

# Specifications Grading, Self Regulated Learning, and Graphic Syllabic: Linda Nilson's Innovations in Teaching Applied to Music Courses

Robert Willey, Ball State University

## Specifications Grading

Specifications Grading helps solve many of the problems in the currently broken grade system. Employers see little connection between grades and employee success on the job due to a combination of factors, such as grade inflation and a disconnect with course goals. Students have become conditioned to submit incomplete work and negotiate for partial and extra credit, teachers live in fear of low student evaluations, and much faculty time is spent justifying the grades given for assignments. Linda Nilson developed the Specifications Grading system to clarify expectations and raise academic standards, help motivate students and give them more flexibility in earning the grades they desire.

Specifications Grading, or "Specs Grading" revolves around designing clear rubrics that make it very clear what is required for each assignment. All work is graded on a pass/no credit basis and there is no partial credit. To alleviate some of the rigidity of the evaluation process teachers can offer a Token system in which students have a certain number of tokens that can be used to turn in assignments late or to redo them.

Another option is to group assignments into bundles. In my music business class there are 4 bundles—one for reading assignments, one for activity assignments, one for discussion assignments, and a final project bundle. The letter grade for the semester is determined by how many bundles a student gets credit for.

## Self-Regulated Learning

"Self-regulation encompasses the monitoring and managing of one's cognitive processes as well as the awareness of and the control over one's emotions, motivations, behavior, and environment as related to learning... Learning is about one's relationship with oneself and one's ability to exert the effort, self-control, and critical self-assessment necessary to achieve the best possible results—and about overcoming risk aversion, failure, distractions, and sheer laziness in pursuit of real achievement. This is self-regulated learning." (Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-Regulated Learners*, 2013)

- Cultivate reading skills and study habits
- Help students get control over their emotions and behavior
- Help students become aware of what they have and have not understood
- Make students more aware of their learning process, where there is resistance, and how it can be overcome
- Combines well with teaching and learning techniques proposed by other authors such as Peter Brown, Angela Duckworth, Carolyn Dweck, and James Lang.

## Graphic Syllabi

The traditional syllabus is often produced as a formality by the instructor and ignored by students. The most important information may be the contract provisions such as the grading and attendance policies. A graphic syllabus, which can be an add-on to a conventional one, provides a one-page overview that shows how a course is organized, for example, how a course is divided into modules (see music industry example on right). The interrelationship between topics can similarly be expressed in a concept map, for example, the elements that become part of a student's toolkit in a songwriting class (see example on right). Information that is presented visually may be more easily understood and retained by students, since it comes in a form that more closely resembles how it will be stored in the brain, compared with a text representation that requires more pre-processing.

## Bibliography

Linda Nilson, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Stylus, 2014

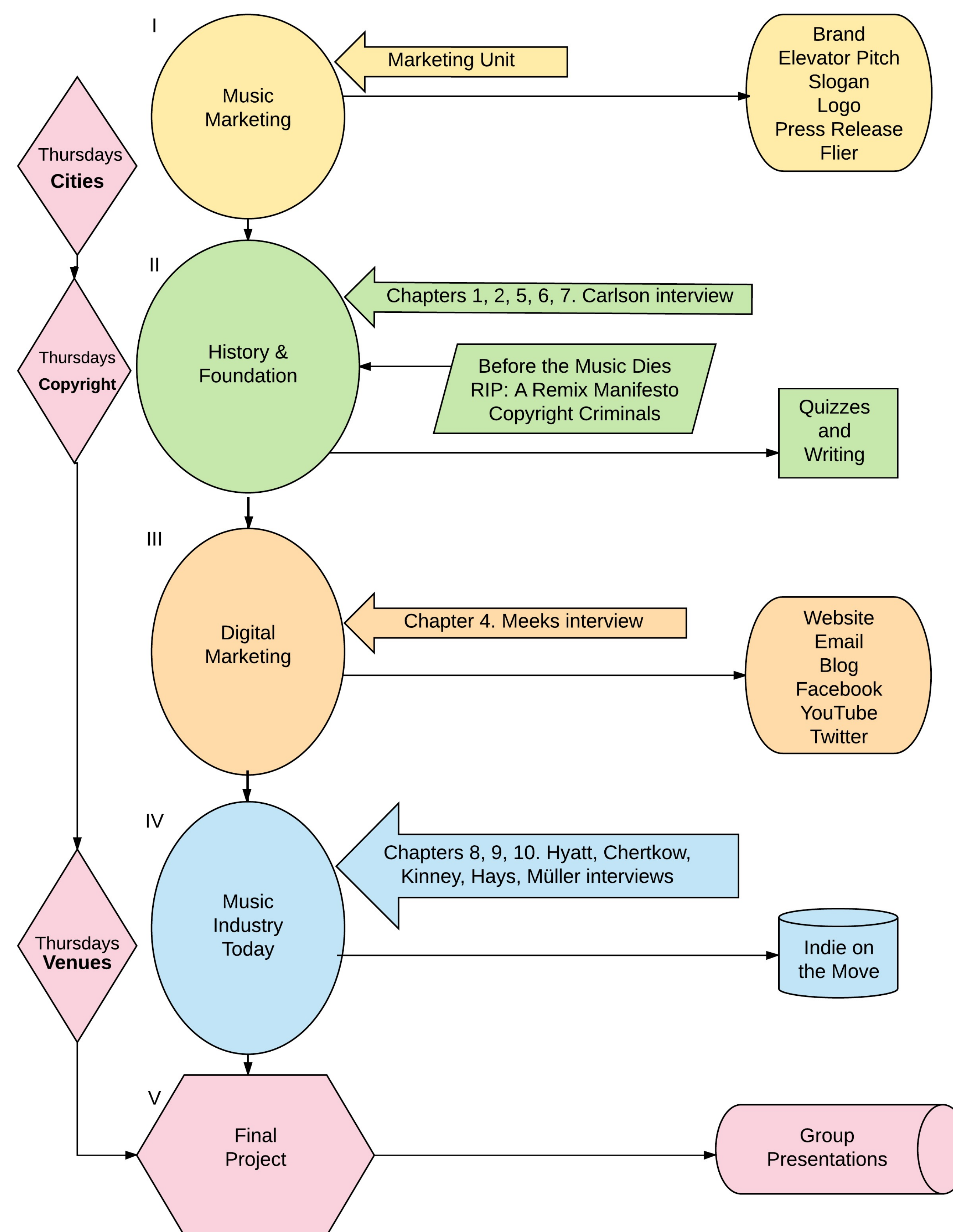
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Linda Nilson, *The Graphic Syllabus and the Outcomes Map: Communicating Your Course*. Jossey-Bass, 2007.

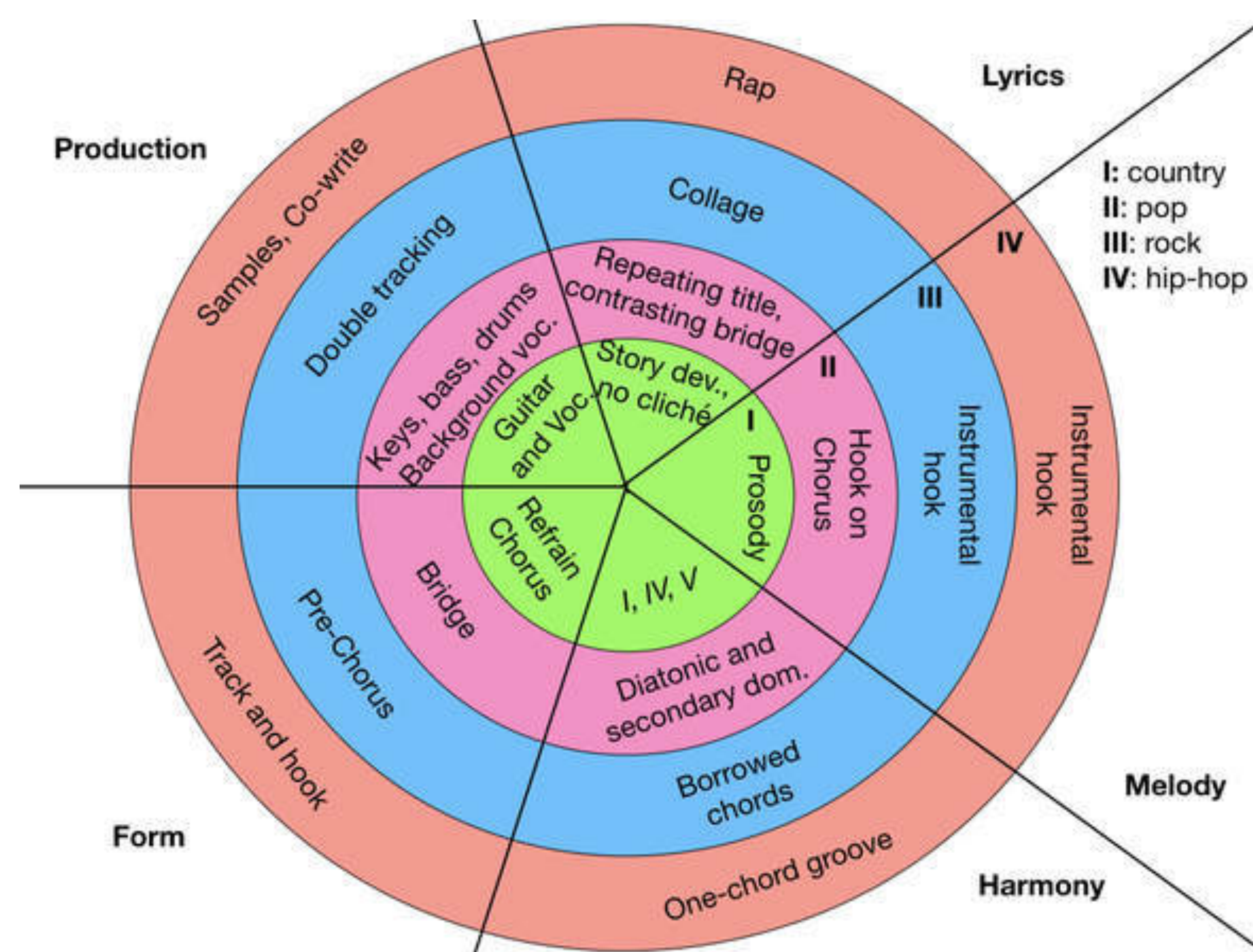


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Graphic syllabus for music industry course



Outcomes map for songwriting class