

# Songwriting

## WRITING BOX

If you have something to say and a song in your heart, songwriting might be for you!

### What is a song?

A song is comprised of lyrics set to music – melodies, rhythms and harmony, or chords. Some artists write lyrics first, then compose the music, while others compose music, then fit lyrics to the melodies. Alternately, a lyricist might collaborate with a music-writing colleague to finish the songwriting process. However if you play an instrument (guitar, ukulele or keyboard), you may wish to compose your music with the instrument.

### What are lyrics?

Song lyrics, a type of poetry, often describe a small moment, slice of life, or a scene and aim to move your audience's emotions and imagination. You want your lyrics to be relatable and authentic. They present context and emotion in order to tell an understandable story. Lyrics are typically written to be short and repetitive and often (but not always) include complex rhymes.

### Why write lyrics?

Sometimes the best, as well as most creative and artistic manner of expressing or sharing emotions or telling a story is through writing lyrics for a song!

## What are the most important components of song lyrics?

### CREATING A THEME

Start with a theme, story, or set of emotions that you want to communicate. To help focus your creative ideas you might:

- try journaling or creating a drawing or painting about a theme, story, or set of emotions
- brainstorm: Come up with a set of colorful, descriptive words or phrases about a story/theme that are *based on the senses*: **sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing** AND words that describe types of **movement** (for example jerky, floating, whirling, sweeping)
- think through and outline both smaller, detailed images of your theme/story, as well as broader viewpoints
- consider how your audience will relate emotionally to your lyrics.
- write as if you were talking to a friend; be authentic.
- use descriptive words.
- create an experience (rather than “telling” your listener how to feel, “show” them through a story or vignette )

### CREATING A FORM

Lyricists also think about the form of a song, which often includes these 3 parts:

1. Verse (V) – The bulk of your song consists of changing words, accompanied by the same music, that tell a story by
  - introducing your characters
  - describing different parts of the story
  - building on the previous verse, as the story expands or grows
  - using 4-6 lines (or 6-10 shorter ones)
2. Chorus (C) – Short snippets of new words between the verses - *repeated lyrics and music*; designed to be easily remembered; feature simple, universal lyrics and
  - is catchy enough so that everyone can sing along

- uses different, but compatible music from the verses, with possibly new rhythms
  - is surprising (has a “hook”) in the lyrics and/or music
  - contains 3-6 lines (or 5-8 shorter ones)
3. Bridge (B) – Connecting section that usually occurs once in a song that
- sounds completely different from V or C, often with *new lyrics* and new music
  - often leads or directs attention to the last, most important Verse
  - alternately may serve to renew interest in another, very important *Chorus*
  - sometimes highlights or leads to an instrumental *solo* (short or extended)
  - provides the listener with a new perspective, challenge, or invitation to a new idea
  - is very short – usually only a line or two of lyrics
  - sometimes leads into a key change

*And if you want to get even fancier!*

Songs may also contain the following sections, which may use lyrics, or may be only instrumental:

An Introduction (I) – Often quite short and simply instrumental; creates the mood of the upcoming song. May be completely new material or use borrowed instrumental “riffs” or snatches of LYRICS or melody from the V or C. Perhaps even the title is simply repeated here..

An Outro (O) – Taken from previous lyrics/music, or short snippets of previous lyrics/music; or may be completely new words/music. This section often comprises multiple repetitions of short word phrases or musical motifs and brings the song to a close.

Experiment to find an overall *structure* to suit your storytelling that features your choice of alternation or repetition of Verses and Choruses. You may want to start with

V C V C V, a very common type. Other common patterns include: V V C C ; V C V; V V V V; V C V B V C V; or I V C V C B V O.

### **CREATING A TITLE**

Try to create a unique, catchy title (*say 1-4 words*). This helps the song stick with your audience. The title identifies your song and sums up its meaning. Some lyricists write the title before starting the verses or chorus!! A title might be used effectively as part of the Chorus (or in the Intro or Outro).

### **WRITING LYRICS THAT IMPACT THE LISTENER**

Lyrics should also be expressive, convey the message, be original, and communicate easily. Additionally, consider that

- consonants (like K, T, J, etc.) provide energetic and hard-edged sounds, good for forceful, emphatic or angry lines. Also good for beginnings to catch attention.
- vowels (A, E, I, O, etc.), however, sound gentler and softer. They are also easier to sustain (on long notes, such as at ends of lines or verses).
- usually melodies follow natural speech patterns – for example, a stressed word or syllable occurs at the high point of the tune.

### **RHYMING**

While rhyming is optional in song lyrics, it can be used to create a particular mood. If you do use rhyme it should feel and sound natural. Lyricists often employ the same pattern or rhyme scheme during all the verses with a different one in the chorus. The pattern we choose allows us to create a structure that feels either stable or unstable, which can reflect the mood you're going for in your lyrics. For example,

- AABB rhyme scheme (stable): if every two lines of lyrics rhyme with each other you have a steady, even, and stable rhyme scheme. (The letters A and B refer to what rhymes; here the first 2 lines match, as do the final 2.) It feels a bit like one line is a question, which is answered smoothly in the very next line.
- ABAB rhyme scheme (stable): This makes the group of 4 lines feel as if they all belong together in one longer thought.

- ABCC or AAAB (unstable): If your rhyming pattern is odd, and/or some lines don't rhyme at all, you're creating a scheme that is unbalanced, irregular, and unstable. This inspires different emotions, and possibly confusion, worry, or questioning.

As you consider what you want to communicate, explore a variety of rhyming styles: either *perfect rhymes* [ i.e., same vowel/consonant ending (e.g., fat and cat, river and giver, etc.)]; or *near rhymes* such as

- family rhymes: vowels or consonants come from families of plosives, fricatives, and nasals (e.g., white and ride); or
- additive/subtractive rhymes: the same vowel, plus or minus a consonant (e.g., fray and paid); or
- assonance: the same vowel with whatever consonant (e.g., flow and throat); or
- consonance: different vowels, but the same consonant (e.g., hate and foot)

More tips on rhymes:

- Consider using a rhyme to create an emphasis when there's a reason for it. For instance, the last two lines of the chorus will often have a strong rhyme to signal the end of a thought.
- Rhymes also bring out a word or idea, and overall make those lines more memorable.
- Remember to express emotions first, then use rhyming to highlight. Indeed rhyming words feel emphasized, so make sure they're important words you want to draw attention to.
- In order to hone your skills, try keeping a list of GREAT rhymes, especially "near" rhymes.
- Finally, if you get stuck, ABAB works great in Choruses! It's also favored in "traditional" poetry and songs. Also great in a Chorus is AAAB since the attention's pulled to the punch, the hook in the last line!

# Tips to help you with writing lyrics

As you write your lyrics, you might wish to keep the following in mind:

## Getting started

- Study songs that you love in the genre you want to write in. Also listen widely across diverse time periods and genres to such artists as the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Suzanne Vega, Harry Chapin, Elton John, Paul Simon, Fiona Apple, etc.
- Practice by taking a familiar song – hymn, folk song, children’s song, pop tune – and create new lyrics for a few lines, or for the entire piece. Alternately, find some poems you like and change, edit, or reimagine some lines so that they become great song lyrics.
- Keep a notebook with lyric ideas, such as scenes, stories, lines, descriptive words, possible rhymes. Write with as much detail as possible. The more you write, the more you’ll find you have to write! Try the following:
  - writing down as many descriptive or colorful words as possible
  - reviewing great songs and analyzing their best lyrics: note the topics, what kinds of rhymes are used, how the lyrics depict the topics, the rhythm of the lyrics, the sound of the lyrics, etc.
  - practicing stream-of-consciousness writing, i.e. write down everything that comes into your head (say while you’re looking at a scene, or thinking about a topic, or just sitting!)
  - conjuring a small picture, story, or moment to write about in as much detail as possible
  - writing from your senses – taste, touch, smell, sight, sound, and movement
- Lyrics often need an inspiration such as a drawing, photograph, personal experience, film, story, or memories of family or friends. It’s powerful to have a

visual! Make sure you're able to answer: *What is the focus on my theme/story/song?*

**PRACTICE SUGGESTION:** Listen to and analyze some songs for form, words, rhyme scheme, etc. Then write your own lyrics following that template.

- If you come up with a few great lines of text, keep those and use them to inspire the rest!

### Writing and Revising

- Consider outlining your song on paper before you start writing. Who are the characters? What happens in each Verse? What do you want to communicate to the listener? What's the motivation in the song?
- Start writing using the standard V C V C structure. (Of course, each V has several lines, as does the C). Songs may or may not feel as if they also need an Introduction, Bridge and/or Outro. All are up to the writer. Any of the parts may be repeated, as necessary.
- Test out the *sound* of your lyrics by actually singing (or chanting!) them.
- Remember that the same melodies and motifs are repeated many times in a song, but not the lyrics. Those should be repetitive enough to be familiar, but also need variety for balance and interest. However, you may decide to repeat lyrics (especially if written in very short lines) *if the music itself provides more interest.*
- Make sure you have a catchy chorus. Consider testing verse lyrics against those in the chorus, in order to protect *the power of the chorus.*
- In general during the writing process, speak the patterns aloud to hear the consistency in the rhythm of your lyrics. Putting the words to the melody will be easier if the lines have a good rhythm that's the same from line to line! So,

perhaps start with a rhythmic pattern, and then match words to that pattern. Placing strong syllables on strong beats and weak syllables on weak beats usually results in a fairly natural-sounding vocal melody, while doing the opposite can often sound forced or stilted. Additionally, you can reinforce these natural alignments further by making stressed syllables louder, higher in pitch, or longer in duration.

- Write like you speak!
- Write anything down at first; polish later. Just keep writing!!!
- And, most of all, have patience; this is hard work!

### Here are some samples to help you as you write your own lyrics

1. The children's song *Baa, Baa Black Sheep* showcases "near" rhymes and a repeated rhythmic scheme of 4 "beats" per line, with stressed syllables marked in **bold**. The accented syllables (or beats) remain the same for the all 8 lines. Notice, also, that in the second group of 4 lines the rhythm (long, short-short, long, long) repeats – basically – throughout. Try reading the lyrics out loud thinking rhyme and rhythm!! (This is also a great example of a multi-purpose tune, as it's also the melody for the *Alphabet Song* and *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star!*). The rhyme scheme ABCB contains near rhymes in B lines.

1 2 3 4

Baa, baa black sheep

1 1 2 2 3 - 4

Have you an-y wool?\*

1 2 3 4

Yes sir, yes sir

1 2 3 - 4

Three bags full!\*

1 2 2 3 4

One for my mas-ter

One for my dame\*

1 2 2 3 3 4

One for the lit-tle girl

4 1 2 2 3 - 4

Who lives in the lane.\* (A little creative rhythmic adjustment here as the first stressed beat is the second word.....)

2. For an example of the V C form, think the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Also check out the rhyme scheme in the verse – AAAB. This sets up an expectation that the last line will also rhyme, so it’s very surprising and catches attention when it doesn’t. This “gasp” makes the listener especially interested in what’s coming next in the chorus. Also, this verse is much more active rhythmically than the chorus, which contains a simpler, less active tune with repeated words and a melody with a much restricted vocal range, thus creating variety (compared to the verse), yet with words that meld the V and C (“His truth is marching on”).

*Verse:*

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword

His truth is marching on. His truth is marching

*Chorus:*

Glory, glory, Hallelujah! Glory, glory, Hallelujah!

Glory, glory, Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.

3. In *The House of the Rising Sun*, a song without a chorus, verses use the rhyme scheme A B C B. Additional cohesion and interest comes from longer lines (A and C) each with 4 accented words (“is”, “house”, “New”, and “-leans”). The B lines all have 3 stressed syllables (“call”, “Ris-“ and “Sun”). This regularity in rhyme and stressed syllables results in a *rhythm* that works easily with a

repeating or recurring musical rhythm in the melody. This regularity allows the message of the song to shine through (even without the unifying device of a repeating chorus).

There is a house in New Orleans  
They call the Rising Sun  
And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy  
And God I know I'm one

4. Many songs feature interesting lyrics including Josh Groban's *My Heart Was Home Again* (a mash-up of rhyme schemes) and Carly Rae Jepsen's *Call Me Maybe*. Chart out the rhymes (some internal – in the middle of a line), then read them aloud for full effect. *Hello* by Adele also exhibits internal rhyming, as well as an unexpected extension of a line, which unbalances the rhyme.

## Sources and Further Resources

Lyricist Vs. Songwriter: <https://www.careersinmusic.com/lyricist-songwriter>

How to Write Song Lyrics: <https://www.wikihow.com/Write-Song-Lyrics>

How to Write a Song in Ten Steps:

<https://myson.coach.com/write-a-song-in-ten-steps/>

Show--Don't Tell:

[https://www.bmi.com/news/entry/showdont\\_tell\\_3\\_steps\\_to\\_writing\\_better\\_lyrics](https://www.bmi.com/news/entry/showdont_tell_3_steps_to_writing_better_lyrics)

Molly-Ann Leiken, *How to Be a Hit Songwriter: Polishing and Marketing Your Lyrics and Music*

Pat Pattison, *Writing Better Lyrics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed)

Sheila Davis, *The Craft of Lyric Writing*

Mastering Rhyme Scheme:

<https://www.izotope.com/en/learn/mastering-rhyme-schemes-in-lyric-writing.html>

To Rhyme or Not to Rhyme:

<https://mysongcoach.com/rhyming-in-contemporary-songs/>

100 Greatest Songwriters:

<https://www.rollingstone.com/interactive/lists-100-greatest-songwriters/>

Near Rhymes: [www.B-rhymes.com](http://www.B-rhymes.com) and [RhymeDesk.com](http://RhymeDesk.com)

WikiRhymmer - also great for near rhymes (at the bottom of the results page)

**For additional help in songwriting, YpsiWrites offers one-to-one consulting. For more information, see [ypsiwrites.com](http://ypsiwrites.com).**