

Start songwriting

By Dr Liam Maloy: l.maloy@derby.ac.uk

These notes are aimed at writing songs with children. They also work as a guide to get adults involved in songwriting.

My rationale:

- to give non-musicians some skills and ideas to write songs
- to build teachers' (and non-teachers') confidence to lead songwriting
- to get more songwriting into schools (and the world in general)
- to afford songwriting the same kudos as more traditional composition in schools

Songwriting in schools ... :

- Fosters students' self-expression and creativity
- Builds group working skills
- Links music with creative writing and analysis of poems and literary texts
- Gives singers and rappers an opportunity to shine in ways they may not do in other subjects
- Provides opportunities to sing together as a group, either in the session and/or during an assembly or other event
- Can be linked with recording, music production and instrumental music lessons

... and while it's satisfying to create a whole song (a **product**) during the session, there is much to be learned from the **process** whether or not the song gets finished in the allotted time.

My songwriting background

- I've been writing songs seriously for at least 30 years.
- I was the songwriter and bass player for the Britpop band [Soda](#).
- I have written over 200 songs across nine albums and dozens of singles for children and families with my band [Johnny and the Raindrops](#).
- I taught songwriting to degree-level music students in Nottingham and Notts for 18 years.
- I work as Associate Artist (Music) for the Royal Shakespeare Company which takes me into primary and special needs schools where I do spontaneous songwriting with the older students.

Songwriting with children

If you have attended my workshop, you will be familiar with how I approach the task of working with a group of children to write a song.

1. Ask if anyone has written a song before. What has been done previously? Words and music? In groups or alone? At school and/or at home? How many songs? Have they been performed or recorded? etc.
2. Then talk about **songwriting 'tools'**

Start with **rhyme**

Do a 'rhyme train':

Say a word (cat, dog, fly, etc.) and get each member of the group to say rhyme. Go around the group. They can't repeat what has already been said. If they get stuck, throw in another word. Towards the end, use two-syllable words (custard, scooter) or more (rhinoceros /hippopotamus).

At the end:

- Point out that **full rhymes** repeat not only the vowel sound but also the final consonant sound.
- Highlight if students have used **half rhymes**. For example, 'dock' and 'loch' are half rhymes for 'dog'; 'tap', 'catch' and 'Kath' are all half rhymes for 'cat'. The final consonant sounds generally have to be in the same 'family of sounds'.

Tell them that **rhyme is about the sound of the words not how they look on the page.**

To illustrate this: Ask students to suggest words that have the letters 'ou' in them. They might suggest: **mouse, your, though, sour, thought**, etc. all of which sound different.

When you write a song, your job is to ...

balance the sound of the words with the meaning of the words.

However, something always gets compromised in the process.

Point out that **rhyme generally happens on the right-hand side of the page**, in the final words of each line. It can also appear within lines. This is called **internal rhyme** and tends towards **assonance** where the vowel sounds are repeated.

Tell them about **rhyme schemes**:

AABB = the first two and last two lines of a four-line section rhyme (rhyming couplets).

ABAB = the first and third lines rhyme AND the second and fourth lines rhyme.

ABCB = only the second and third lines rhyme.

If you have time, get them to analyse the rhyme schemes of the songs they know. I often use the songs of Abba as lots of people seem to know them. Choose examples that best suit your class.

Briefly mention **alliteration**.

I ask students to give me examples rather than define it.

Their names are often good for this. I would be **L**aid-back **L**iam! What would your alliterative name be? Alliteration gives the song a poetic feel. Shakespeare uses lots of alliteration! As well as words that are immediately next to each other, alliteration can also work through passages of words.

For example, look at the first verse of '**Let it Be**' by The Beatles written by Paul McCartney:

*When I find myself in times of trouble
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom
Let it be*

There are three examples of **alliteration** – one in each of the first three short line.

There's also some **assonance** – the 'i/eye' sound bounces through 'find', 'myself' and 'times'.

Finally, talk about **syllables**.

Get students to count the syllables (you can call them claps or beats) in their name. Some students get confused between the number of letters and syllables.

Which student has the most claps in their name?

Ask them: which syllable of your name do you **stress** when you say it?

In other words: Which syllable is **emphasised**? Which do you **push** down on?

My name is **Li-am**. Like most (but not all) two-syllable names, I stress the first syllable. Ask the three and four syllable students which ones they stress. If they can't decide, exaggerate each syllable for them.

Ask them: is it **Chriiiiiis-tin-a**? Chris-**teeeeeen** -a? or Chris-tin-**aaaaah**?

Get them to count the syllables in the lines of songs that they know or examples that you give them. Again, I often use the songs of Abba, such as this one – 'Knowing Me Knowing You'.

No more carefree laughter (6)
Silence ever after (6)
Walked into any empty room. Tears in my eyes (11 – 7+4)
This is where the story ends. This is goodbye (11 – 7+4)

... or 'Super Trouper':

I was sick and tired of everything
When I called you last night from Glasgow
All I do is eat and sleep and sing
Wishing every show was the last show

Each line has 9 syllables.

Think about how the **syllables create patterns of rhythm**.

Those patterns are called **metre** (or meter depending on whether you're American!).

Metre is the patterns of the rhythms of the words.

Get students to say 'the patterns of the rhythms of the words' over and over.

Metre allows them to think about phrases. Look at how the phrases are broken into groups of syllables:

The first two lines of that first verse of 'Knowing me Knowing you' (above) have around half of the syllables of the last two lines, yet they fill the same amount of musical space (four bars of four beats or crotchets in each line) and take up the same amount of time. The syllables in the last two lines occur more quickly. They are more packed in. You could call it **syllabic density** if you really want to sound like you know what you're doing!

This means that the third line – 'Walked into an empty room ...' feels quicker. The pace has picked up. In this case, it adds a tension or excitement that matches the meaning of the words – in this case, the sad (and sudden?) end of a relationship. These are very 'dark' words – 'silence', 'empty', 'goodbye' – which through some very expert songwriting have been made sing-able and memorable, the true test of a great song!

The songwriting task

In small groups (of four or five people):

- **Write four lines of words** (one verse per group)
- **They have to rhyme** (think about your rhyme scheme)
- **They have to be about a chosen or given theme.** Ours was 'the local area' which was this year's Festival of Social Science theme.
- **Try to make each line have (roughly) the same number of syllables.** I generally suggest ten but it could be 9, 11 or 12.
- **You have 20 minutes** (your class may need more or less)

What we are doing is setting up a framework or a scaffold that serves to limit what is required. These **limitations are the key to creativity.**

Simon Armitage, the current poet laureate wrote a poem for the death of Queen Elizabeth. He wrote an **acrostic poem** (each line started with the letters of ELIZABETH) and used an **allegory** (an extended metaphor) of lily of the valley to limit and frame his own creativity.

Add or take away the framework for older/younger, and for more or less able groups.

Think about your **theme.**

What is the song 'about'?

What words pop into your head when you think about the them?

On the board, write a list of words suggested by your class.

Before a painter puts their brush to the canvas, they gather colours on their palette. Collecting words and phrases serves the same purpose.

You are not trying to write the song at this stage.

Rhymes may come but don't try and force them.

You are simply collecting vocabulary from which you will build your verse.

The verses

The first line of the verse will set the **rhyme scheme** and the **metre.**

Look at the last word of your **first line.**

Do you want to **rhyme** with it? Is it easy to find a rhyme for this word? Does it give you lots of options?

Some words are hard to rhyme. If you have chosen a hard word to rhyme either:

- rewrite your line with a different end word that's easier to rhyme, or
- use ABCB.

If you get stuck, use an online rhyming dictionary such as [RhymeZone](#). Most songwriters will use something like this.

Look at the **metre.** How do the syllables bounce along? Are there any natural patterns? Try saying the line in different way, emphasising, stressing, and extending or shortening different syllables. Try to keep the natural stresses in the words so that it sounds like conversational speech.

The **second line** needs to respond to the first one in terms of **rhyme**, number of **syllables** and **metre**.

If you chose ABCB then by the time you get to the end of the second line, you know what the last word of the verse is going to sound like. Make list of 'useable' words that rhyme with the one you've already got. Reject any straight away that don't fit with the theme.

For a group of 30 students split into groups of five, you might end up with six verses. Inevitably, one or two of the groups might not complete the task. Four is about the right number of verses for what we need.

Circulate around the class. See how you can be helpful.

The chorus

Always leave the chorus until last. Someone will usually have an idea for how to sum up what we have already created. Choruses generally have few words and are repetitive. Think of the song 'Hallelujah' by Leonard Cohen (the same word repeated four times), 'Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (a Man after Midnight)' by Abba, 'Sweet Caroline' by Neil Diamond (both repeat the title line in lines 1 and 3) or any song that people spontaneously sing *en masse* at weddings for inspiration.

Of course, songs can have other parts other than verses and choruses.

Although most modern pop songs don't use them, you may choose to include **bridges** (the ascending bit that is the bridge or ladder from the **verse** to the **chorus**) or a **middle-eight** (generally 8 bars of music that come usually after the second chorus that take the song somewhere else musically and narratively). Bridges and middle-eights are now a bit old fashioned. You will find them in the 'classic' songwriting of the '60s and '70s and in the work of more recent 'classic' songwriters such as Gary Barlow and Noel Gallagher.

The music

Your final task is putting the words to music.

Most generalist teachers are not musicians. However, most primary teachers have built their confidence to sing in and with the class.

You could use a familiar melody that already exist, but I would argue that this is often a very hard thing to do. You are asking children to match their phrasing, metre, and rhyme scheme to a given template. Their ideas may simple not fit.

If you play an instrument, great! If one or more of your students plays an instrument, even better!

Chords

We need chords. These are collections of notes. There are usually three different notes in a chord.

Imagine putting three fingers on a piano keyboard. A C chord would contain a 'c' note (the white key immediately on the left of the two black notes that sit together). Skip one white note on the way up (the 'd' - for 'dog' - that sits inside the two black 'dog's ears'!), then find the 'e' note. Skip another white note and find the 'g' note.

The chord of C major is made up of these notes - c, e and g.

Keeping the same space between your three fingers, move them up and down the keyboard playing only the white notes. Your most useful chords (remember, we are deliberately limiting our choices) are:

C = notes c, e, g

F = notes c, e, g

G = notes c, e, g, and

A minor = notes c, e, g

You can see that the bottom note of the three is the 'root' note from which the chord gets its name.

For **major chords**, we tend to just write the name of the chord – C, F, G.

Minor chords are generally written as Am, Dm, Em, etc.

There is a good reason that the A chord here is minor (the D and the E will also be minor). It's because the number of keys (count the black ones as well as the white ones this time) between the root note and the middle note (the third – it's three keys or semi-tones up on a keyboard) is one key (or semi-tone) less than the others.

You can make it an A major chord by moving the middle note up one key (or semi-tone). You have just **sharpened** the third! To make a minor chord, flatten the third by moving the middle note down one key.

I use a big cardboard die (singular of dice!) to choose the chords. The sides show the basic chords in the key of C major – C, F, G and Am. There's also a repeat sign which means repeat the last chord you rolled. I might also use cards or pieces of papers on which the four chords are written.

For now, we will choose **four chords for the verse** and **four chords for the chorus**, plus extra chords for the bridge and other bits if you really need those sections.

- Roll the dice four times.
- Play the chords on the keyboard, guitar, ukulele, whatever you've got.
- Do they sound OK to you? To the students?
- What would it sound like if the chords were in a different order?
- Try out some combinations and see which one you like best.

Remember that C is the root chord in the key of C.

Whatever other chords you choose, there will always be a pull (listen for it) towards the C. The C is the 'home' chord that tells your brain that everything is OK, that you are safe at home. The other chords add a tension or expectation that is 'resolved' by the home chord.

A mix of major and minor chords works well.

Decide how long you will stay on each chord – for now, either **four beats** (one bar) or **eight beats** (two bars). Our verse will have **eight bars with four beats in each**.

Try eight beat chords in the verses and four beat chords in the choruses. This has the effect of quickening the changes in the choruses, driving the song, and making the choruses more exciting.

The other way to choose the chords would be to write C, F, G and Am on the board, then choose children to suggest the chords in order. Listen to each one before choosing the next, and so on.

If you have access to Garageband (which is a free download), you could create coloured blocks on the screen for the different chords which could then be moved about to create the necessary number of bars, which is eight.

Melody

The last job is to create a melody over the top of the chords (the chords are the **'harmony'**).

Try singing the words that have been written over the chords.

Get confident child singers to give it a go. Practice and confidence go a long way!

The chords have been chosen so that they all sit in the same family.

Your melodies will be easier to create this way. The chords make the melody line more predictable and intuitive.

You only have three (main) notes to start singing on. For the C chord, you have c, e and g (see above). Try starting on each one. Which do you prefer?

Some say that melodies tend to go downwards (with a bit of up and down in the middle) to match the outward breath of singing.

Apart from singing, you could give small groups of children some chime bars, keyboards or other pitched instruments and get them to create melodies for their words.

Which melodies do they prefer? Why? Does their melody match the syllables of the words? It's important that it (mostly) does.

Each verse needs to have the same melody.

Each chorus does too.

Listen to your favourite songs to confirm this (Abba's 'Dancing Queen' is a good example).

Solo vocalists might improvise on melody lines, especially in the last verse or outro. Motown often let the singers let loose on the last part of songs that were, up until that point, very tightly structured in terms of melody.

Depending on how much time or how many sessions you have for your song, you can work on melodic ideas.

Generally, **choruses have higher melodies**, or at least start on higher notes, **than the verse**.

Bridges are the melodic ladder up from the verses to the choruses. Listen to 'Don't you want me' by The Human League for a classic bridge that does just that ('It's much too late to find you think you've changed your mind ...'), followed by a chorus that is higher than the verse and highly repetitive ('Don't you want me baby. Don't you want me. Woah, Woah' [repeat]).

The simplest structure for your song will be:

Intro (part of the chorus chords with the vocal melody of the title line played on an instrument)

| Verse | Verse | **Chorus** | Verse | Verse | **Chorus** | **Chorus** |

If your class has written more verses, add them on the end, followed by one or two more choruses.

Placing the words

The words will have their own musicality - the sound of their vowels and consonants, their number of syllables and the places where individual syllables are stressed (emphasised).

The words of your main idea (maybe your main chorus line or the title of your song) will inspire the music. They will set the pattern for the rhythms, the tempo, the rhyme scheme and the key.

I often **draw a line** under each syllable that I stress at the start of each line. These should ideally be the syllables you would naturally stress in conversational speech. The stresses (or lines) correspond with the bar lines. These are the places where your count of 1,2,3,4 repeats. The stresses fall on the 1 – the first beat of the bar.

Many songs place the first syllable of the first word on the first beat of the bar – **‘Thank you for the music’** and **‘Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (a Man after Midnight)’** do this.

You might find that you have a syllable or two (or more) up front of the bar line before your stressed syllable locks into the first beat.

‘You are the **DAN**-cing Queen’ or ‘Knowing me knowing **YOU**’ for example.

You might even miss the first beat and place your first stress on the 2 (or 3 or 4). ‘Satisfaction’ by the Rolling Stones does this. Say a silent ‘mmm’ on the first beat then come in with ‘I’ on the second beat. The full line is ‘I can’t get no satisfaction’. The ‘sat’ of **‘sat-is-fac-tion’** also falls on the second beat.

Here are some songs that I have written for my band [Johnny & the Raindrops](#) to explain the point.

Once I had decided that the song was going to be called ‘Imagination’ and that I would create a chorus by saying that word six times, I rolled the word around and decided that I would push the fourth of the five syllables: [ImagiNAtion](#):

In [‘I’m Dreaming Vegetables’](#) I push down on the **VEG** syllable. The words ‘I’m dreaming’ sit up front of the bar.

In [‘Are we there yet?’](#), it’s the third out of four syllables – **‘there’**.

With [‘What’s the time?’](#), it’s the last one – **‘time’**:

All of these pushes coincide with the first beat of the bar.

Bar lines and beats are set in stone.

| 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 |

You must move your syllables to fit them. Move your line of words back and forth across the top of the bars and beats until you find a place where it works for you.

Extend and contract syllables (usually vowel sounds) to make your lyrics fit. Make them longer or shorter.

Repetition of melodic phrases and melody lines is the key here.

Rhyme, rhythm (of the words) and **repetition** are the main things that I would focus on when writing songs, especially for children.

I hope this helps you write your songs. Practice and be patient.

Now use what you have learned to help others write their songs and express themselves.

Feel free to get in touch if you have any questions.

Happy songwriting!

Liam Maloy: l.maloy@derby.ac.uk