceptable for a candidate to perform one piece unaccompanied, for example, a study.

However, any performance can be accompanied if the centre wants to do so. For example, it is acceptable for bagpipes and pipe band drumming performances to be accompanied.

Accompaniments can be live or pre-recorded.

How important is it that vocal candidates sing exactly what is notated on the sheet music?

Visiting assessors mark what they hear during a candidate's performance while looking at conventionally notated sheet music provided by the centre. Consequently, it is important that the sheet music accurately shows what the candidate intends to perform.

Centres can annotate sheet music to show what the candidate expects to sing.

If there are no dynamic markings in a piece of music, how is this performance aspect assessed?

Visiting assessors assess dynamics only if they are included on the sheet music provided by the centre. However, the mood and character of a piece might be enhanced when candidates make appropriate dynamic contrasts even if they are not present in the sheet music.

If repeats are included in the timing of a piece, must they be played?

Yes, candidates must perform repeats if they are included in the timing of a piece.

Can teachers and lecturers make cuts to pieces to keep within the chosen time limit for each instrument?

Teachers and lecturers may make carefully timed cuts to keep within the time requirements, but they should ensure that the sections of music performed are appropriately challenging for the level of the course. For example, Grade 3 is the minimum level for National 5.

What help is available to ensure that a piece is of the required standard?

The following sources show the required minimum standard for each level:

- the 'National Qualifications in Music: Performing' document lists possible repertoire for instruments and voice
- other music examination syllabuses, for example, ABRSM, Trinity College London, Rockschool, London College of Music, and RCS Scottish Traditional Music Graded Exams

Centres can present pieces that are not from the sources listed above, but must ensure that they meet the minimum level requirements. Teachers and lecturers can also collaborate and share materials with other centres.

Where can a teacher or lecturer find information and dates about assessment arrangements for candidates?

The deadline for agreeing assessment arrangements for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher Music performance is towards the end of November. The specific

date can be found in the Delivering National Qualifications: Guide for SQA Co-ordinators document available on SQA Connect.

Assessment arrangements give candidates who are disabled, and/or have been identified as having additional support needs, access to appropriate arrangements to complete the assessment, without compromising its integrity.

Should centres record candidates' performances during the visiting assessment?

Centres can record candidates' performances during the visiting assessment. This is not mandatory, but we recommend recording so that candidates and centres can engage fully with the appeals service.

For more information about recording performances, please refer to Recording of Dance, Drama and Music Visiting Assessment on the Music subject pages.

How important is it for centres to have accurate numbers of candidate entries by the middle of December?

Accurate numbers of candidate entries help us plan visiting assessor allocations, as these are based on the number of entries.

Question paper

Can candidates answer music literacy questions in pencil?

No. Candidates should use blue or black ink to answer music literacy questions. This is stated on the front page of the question papers. Markers view scanned question papers on screen and they cannot clearly see answers in pencil.

What do centres need to consider when preparing a question paper for a formal assessment?

A past paper or specimen question paper in its entirety cannot be the only evidence submitted for the examination exceptional circumstances consideration service. Past papers are accessible on SQA's website and therefore candidates may be familiar with the content before the assessment.

A question paper that is used for a formal assessment should have appropriate course coverage. For example, the question types, acceptable answers, appropriate distractors and allocation of marks should follow those in past papers. Take care when using questions from previous qualifications. They may not provide the appropriate scope, coverage or balance, and may need to be amended.

General questions about National Qualifications

How do centres find key dates such as performance visiting assessments windows and/or assignment uplift dates?

SQA co-ordinators have key dates for all course requirements.

Is there a scaling calculator to work out the final mark out of 100 for all combined components of a course?

A scaling calculator is available on SQA's [exam support and forms web page](#).

National 4 added value unit

What are the required programme durations for the added value unit?

Requirement	National 4
Minimum programme duration across either two instruments **or** one instrument and voice	8 minutes
Minimum programme duration on one instrument or voice	2 minutes

Candidates must perform a minimum of two pieces of music on each of the two selected instruments, or one instrument and voice.

What is the minimum level for candidate performances?

Grade 2.

Are the two instruments or one instrument and voice considered separately for the added value unit assessment?

Candidates must demonstrate basic competence on both instruments, or one instrument and voice, to pass the added value unit. Assessors should make a holistic judgement for each instrument or voice. They should consider the quality of all available evidence for each instrument or voice across the full programme.

Do centres have to record complete performances of the added value unit?

Yes, centres must record all performances for both instruments or one instrument or voice.

Can the performance in the added value unit be split over a period of time?

Candidates must complete their performance in no more than two assessment events within a short timescale for both instruments, or one instrument and voice. This could, for example, be split over the same day, performing on one instrument in the morning and the other later in the day. It is not acceptable to collate evidence on a piece-by-piece basis throughout the session.

What are the drum kit requirements for the added value unit?

Candidates must perform three different styles from the drum kit style bank. All drum kit pieces must have three different fills, and four-way independence.

What are the chordal guitar or chordal ukulele requirements for the added value unit?

Chordal guitar or chordal ukulele candidates must demonstrate nine chords in a continuous accompanying style, which could include arpeggiated chords.

Music units

What are the codes for the Performing on One Instrument or Voice units?

The Performing on One Instrument or Voice units (F3F4) are freestanding units:

- F3F4 09 — SCQF level 3
- F3F4 10 — SCQF level 4
- F3F4 11 — SCQF level 5
- F3F4 12 — SCQF level 6
- F3F4 13 — SCQF level 7

Centres cannot enter a candidate for the same unit and level twice.

What duration should a candidate's programme be for the Music: Performing Skills units?

The Music: Performing Skills units do not specify how long each example of music should be for the candidate to meet assessment standard 1.1 on both instruments, or one instrument and voice.

Candidates do not need to perform complete pieces. They may choose to focus on the sections of a piece that demonstrate that the music is of the appropriate level.

Candidates must perform a minimum of four examples of music (two on each instrument) to fully meet assessment standard 1.1.

What are the requirements for drum kit candidates for the Music: Performing Skills units?

For the Music: Performing Skills units, drum kit candidates must perform a minimum of two examples at the appropriate level:

- Grade 1 for National 3
- Grade 2 for National 4
- Grade 3 for SCQF level 5
- Grade 4 for SCQF level 6
- Grade 5 for SCQF level 7

The examples of music for National 3 candidates should include two different fills and demonstrate three-way independence.

The examples of music for National 4 (SCQF level 4), SCQF level 5, SCQF level 6 and SCQF level 7 candidates should include three different fills and demonstrate four-way independence.

At all levels, candidates should select only one style from each of the drum kit style banks 1–9, available on page 25 of the National 5 Music Course Specification. The drum kit style bank applies to all levels.

This content is valid.

Important: From 1 February 2026, Qualifications Scotland becomes fully operational, replacing SQA and becoming the new national awarding body. This document will remain current and you can continue to use it. It will be updated in the style of Qualifications Scotland when it's next due for review.

Any emails that are sent from 1 February 2026 to an SQA email address (@sqa.org.uk) will be redirected to the new Qualifications Scotland email address (@qualifications.gov.scot). For example, qualification.development@sqa.org.uk will change to qualification.development@qualifications.gov.scot from 1 February 2026.