

Tools for Successful Lyric Writing

Learning to Focus the Lyric

- A lyric needs to express one idea so that the listener can clearly understand the story (even driving down the freeway, half paying attention)
- You only have three to three and a half minutes to tell your story
- No room for sub-plots and extraneous details

Evoking One Emotion

- Evoking emotion in your listener is the ultimate goal of songwriting
- If your listener does not feel the same emotion, you have not successfully communicated
- Your song should express one emotion
- From the opening lines of your first verse the listener should have no doubt what the singer is feeling
- Effective lyrics let the listener know how the singer feels without coming right out and saying it.

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- The whiskey glass was empty except for his tears
 - Heartache is written in smeared mascara that falls down from her eyes
 - Sadness hangs over them like a storm cloud in the desert

Maintaining one consistent text and tone

- Do not interrupt a sincere, heartfelt sentiment with an occasional humorous line or twist on words
- Switching tenses is an easy mistake to make
- Switching pronouns
- Switching voice

Incorrect:

We used to go for walks

Beneath the summer skies

The sun is so bright

All I saw were your eyes

Incorrect:

When I first met her

She was warm and true

Yes, the love that I wanted

I found with you

Incorrect:

Mama and Susie went dancing last night

She danced every dance until dawn

Correct:

Mama and Susie went dancing last night

Mama danced every dance until dawn

Developing strong opening lines

- Even if the chorus is stellar, the song will have to overcome a lukewarm initial impression
- By the time the listener has heard the second line of lyric, they should know what emotion the singer is feeling
- The opening lines need to be unique, fresh and interesting
- After your initial flow of inspiration, go back and rewrite your first lines

Maintaining Continuity

- Every line of lyric needs to advance the development of your story
- There can be no gaps in information
- You need to present them with all of the pertinent information to successfully communicate your story and emotion

Correct:

I held you close and said, "I love you"

And saw my love reflected in your eyes

And in the moment when I kissed you

Baby, there was no doubt in my mind

Incorrect:

I held you close and said, "I love you"

I was late for work yesterday

The dog was barking when I woke up

This feeling just won't go away

- The last line of the verse is crafted to serve as a “springboard” to deliver listeners to the chorus
 - That final line of each verse is the link between the verse and the summation about to be presented in the chorus:
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Correct:

Chorus

I held you close and said, “I love you”
And saw my love reflected in your eyes
And in the moment when I kissed you
Baby, there was no double in my mind

Verse

I’d found a once in a lifetime love

Incorrect:

Verse

I held you close and said, "I love you"

And saw my love reflected in your eyes

And in the moment when I kissed you

No matter how hard I tried

Chorus

I'd found a once in a lifetime love

Incorporating Detail, Action and Imagery into Lyrics

- Show, don't tell
- The goal is to allow the listeners to feel as though they are witnesses the the scene
- Imagine the video for your song
- Use words to show the listener what the singer is “seeing”

- A song entitled “She’s Lonely” might be expressed with the following “pictures”
 - She stays up all night crying in the big old empty bed

- She plays solitaire every Saturday night
- She sips her wine at a table for one
- She sits alone in the dark, watching the same old movie on TV

These evoke more empathy than:

Oh, she is lonely without him

She feels so blue deep inside

Loneliness is all that she feels

Her heart is breaking with loneliness

- On a piece of paper, give a detailed image that will allow the listener to “see” each of the following
 - He’s in love
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- I miss you
 - I’m glad you’re gone
 - I feel like dancing
 - He’s never been happier
 - She’d give anything for one more chance
 - He’s peaceful and content
 - I can’t get you off my mind

Compare these two songs, line by line:

A Beverage

He was at one of my relatives

I wanted to learn things and thought he would teach me

I was young back then

When one night we fell in love

We were down by the water

And I still remember

Chorus:

The beverage we drank when I was young

There was a moon out

It was my first time

And I was inexperienced

But I still remember the fruity beverage we drank

I remember when I was young
I dreaded him leaving
We tried to stay in contact with each other
But then we somehow lost touch
Now I regularly return there
To bring back memories

It's not the same back there anymore
They haven't kept the place up
And everything's different there now
And sometimes I wonder if I miss him
Or just the way I used to be

Strawberry Wine

He was working through college on my Grandfather's farm

I was thirsting for knowledge and he had a car

I was caught somewhere between a woman and a child

When one restless summer we found love growing wild

On the banks of the river on a well-beaten path

Funny how those memories can last (like)

Chorus:

Strawberry wine and seventeen

The hot July moon saw everything

My first taste of love on bittersweet

Gone on the vine

Like Strawberry Wine

Yes I still remember when thirty was old
And my biggest fear was September when he had to go
A few cards and letters and one long-distance call
We drifted away like leaves in the fall
But year after year I come back to the place
Just to remember the taste (of)

The fields have grown over now
Years since they've seen the plow
There's nothing time hasn't touched
Is it really him or the loss of my innocence
I've been missing so much

While the lyrics are the same idea, note him much more interesting and involving the second lyric is:

He was at one of my relatives vs. He was working though college on my grandpa's farm

We were down by the water vs. On the banks of the river on a well-beaten path

We tried to stay in contact with one another vs. A few cards and letters and one long-distance call

- No one else shares your life experiences, or your unique way of interpreting the events and images around you
- Being vulnerable and exposing your pain, fears, hopes, disappointments, and desires in your lyrics is scary, but dig deep.
- Avoid using tired old clichés and images that have been heard over and over
- Infuse your lyrics with honesty and individuality.
- Do exercise on page 42