

Writing Lyrics

Introduction

Writing words that are set to music is an art form in and of itself.

“Unlike a poem, which exists on paper, a song exists in time, as the motor of its melody propels the words forward. The listener, unlike the reader, gets no footnotes and must understand the lyric as it’s being performed... Most important, a lyric is designed to be sung. It’s writer, therefore, must be instinctively musical and must choose words that roll off the tongue and soar on high notes. **Every word should sing.**”

[Sheila Davis, The Craft of Lyric Writing, emphasis added]

So how can we write towards the goal of a clear, streamlined lyric in which every word sings?

Of First Importance

- *Purpose*
As there is limited space in a lyric, every line and section needs to support the song concept whilst having unique purpose in the overall journey of the song – like applying coat after coat of polish to get the desired effect, each line needs to add something to the song. So ensure that every word and line stays focused on the “one thing” the song is about, watch out for unnecessary “filler” or “padding” words/lines that can be replaced with more gainful content, and consider the song’s flow of meaning – is there progression and relationship between lines and sections, and does everything (even if abstract) come together in a common thought?
- *Matching & Movement*
Most songs repeat melodic material with different words (e.g. verses, or melodic repetition within sections) and all are governed by musical metre, so our lyrics need to fit the rhythm, emphasis, and phrasing of the melody and to do so consistently between sections using the same melody. This means that the line-by-line syllable count needs to match up from verse to verse – we can only use as many syllables as there are notes in the melody (perhaps with minor variations). It also means that the natural emphasis in each word needs to line up with the notes that are emphasised by the melody’s metre. In addition we can experiment with the impact of line length and number on the overall shape, direction and momentum of the lyric.
- *Consistency*
A song is almost always written from one point of view that it holds throughout. This means that the use of pronouns (1st, 2nd, 3rd person) needs to be consistent. It also means that the slant/angle taken, the emotional tone, and the linguistic style should be stable, and that the direction of the lyrics – who they are addressed towards – is likely to be settled.
- *A Fresh Take*
To hold a listener’s attention lyrics need to be engaging and intriguing; they need to have an originality in angle or expression that both interests and moves us rather than being full of clichés. Choose concrete, particular language over vague abstractions and generalisations, and strong, colourful verbs over weak, tame ones.

- **Singability**
A lyric should feel good in your mouth as you sing it, so iron out any awkward, glitchy or difficult corners, and pay attention to vowels used on long/high notes.

The Literary Toolbox (A-Z)

Literary devices can enhance and enrich the depth of meaning and impact our lyrics have, as well as making them more satisfying to sing and more memorable. Here are some to get familiar with:

Alliteration	Adjacent or connected words that start with the same letter
Assonance	Sound similarities between nearby words, especially of vowels/diphthongs
Imagery	Vivid, visually descriptive, and sensory language that paints a picture and draws the hearer in by “showing” rather than “telling”
Metaphor	Figurative language in which one thing is equated with another in order to compare them or for symbolic purposes
Personification	Attributing personal or human characteristics to an object or abstraction
Repetition	Many different types of repetition can be used in lyric-writing, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liturgical repetition uses the same line in the same place in every verse • Starting a series of lines, or every verse, with the same word or phrase • Parallelism, in which successive lines or lines that occupy the same place in each verse adopt the same grammatical structure to centre or emphasise the meaning conveyed (also note its inversion: chiasmus) • Word echoes (a word appears in different places throughout the lyric) and epistrophe (a word is repeated at the end of successive lines/sections)
Rhyme	Correspondence of sounds between word endings or stressed syllables. Songs usually have a rhyme “scheme” (a pattern that determines where these similar sounds occur) that can include both end rhyme (rhyme that occurs at the end of the line) and internal rhyme (rhyme that occurs within the line). There are several different types of rhyme that it is worth being aware of (see this page for starters). Work on making your rhymes fresh, not predictable!
Simile	A direct comparison of two things, highlighting their similarities using words such as “like, as, than,” to make a description more vivid and emphatic. The opposite, highlighting differences for impact, is called contrast.
Voice	Active (conveys a strong, clear, direct tone) vs. passive (subtler, weaker).

The Dance Between Poetry & Meaning¹

A song’s lyrics need to be meaningful; they need to convey understanding, communicating the song concept clearly and effectively. But they also need to move us with the beauty and intensity of their emotional expression – their poetry. The tension between these two aspects of a lyric is like a dance between two partners; in some contexts (including gathered worship) meaning needs to lead, whilst in other arenas it is important and more appropriate for poetry to lead.

¹ Thanks to Brian Doerksen for this illustration and concept, shared at the Vineyard Worship Irish Song Writers Retreat, September 2019.