

What makes a lyric good?...

and how will you know if you wrote one?

Two Approaches to Lyric Writing

- ◆ Writing without an idea or title
- ◆ Writing with a starting idea or title

Starting without an idea or title

- ◆ Sensory writing: taste, touch, sight, sound, smell, movement
- ◆ Sift for rhyme
- ◆ Toggle
- ◆ Set to music - try various grooves

Rhythm

- ◆ Match Rhythms: DUM, dum, da
- ◆ Using contrast to define sections
- ◆ Lyric rhythm defines melodic rhythm

At home activity

- ◆ 10 minute sensory writing using SCS, Duples, or Triples

Chorus

- ◆ Journaling
- ◆ Lifting titles
- ◆ Repetition, alternating developmental lines

Writing with a Starting Idea or Title

- ◆ Sensory writing - get specific
- ◆ Title and image search, sensory write again

Lead with your Strengths

- ◆ Express concept through music. Record it, loop it, sensory write to it.
- ◆ Follow toggling steps

Other Considerations

- ◆ Write like *you* talk
- ◆ Write what *you* know, feel, think, and care about

- ◆ Second verse hell - using 'time' as a plot progression
- ◆ It's not 'what' but 'how'
- ◆ Flipping verses
- ◆ Does the chorus summarize largest point?
- ◆ Check tense, point of view, pronouns
- ◆ Walk away

- ◆ Write in 20 minute chunks
- ◆ Sensory Write each day
- ◆ Work on several songs at once
- ◆ Prosody between music and lyric
- ◆ Get real. Face it and fix it.
- ◆ Write simple.

Activities for Songwriting Groups and Classes

Beginning Songwriting, available Spring 2014

Below are some ideas to get the creativity of a group flowing. Some of these activities can be done solo, collaboratively, in groups of two to four, and others involve the whole group.

Physical Sensory Writing

1. To encourage sensory description, take a 15 minute walk alone or with a partner, and describe what you see, hear, taste, touch, smell, and observe moving around you. Listening to what your partner experiences can spark ideas within yourself, and really get the sensory description flowing. Sometimes the physical movement of walking helps to jump-start our creativity, too.

Reflective Listening with Sensory Writing

2. Share a page from your sensory writing journal with a writing partner. Let your partner reflect back to you some of the most interesting language you used. Let them describe to you the emotion they felt, and even what might be the song idea generated from that sensory writing. Then, switch places and you become the listener as your partner reads. Another interesting effect is to read your partner's sensory writing yourself as the author listens. Hearing our own ideas read aloud can shine a different light on the words we choose, and we can sometimes hear ideas we didn't hear when we were the writer or reader.

Reflective Listening for Verses and Choruses

3. In a group of two or three, share a page from your sensory writing journal. Let your partners observe what language you used might be good chorus or title material, and what might be good verse material. Pay close attention to whether the writing is particularly sensory or not. Very sensory writing will offer more verse lyric, while less sensory writing will seem better for choruses.

Photos and Words

4. Gather photographs of interesting places, faces, or objects from sources such as magazines or online images. Make a list of some interesting and random words, and write one each on a small piece of paper. Lay out the words and photographs on the floor in the middle of the songwriting group. Assign pairs or let the songwriters of the group pair themselves, and have them choose a photograph and a word that interests them. The goal of the partnership is to write a song, lyric and music, in no more than an hour, inspired by the photograph and using the word within the lyric. Songwriters can then share their collaborative songs with the larger group, first presenting the photo and the word before playing the song.

Crumpled Paper

5. Have each songwriter take out a sheet of paper. On the paper, have each songwriter write something they deeply want to tell someone, but are afraid to. Crumple up the paper and throw it in the middle of the room. After everyone has contributed a paper ball, have the songwriters each choose a crumpled paper and unfold it. (If any songwriter gets their own writing, have them throw the paper back and choose a different one.) Each songwriter will write a song based on the idea they chose, perhaps even using the language on the paper as the actual chorus section of the song. Have everyone perform their songs next time the group meets.

Metaphor

6. Divide the songwriters into 3 groups. One group will make a list of nouns, another group a list of verbs, and another group a list of adjectives. Have each group write their lists on a common board visible to everyone. Ask students to 'collide' a noun with a verb, or a noun with an adjective, or a noun with a noun. Encourage songwriters to form sentences using the collisions that arise from these random pairings.

Guided Meditation

7. Turn off the lights, and ask the group to close their eyes. Help the group to quiet down and still their bodies. Encourage them to let their mind drift, being aware of what feelings rise to the surface while they sit in silence. Suggest feelings they may have, such as boredom, frustration, impatience, or eagerness, excitement, and racing thoughts. Continue to let them steep in the moment. Suggest what else might be going through their minds, such as not wanting to be here, or being distracted with things that happened just before coming to the meeting. Ask them to let it go, and enter into the present moment. After some silence, ask them what emotions they feel in their body and where they feel them. Ask them if they feel a tugging, a slight or strong nudging from within that is speaking out. If that feeling were given a voice, what would it be saying? If that feeling were writing a song, what would that song say? Turn the lights up enough for participants to see computer screens or paper, and have them journal for 10 minutes.

Being the Expert

8. Pair up with another writer. Consider something you are really good at, perhaps even an expert at, and talk about it for 5 minutes to your partner. Tell any stories that come to mind about how you found the activity or knowledge you're an expert on, and what keeps you doing and pursuing it. Let your partner ask you questions about it too. When you're finished, have your partner reflect back to you your feelings about the activity or knowledge you know so well. See if that matches up with the way you view your own feelings. Together with your partner, talk about how you might build a song out of the feelings and the activity/knowledge that you hold so dear and know so well.

Spoken Word

9. Find a short spoken word performance, not greater than 4-5 minutes, that inspires you on YouTube. Dim the lights and play the spoken word piece for the group. After the piece is over and without discussing the performance, let songwriters journal for several minutes about their thoughts and feelings. Using different art forms to inspire our own songwriting is a wonderful way to bring ideas to the surface we didn't know we had.

Melodic Motifs

10. Play a simple 2 or 4-chord progression piano or guitar. Simple works best, so that everyone can easily imagine melodies that may suit the progression. Looping the progression, go around the group and have each songwriter sing an 8-bar melody with the creation of a strong melodic motif in mind. Encourage songwriters to use repetition of this motif throughout the 8 bars. Compliment participants on their willingness to sing if they aren't singers, create something without much preparation, and take chances in front of the group. Have songwriters notice the parts of each melody that are catchy or 'hooky.'

Guided Feedback

11. Before a writer performs a song for the group, hand out a guided feedback sheet to encourage helpful comments. Feel free to use the questions below on your sheet, or add questions that focus on your topics for discussion for the meeting.

1. Is the message of the song clear? Try reflecting back to the writer(s) what you heard as the main message of the song.
2. What is the song form? Are the different sections easy to identify?
3. What really drives this song - melody, lyric, groove, harmonic interest, or performance? Is that the strongest element? How does that element help the song to work?
4. Can you identify the weakest element of the song - melody, lyric, groove, harmonic interest, or performance? Does this weak element distract you from the strong elements? What suggestions do you have as the listener to strengthen this area of the song?
5. What qualities in the songwriter's personality can you observe also shine in the songwriter's song? Share this to help the songwriter become aware of when and how her own unique artistry is expressed through her art.

Write Happy

11. So often we write songs using the emotions of sadness, loneliness and loss. Challenge writers of the group to write a happy song, paying special attention to starting with a groove at a perky tempo. This exercise is nice done collaboratively or in groups of three.