

Chapter 1 – Lyrical Writing

So what comes first? Lyrics or music? It's an age old question that really doesn't warrant an answer. It's rhetorical. Let's try it both ways and see which way works best for you.

1. Lyrics FIRST

When coming up with lyrics, the absolute FIRST thing you need to establish is the mood. It doesn't matter WHAT you say as long as it falls into a logical expression that you are currently experiencing or have previously experienced. That's all you need to know to begin. Here are your 'food-for-thought' questions. I'll pose the question and you write it down on the checklist I've provided for you. Be SURE that you write it down. You must follow the steps in order to keep your brainstorming flowing.

Question 1: What kind of mood are you in RIGHT now? What you're looking for is the very first expression that comes to mind. Narrow it down to the most common of expressions. These include happy, sad, and angry. We only need three expressions.

Once you've decided on the mood or expression for what you are writing, ask yourself this question:

Question 2: Are you writing the lyrics in:

1. First Person Narrative (I, Me) "I feel like this should be easy."
2. Second Person View (You) "You walk into a room."
3. Third Person View (He, She, It) "He/She loves me."
4. Alternating View (some/all of these elements together) "I feel like this should be easy, but he doesn't think so."

Note: Alternating view is very common in music, BUT it can cause the listener to feel as if the song isn't actually speaking directly to him or her. It's cool to use, but be careful with it. More on that later.

Question 3: Based on the mood and the choice you've made in the perspective you are writing from, do you want the audience to relate immediately or as the song progresses? Once you've figured out this last question you may begin writing your first phrase.

- a. Expression vs. Repression - When you jot down lyrics, are they cryptic or straightforward? Do you have a point or do you want the listener to decide?

Expression: do you want to make the expression obvious?

Repression: do you want to make it cryptic?

Example of expression: "I feel sad."

Example of repression: "The dark shadows surround me, my own little black hole."

This is a VERY important choice in your song decision.

Let's not get too moody at first. Let's choose expression. We'll go back to repression in a moment.

Your Decision: We'll be writing a song based on (insert mood here) from the (insert perspective here) perspective. We'll also be using (insert expression here) to (drive/cryptically deliver) the point home.

For purpose of demonstration I'll start with the following decision:

My Decision: I'll be writing a song based on (sadness) from the (first person) perspective. I'll also be using (expression) to (drive) the point home.

b. Stylization - The way you write your lyrics will decide the tone you want for your melody. Understanding your style makes the melody easy.

Since I've chosen to stylize my song based on sadness from my own perspective, I'll need to express my emotion in a straight-forward way.

c. The Creative "Bug" - This tutorial will show you how to get the most from your random creative vibes even at the most inopportune times.

Here's the FUN part. Don't try to work up a full phrase. Right now just work on words that will allow you to feel a certain way. In my case of sadness I've come up with some words, purposely NOT duplicating the actual word of 'sadness.' Even though I am using a straight-forward expression, I don't want to actually deliver that word. Instead I need to come up with words that 'hint' at the term sadness.

Use the first five letters of the alphabet to come up with some brainstorming words for sadness. If you get to a letter that you can't think of a word for, just skip it. You still need five letters though.

Brainstorming Session: **A**wful, **B**itter, **C**areless, **D**ismal, **E**(skipped), **F**ailure

d. Creating The "Story" - Every line of your lyrics **MUST** contain a story. Failure to provide a story keeps the listener from understanding your point.

Let's refresh what we've learned so far before creating the story.

Basically we are writing a sad song that tells the audience exactly how we feel, and we're going to use the words from the brainstorming session to decide a story. Since in this case I am writing it about me, I now need to choose the word that works best for a STARTING word in the verse. I like the word "bitter" right now, so I'll use it.

Bitter.....

Bitter makes me think of a broken heart or anger about something that has happened in society. However, unless you've got some serious nerve, talking about problems in society can be rather dangerous (politics, schools, military, law, etc.) so for now let's avoid that.

Let's stick to 'broken heart.'

Now I know that I want to write a song about having a broken heart, but not in a sad way. My sadness has now been converted more to bitter and angry. BUT, since anger is really just a form of sadness (and vice versa) in itself we can still get by with sadness as long as we are SAD because we are BITTER. (again – vice versa).

This song is starting to sound like a blues/jazz song isn't it? Virtually all blues songs are about something 'sad' (hence the blues) and something about a broken heart. Let's stick to that. I know now that I am writing a blues song. Let's create the story.

One thing is for sure as of right now. I can't say that any girl has broken my heart. I have an amazing wife and daughter, so it's hard to 'fake' an emotion. Instead, maybe I can think about someone from the past that HAS broken my heart. Maybe even a boss or a co-worker. Maybe just a friend. Remember that the audience will interpret this for you, but you need to create a story that fits the mood so that it is easy for them (because in this case we are being EXPRESSIVE.)

Now I need to create the idea of:

WHO has made me bitter, or WHO has broken my heart?

WHAT am I writing about? WHAT am I doing right now?

WHERE did this happen? (this could be a stage in life, not a physical location)

WHEN did I discover this?

WHY did this happen?

HOW did I fix it? Did I?

I know it seems like a grade school concept, but it's 100% necessary. They teach this to us in school for a reason.

Down To Business...

Sad Song > Told By Me, About Me > Expressing Obvious Emotion > Bluesy

That's the process. Now here are some lyrics for the first few lines. PAY NO ATTENTION to rhyming right now.

Bitter and cold, I sit behind my own reflection, looking in. (this is the "what," as in, what am I doing.)

I've drawn the line, between right and wrong. (another 'what' in term of what is written about.)

You've left me standing, a frozen space in time. (this is the "who" and the "where")

But only you and I know why. (this is interesting because it's the "why" without telling.*)

*It's ok to do this even during an expression-based song (vs. repression) a few times to drive the audience without being TOO cryptic.)

We've thus covered the what, who, where, and why. The "when" and "how" are addressed in the chorus. First let's look at the logics behind the lyrics to see how they 'measure' up in terms of flowing of words and possible rhyming.

**Bitter and cold, I sit behind my own reflection, looking in.
I've drawn the line, between right and wrong.
You've left me standing, a frozen space in time.
But only you and I know why.**

We've got a simple four line verse, which I recommend using for now. Don't get confusing and create an awkward song just yet.

Notice that the first two phrases don't actually rhyme. They don't need to. They don't have to. They just need to flow nicely. I think these lines do, but what if they didn't? What if you DID want to rhyme? Let's investigate that real quick and make the 1st and 2nd lines rhyme. (This isn't always the way to go, but we're just testing different ideas.) Notice that the last two lines DO rhyme, so let's just leave those for now.

**Bitter and cold, I sit behind my own reflection, looking in.
I've drawn the line, between right and wrong.
You've left me standing, a frozen space in time.
But only you and I know why.**

Words that rhyme with "in": begin, sin, lend, mend, pretend, apprehend, depend

Words that rhyme with "wrong": along, song, belong, carry on, move on, strong (notice that two words can be used as well, such as *carry on*.)

Notice here I didn't worry about the alphabet. I just thought of words that came to me immediately. Even if they are strange words, you're still brainstorming.

What you've just done is pick and choose words based on logics. You didn't scratch through a bunch of GOOD lines. You're just using what is called 'word choice' and is an AMAZING tool to provide the creative vibe. I do it with my sales pages to show interested subscribers what is in store for them as a member of EZ Strummer.

You didn't change the feeling of the song. You're just suggesting a few enhancements. Because I am happy with the 1st line, let's instead make the 2nd line rhyme with the 1st. I don't want to mess up the 1st line because it fits the mood perfectly. However, the 2nd line does too. So, what to do? Well, the word 'wrong' is only related to the word 'right' because it is a call and response. In other words, for every

right there must be a wrong. It's just symmetry, or balance. So, let's instead remove the whole 'right and wrong' phrase. I like the phrase 'carry on' because it HINTS at the "HOW" but doesn't actually explain it.

right and wrong > carry on

Now we need to rephrase the lyrical line. "I've drawn the line, _____ carry on."

We need something in this blank. Without changing the opening phrase of "I've drawn the line" we need to establish Who, What, Where, When, Why, or How we've drawn the line. It's considered a 'what' based on the previous investigation, so let's stick with it.

Maybe....

"I've drawn the line, so step aside, I'll carry on."

It may not be the most beautiful line, and to be honest I like the first version better, but by experimenting with word choice, you'll still deliver the message. This is when your own creative expression comes in. If you're like me, what has happened is you FEEL as if the song has changed. If you feel this way, the audience might as well. In that case, go back to your original thought. Sometimes the first thought is the best one.

The Final Step...

You've started writing your first verse. You now need a chorus. BEFORE you get into the chorus though, you'll need to establish the ENTIRE story based solely on the first verse.

Here's what we can deduce from the first verse (omitting the recent change):

**Bitter and cold, I sit behind my own reflection, looking in.
I've drawn the line, between right and wrong.
You've left me standing, a frozen space in time.
But only you and I know why.**

Line 1: I'm sad (or angry) and I'm either in a cold room or I FEEL cold (perfect for a desperate, pleading approach to a song) as I sit behind myself (technically impossible – it leaves the reader/listener to think) while looking IN on my own reflection?! That's just crazy, right? Hmm...maybe the word 'crazy' could take us places.

Line 2: So even though I'm feeling everything from line 2, I'm also offering some sort of ultimatum. I've had it with whatever is making me feel sad. So, I'm letting the listener, or the person BEING talked about, decide what is 'right' and what is 'wrong' to him/her. I'm giving a call and response to the expression. Maybe I'm just tired of feeling sad.

Line 3: Here is where you can really have some fun with the word choice. I've actually given an ultimatum already in line 2, but I am reinforcing WHY with the 'who' and 'where.' In case you starting to figure it out, the secret is to re-iterate every single point within each few lines. Remember that the 'when' and 'how' is being reserved in this case for the chorus. So, line 3 contains the concept that a person has either 'left' or is there but has 'checked out' so to speak.

Line 4: It's the mystery line. The audience wants to know what has happened, but since you've not given them any 'how' or 'when' they are forced to listen on. It's a verbal hook in the world of guitar. ALWAYS leave them wanting more.

Take all of the underlined phrases I've given in each line.

So maybe I'm slowly going crazy (line 1) because I'm tired of feeling sad all the time (line 2). There's a reason that I feel this way because I am spinning wheels or can't progress so to speak (line 3). But why? Well, only the 'person' and 'myself' know why – not the listener (line 4). Now the chorus NEEDS to explain the 'how' and 'when' during the chorus.

The Chorus:

"Don't bore us, get to the chorus."

You'll hear this all the time. It is DEFINITELY true in standard rock music, but RARELY true in folk, blues, or jazz. Since we're focusing more on a blues/jazz theme here, let's keep the chorus short and sweet.

This time there is no need for any word selections or anything of that nature. We already established the mood as well as what needs to be addressed:

1. How
2. When

This should be focused on in this order. Why? Well, in THIS case, the resolve of the chorus is the 'when' because it needs to wrap up the entire message within the chorus. If you switched it to "When" and then "How" you'll find that you aren't wrapping the song's chorus up.

You'll end with a line such as "...when are you going to make up your mind?" instead of "...how can I make you change your mind?"

While there's nothing wrong with it, we have already left the audience to wonder what and how at the end of the verse. We don't want to KEEP them guessing. This is an expressive song.

The big question is "DO WE JUST REPEAT THE SAME LINES OVER AND OVER?"

Sometimes yes and sometimes no. How do we decide? The easiest answer to this question is based on how much of a development has been established in the verse. If the verse is really deep, or thought-provoking I personally recommend making the chorus repeat itself. It allows the listener to find a normality in the song, and repeated phrases allow the listener to remember the lines. Let's stick to that

for now. Since we are being direct, let's actually USE the 'How' and 'When' phrase to begin the chorus. For more experienced songwriters this doesn't feel too grand, but it works for getting the core logics down.

How much more can I take?
When will this feeling end?
How do I erase this mistake?
When will this feeling end?

Did you notice something? Aside from the obvious repetition of "how" and "when" I've also DUPLICATED the 'when' because I want that to be the 'tagline.' It could even be the title of the song if that is decided upon later. (I don't agree with making the title of a song before writing the lyrics.)

I was also a bit sneaky by rhyming the entire chorus with 'take' and 'mistake.' Sometimes the simplest of vocal inflections make all the difference.

Now that we've accomplished both the first verse and chorus, let's see it all together.

Verse

Bitter and cold, I sit behind my own reflection, looking in.
I've drawn the line, between right and wrong.
You've left me standing, a frozen space in time.
But only you and I know why.

Chorus

How much more can I take?
When will this feeling end?
How do I erase this mistake?
When will this feeling end?

The last thing we need to do for a BASIC song is to repeat what we've just learned. We know that the verse has four lines. The chorus technically has four lines as well. Let's keep the consistency BUT not the same format as before. We're going to completely reverse it. This one might take you by surprise. The brain registers patterns even if it isn't noticed. That's why it is so hard to say the alphabet backwards. The pattern is only there by training. So how do we reverse it? Can you guess?

Bitter and cold, I sit behind my own reflection, looking in. (this is the "what," as in, what am I doing.)
I've drawn the line, between right and wrong. (another 'what' in term of what is written about.)
You've left me standing, a frozen space in time. (this is the "who" and the "where")
But only you and I know why. (this is interesting because it's the "why" without telling.*)

“Why” comes first. “Who/where” comes next, followed by “what” and then another “what.”

It is reversed from the previous verse pattern. Now that we know we can reverse it, let’s go ahead and create a duplicate verse based on these elements.

Verse 1

Bitter and cold, I sit behind my own reflection, looking in.
I’ve drawn the line, between right and wrong.
You’ve left me standing, a frozen space in time.
But only you and I know why.

Chorus

How much more can I take?
When will this feeling end?
How do I erase this mistake?
When will this feeling end?

Verse 2

Line 1 (why):

Through these bloodshot eyes maybe I’ve fallen behind.
(a solution to ‘why’ because this could explain your feelings.)

Line 2 (who/where):

Just like you, I don’t know who I should be.
(this is pretty obvious. “Who” is used this time.)

Line 3 (what):

Sometimes I wonder if you’ll ever change your mind.
(here you can take a bit of liberty in the ‘what’ so that you can paraphrase ‘what’ is happening.)

Line 4 (what):

Til’ then I’ll just stay behind.
(here is an example of ‘what’ you are going to do about the issue.)

Verse 2 as a whole:

Through these bloodshot eyes maybe I’ve fallen behind.
Just like you, I don’t know who I should be.
Sometimes I wonder if you’ll ever change your mind.
Til’ then I’ll just stay behind.

Here I just repeated (much like in the chorus) the whole 'behind' concept in the 1st and 4th line of the verse. Sometimes the simplicity is the key.

What's Next?

So maybe this song isn't going to be a hit. Maybe it needs a lot more work. That's just it. A song is NEVER completely finished, nor is it ever fully satisfying. Think about all the various versions of the same hit you've heard before. As you place each song on the table, you'll decide which ones you really like, and which ones that need to go into File 13.

Now we're going to move on to making the melody.