



KROC FINE ARTS

Live & Online **SONGWRITING**

A PROVEN TECHNIQUE TO WRITE BETTER LYRICS

When I started writing songs, the process of coming up with ideas seemed magical and arbitrary. If it was a good day, the ideas would come; if it was a bad day, I was out of luck.

But then, I started learning about how the mind comes up with new ideas. I noticed that when I sat down to write a lyric, I could often be successful if I just used a few simple strategies. I looked at how ad men, designers, writers, and other prolific creators came up with brilliant ideas time and time again.

As I read more about the topic, a picture began to emerge: brilliant ideas are not magical, and anyone, with the right preparation, can get them.

Here's a better way to write brilliant lyrics — even on a bad day.

Step 1: Gather Raw Materials

Most songs start with a vague idea or emotion. So how do you get to a finished, compelling lyric?

The answer is to use your vague idea as a starting point and to gather raw material around the idea. It seems obvious; to write well, of course you should understand your subject! But this is a criminally ignored part of the process. Most people briefly think through some words, stories, and ideas that could fit their idea, and prematurely charge forward to the next step.

Taking time to gather raw materials will pay off immensely when the going gets tough later.

There are two types of raw material you need to write a great lyric. I've adapted these two types from James Webb Young's wonderful book about producing better ideas.

1. General

An idea is nothing more than a new combination of old elements. In the case of lyrics, we combine our core lyrical idea with our general life experiences and knowledge of the world. It is often the little details that emerge from the real stories of your life that elevate a lyric from average to exceptional.

2. Specific

You also need to gather raw materials about the subject you've decided to write about. I like to think of words, memories, stories, conversations, and people related to my topic. It will be tempting to give up too early here, and to move forward with only a few ideas. Don't give up! Really dig in and do a thorough job. I spend at least an hour or two gathering specific material.

Some tips on gathering specific materials:

One of my favorite authors on the art of better lyrics is Pat Pattison. In his book, *Writing Better Lyrics*, Pattison recommends making worksheets which are a perfect complement to our strategy of gathering specific material. I use a modified version of his method.

Here's how it works:

- **Make a list of words that express your idea**

Go through a thesaurus laid out idea-style (not dictionary-style) and find some key words related to your idea. Follow any related words that catch your eye, and if you like a word, write it down. Spend a while just following the thesaurus wherever it takes you and noting down any words or phrases that you like.

- **Trim your list to the best 10-12 words**

The idea is to narrow down to the very best words, the heavyhitters, the ones you think could really work in the song. Keep in mind that the best words are likely to end in a stressed syllable, so that they're easy to place in a rhyming position and work other words around.

- **Look up your words in a rhyming dictionary**

You've found your key words and put them into a short list. Now, it's time to perform one last step! List your words along the top of a blank sheet of paper. Then, one word at a time, turn to your rhyming dictionary and look for any words that could fit your topic and also rhyme with your key word. It's best to avoid clichéd perfect rhymes; pay attention to imperfect types like family rhyme, subtractive rhyme, and assonance rhyme. I normally write my words down in the order of how closely they rhyme: perfect rhymes at the top, assonance rhymes at the bottom.

Whew.

That was a lot of work! You've laid down an incredible foundation, one which will support you and push you forward when you get stuck. More importantly, you've built a profound understanding of your lyrical idea and are prepared for brilliant insights down the line.

Step 2: Search for Patterns

As I've used this process again and again, I've noticed that if I go out of order or skip a step, it no longer works for me nearly as well. So before jumping forward to this step, make sure you've really done a thorough job of gathering your raw materials. Each step compounds the next.

In this step, we work through our raw material.

Go through the different words and phrases in your list and turn them over in your mind. What associations do you have? What life experiences, memories, stories, connotations, facts, and ideas come to you? It can also help to pair words together from your list, and search for ideas in those pairings. James Webb Young describes excellently what this process feels like:

A Proven Technique to Write Better Lyrics, p. 3

Little tentative or partial ideas will come to you. Put these down on paper. Never mind how crazy or incomplete they seem: get them down. These are foreshadowings of the real idea that is to come, and expressing these in words forwards the process.

When you've really worked through your key words and ideas, you're ready. The wheels should be spinning in your mind; you've focused deeply on everything around the subject of your lyric, and most of the time, after so much focus and brainstorming, everything will jumble together in your mind so you feel as though you can barely think.

Good! That's exactly what should happen. This gets your subconscious working hard on the problem in the background, ready to deliver up fresh creative ideas. So now, we're ready for the third step.

Step 3: Rest

You've been working incredibly hard, and now it's time to rest. Your subconscious will keep working on your lyric in the background, but you need to rest your conscious mind so you can be receptive to ideas when you sit back down at your desk.

Stop working on your idea entirely. Don't think about your lyric, or work on anything related to it. Instead, take this time to rest: go to sleep, or take a long walk, or read a book.

My ideas usually come not at my desk writing but in the midst of living. – Anaïs Nin

Step 4: Build Your Lyric

Often, a brilliant lyric will strike you as you're walking, or showering, or doing the dishes — or it may wake you up in the middle of the night. When this happens, sit down and write it out!

Sometimes, however, you have to kickstart your inspiration. If I have really prepared well, and rested, and yet nothing is coming to me, then I know it's up to me to make my own inspiration. It's as simple as sitting down at your desk, getting out a sheet of paper, and writing a terrible first draft of your lyric; one you want to burn immediately for fear that anyone finds out you wrote something so awful.

Everyone writes horrible first drafts. The key is that in writing a first draft, you've kicked your mind into gear; where before you had nothing, now you have something in your hands to work with. Most of the time, after painfully writing three quarters of a strikingly bad lyric, I'll suddenly get hit by an inspired line or two, and my preparation will come through to save me.

The absolute worst case scenario is that you hold a truly awful piece of writing in your hands; but you have a vast wealth of words, images, memories, stories, and rhymes waiting to be summoned to help you work through your lyric, to build your first draft into a second, third, or fourth draft which is incredible.

Step 5: The Hard Part

Finally, with a rough lyric containing a few brilliant ideas and your worksheet filled with resources and rhymes in hand, you're ready for the hardest part.

Most great lyrical ideas die here. **But not yours.**

This is where the strength of preparing for your lyric really shines. Without preparation, you may get stuck, and struggle to figure out how to move forward with the rough idea in your mind. But you already took the steps to find all the ideas you need for a compelling lyric when you prepared your worksheet. Now, it's time to look through your lyric, find the weakest points, and then use your worksheet to come up with better alternatives for the story. When you get stuck, turn back to your worksheet and look at the words, rhymes, stories, and ideas that you've already prepared for this moment.

It's tough, but this is the final stretch. Don't give up!

Conclusion

My hope is that this method can help you break through obstacles on days when you feel tired or stuck, and give you more lyrical ideas than ever before. But I know that it can feel overwhelming to think of applying all these new techniques.

So right now, commit to writing your next 5 lyrics this way, and see how this method can give you more ideas and solid ground to stand on as you write. After those 5 lyrics, you'll be in a good position to decide what works for you, what doesn't, and how you can make this method your own.

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