

Guide to Songwriting

This section provides guidance on how you can support students with songwriting. Songwriting can be an excellent way of enabling students to express themselves about topics that are important to them, and in musical styles and genres with which they are familiar. This guide suggests some processes, techniques and ideas for encouraging your students to write their own songs, without suggesting actual musical or lyrical content – this should come from the students themselves.

All songwriters, whether individuals or groups, write best in their own way, in the order which suits them and their songs, and very often dealing with more than one aspect of the writing at a time – for example, coming up with words and music together. Furthermore, they may well write different songs in different ways. So there is no one way to teach songwriting.

Consequently, there isn't one set way of using this guide. We have suggested a skeleton structure for how you might incorporate this guidance into a six-week project. However, this guide could also be used in a much less formal way, to support students working on composing/songwriting as part of the informal learning model for example (see page 154).

This guide should be treated as a framework – student voice and creativity should form the content and determine the direction of all songwriting work.

PREPARATION

- Either ask students to bring songs to the lesson (for the comparison exercises) or have a number of popular songs of different structures/styles prepared that students can draw upon for discussion and inspiration
- Photocopy the student prompt sheets, if required

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RESOURCES

- Practice spaces, one per small group
- Range of instruments – ideally a typical ‘band’ set up (drums, guitar, bass, keyboards, microphones), and/or acoustic instruments, classroom percussion
- Ideally, access to computers with music sequencing/sampling software for students who want to compose electronically
- Flipchart paper and pens, and if possible audio recording equipment, for students to record their ideas
- Copies of the student prompt sheets, if required

STUDENT PROMPT SHEETS

The following student prompt sheets are available to download from www.musicalfutures.org.uk/songwriting:

- Prompt Sheet 1: Adding to our song
- Prompt Sheet 2: Finishing your song
- Prompt Sheet 3: If you just can’t get started

Your students may not need to use these prompt sheets and they should be offered as optional guides, rather than fixed instructions.

TEACHING ADVICE

The following set of activities provides a step-by-step guide for how students might start, continue and finish a song. This is not a prescription of how students must write songs, but a series of suggestions and exercises for things they could do, especially if they get stuck.

It is important to stress to students that, when they express themselves in a song, no-one can say that something is right or wrong. However, it is beyond doubt that some songs are better than others and the care used when choosing notes, lyrics, chords, etc, can make the difference between a satisfactory school exercise and a song which is really exceptional.

In this project, we use the word ‘write’ for making up or creating words and music. This does not necessarily imply writing on paper – and it refers both to the mental activity of creation and the recording of the song. Though some students may prefer to write songs on their own, the material here is written for groups of students writing collaboratively.

LISTENING TO OTHER SONGS

We make specific suggestions for linking listening with songwriting throughout this guide, to encourage students to listen to as many songs as possible.

Students are likely to prefer writing the sorts of songs they enjoy listening to, but encourage them to challenge themselves and write other types of songs as well. Not only will this expand the range of possibilities, but it should improve their overall songwriting style. It also could lead them to discover some new music which they would never have chosen to listen to.

TECHNOLOGY TIP

As listening can guide young songwriters through investigating how others have created great songs, enabling students to have in-school access to online music streaming sites such as Spotify, Last.fm, Deezer and We7 (current sites at time of going to press) can be beneficial.

RECORDING AND REVIEWING

Recording and reviewing work is a critical part of the creative process. It can be particularly frustrating for students if they forget an idea developed in a previous lesson. Flipchart pads and pens should be made available for jotting down ideas and lyrics in progress in whatever way the students choose, and also audio recording devices to record their ideas. These ongoing notes/recordings should be available every lesson.

Recording (either audio or video) is also a crucial way of tracking student progress, both for the teacher and students. It can be very beneficial for each group of students to have a means of jotting down ideas aurally. This could be on their mobile phones (depending on school policy), or other available recording equipment.

COPYRIGHT

It is useful to remind students that, if they are using other artists' words, music or recordings in their songs, they may not be able to play their songs in public or record them for distribution because the material will be protected by copyright. Soundrights (www.soundrights.co.uk) is a web-based resource developed by UK Music that provides lesson activities and online resources to help students at Key Stage 3 understand copyright, and how they might need to go about protecting their own material.

WRITING A SONG

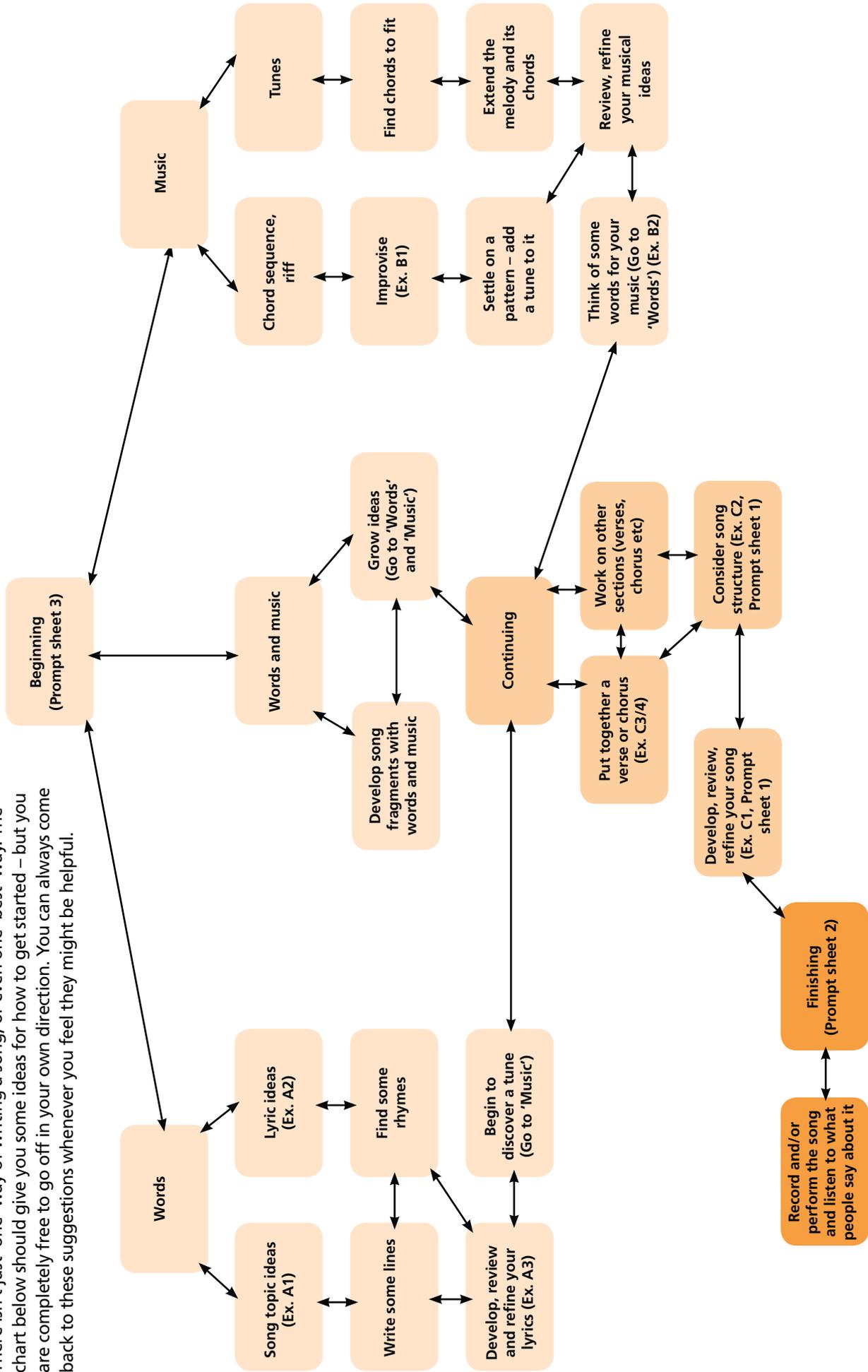
'Writing a Song' provides an illustration of the songwriting process, and links the stages to the exercises in this guide.



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WRITING A SONG

There isn't just 'one' way of writing a song, or even one 'best' way. The chart below should give you some ideas for how to get started – but you are completely free to go off in your own direction. You can always come back to these suggestions whenever you feel they might be helpful.



SONGWRITING ACTIVITIES

Students often ask whether the words or the music are written first in a song. It may be either, or both together. However, it can be useful to decide before starting what the song is going to be about, which may or may not actually be mentioned in the song.

Students using lyrics as a starting point should work through Exercises A1–A3, and students using music as a starting point should go straight to Exercises B1/B2. If students are beginning with fragments of words and music together (lines for a song) they may use aspects of both methods simultaneously.

Songs don't need to be written in the order in which they are sung/performed when they are finished. In practice, songwriting usually happens as a non-linear process, therefore students should follow the exercises in the order most appropriate to them, and be able to revisit the exercises and refine their work as and when necessary.

STARTING POINT: WORDS

EXERCISE A1: SONG TOPIC IDEAS

Students start by establishing the theme/topic that their song will be based on.

- ◊ Ask students to divide into friendship groups, or to work on their own
- ◊ Each group should choose a topic on which to write a song and discuss it, writing down or recording any interesting ideas that could be used to inspire their song and its lyrics
- ◊ Some of the words and phrases chosen may later be used in the song. But, at this point, encourage students to concentrate on the topic and what arises from it, rather than thinking about the song
- ◊ Students should make a note of all of their ideas, and then go through them and decide which ones to use

It is possible that their ideas will be a mixture of words and music or even simply bits of tunes or chord progressions. If the ideas include music, see the B section (page 107).

As part of this exercise, ask students to choose one of their favourite songs, listen to it and discuss what the song is about, for example:

- ◊ How many of the lyrics refer to the central theme/topic?
- ◊ Do they tell you everything at once or build up a story?
- ◊ Is anything else brought in from a different topic; if so, why?

EXERCISE A2: LYRIC IDEAS

After establishing a topic for the song, students now begin writing their lyrics.

- ◊ Ask students to review their bank of material for possible lyrics for their song. These needn't be the first lines in a song, although they could be; students are looking for something which fits anywhere in a song

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- Where there are verbal phrases, encourage students to find a good rhythmic way of expressing them
- If there are some strong words or phrases, encourage students to search for more words about the topic which rhyme with them and make a list of useful rhyming words
- Students should work on this until they have a few useful sentences and phrases

As part of this exercise ask students to choose one of their favourite songs and:

- Select examples of short phrases – words and music – where these two elements work particularly well together
- Ask them to consider:
 - Why are these so good? Are there any places where the words and music don't fit together well? Does this spoil the song?
 - How are rhymes used – on any words, or on words important to the message? Do the rhymes fit with the rhythmic stresses in any way?
 - Are the words easy to sing: which vowels work well on long notes; which consonants get lost when one word follows another?
- Encourage students to make a phrase of their own modelled on one of these phrases, either by adding their own ideas to what the original song is about, or by choosing another topic for their phrase

EXERCISE A3: DEVELOPING LYRICS AND BRINGING IN MUSIC

Students should now be in a position to develop their lyrics, using some of the material they have developed in Exercise A2.

- Students should spend some time saying aloud, in rhythm, the words they already have written. They should then work on these, adding and taking away words, until they have two lines which work well together as lyrics for a song
- Next, using exactly the same rhyme scheme and rhythm, write another two lines
- If the meaning is not complete, students should continue the pattern (or choose another pattern) to grow the four lines into a longer section
- Students can start to think about how their lyrics might fit to music. If there is no music with the words yet, encourage them to say their phrases in different 'sing-song' ways, gradually singing lines to a new tune
- The second of the two-line groups will usually have new words, but could have the same music as the first two lines. However, students could change the music at the end to make a slightly different second half of the fourth line

As part of this exercise, ask students to choose one of their favourite songs, pick out some two-line phrases and consider:

- Is that structure then repeated immediately afterwards?
- If so, is it changed at all? Is it used again later in the song? How do

other two-line phrases – different ones in the same song – relate to the one they chose?

- Why are things so often expressed in two-line phrases?
- Encourage students to create a verse or a chorus modelled on the best of these examples, either by adding their own ideas to what the original verse is about, or by choosing another topic

At this stage, it is particularly important to encourage peer feedback, because having another point of view can open students up to writing a song which will be relevant to more listeners. It can also alert students to a songwriting 'habit' which they may use without being aware of it, or warn them of other songs which they may have copied by mistake.

Remind students that the language of song lyrics is different from that of speech, stories, official forms, or even poems. This is because the sound of the words is as important to the message as the meaning. It is also because the songwriter may want to imply more than is being said openly. The music also contributes to the meaning – sometimes the music and the lyrics can give deliberately different messages. Students will need to consider what type of language (vocabulary and grammar) they will be using.

TECHNOLOGY TIP

There are many websites where you can download samples, which may be bass sounds, drum sounds and loops, vocal samples and FX. Students can use these sites to keep their productions sounding fresh and current.

STARTING POINT: MUSIC

EXERCISE B1: IMPROVISING A BACKING

In this exercise, students use jamming and arranging to work up musical ideas for their songs.

- Ask students to divide into friendship groups, or to work on their own
- Using instruments and/or voices they should jam around a chord-sequence and rhythm with which they are familiar
- Encourage students to keep looping their musical ideas until they flow well
- If students already have an idea for a melody (with or without words), the chords of the backing should fit with it

If the above doesn't work, or as a preparatory exercise, ask students to choose one of their favourite songs and do the following:

- Play along with the basic accompaniment a few times, and then play their version of the backing without the recording
- Encourage students to try a few slight changes, for example the order of the chords, the bass line or the feel of the drum beat
- Practise the new music and continue as above

EXERCISE B2: ADDING A VOCAL AND BRINGING IN WORDS

If there is already an idea for a melody, it could be used as the basis for the next exercises. If not, students should improvise a melody (with or without words) over the backing developed in Exercise B1.

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- Encourage students to improvise lines of a tune, or to rap verbal phrases in a rhythm which fits their backing
- When students have part of a tune which fits the chord progression, they can try putting words or phrases to it
- Encourage them to go round this sequence, trying new ideas which work with the backing – they may be able to get more than a single line this way
- Once the improvisations bring up some useful lyric ideas consider referring to Exercise A3

The style of an accompaniment can completely change what a song is saying. It can be a good exercise to try out different ways of playing a song to discover the different effects this can have.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Students should now have some small sections of a song with words and music. At this stage, the sections may not fit together, but they should feel like part of the same song.

EXERCISE C1: REVIEWING THE MATERIAL

Regularly reviewing and refining music and lyrics is an important ongoing part of the songwriting process.

- If the ideas don't really fit together as part of the same song, students could consider which elements could be put aside or changed
- As well as coming up with new lyrics ideas, students could try using different words and word orderings to improve the effect of the words that they already have written
- As well as practising the music and improving the performance of it, students should be alerted to how small changes can have a powerful effect, and try out different chords and rhythms

As part of this exercise ask students to choose one of their favourite songs and:

- Explore how ideas are repeated, developed or replaced in the song
- Consider whether any parts of the song don't fit well with the rest of it
- Try to write some new words and music which develop these ideas

EXERCISE C2: MOVING ON

Students will potentially have some song material by now, probably still as separate bits. Students can use any structure they like to put this together, however we suggest the basic verse and chorus structure here:

Verse 1, Verse 2, Chorus, Verse 3, Chorus.

Students should listen to their work and decide whether each completed section or uncompleted idea would work better as part of a verse or part of a chorus.

To help with this exercise, ask students to choose one of their favourite songs and:

- Try splitting it up into different sections, identifying verse(s) and chorus(es)
- Listen to what is 'said' in each part of the song. Do the words in a verse have a different message from another verse, and from the chorus? Is the music different in the introduction?

Now students should try to shape their own material into verses and chorus.

EXERCISE C3: COMPLETING A CHORUS

Students now work to finish their choruses.

- If students already have part of a chorus but don't know how to finish it, encourage them to analyse what they have already got
- Is there anything that still needs to be 'said' in their chorus? Does the music feel complete in itself or is there something missing? If there is still something missing in their chorus, try these suggestions:
 - Repeat one or two lines in the chorus, or repeat a line with a very slight change (perhaps in the harmony)
 - Include a line from the verse in the chorus
 - Check that the students are sure that what they actually have is a chorus. Might it be a different section?

As part of this exercise, ask students to choose one of their favourite songs and analyse the chorus by asking questions such as:

- How long is it, related to the verses?
- Is it in the same key as the verses?
- Does it end with the home key or lead to that?
- Does the rhythmic feel change in it?
- Does it 'represent' the song?

Then encourage students to write their chorus on the same model.

EXERCISE C4: COMPLETING VERSES

Students now work to complete their verses.

- If students already have part of a verse, encourage them to try finishing it off as described in Exercise A3
- When students have finished one verse, they should write a second and perhaps third verse, using the same music and rhyme scheme as the first, but with new words. As far as possible, encourage them to keep the number of syllables in the lines the same, and to be careful where the stresses in the words and sentences fall
- Encourage students to try to move the 'story' of the song on and not simply say the same things again. Students might do this in various ways, for example by telling the next thing that has happened or that they want to happen, or by explaining the first verse further
- If while working on Verse 2 they decide that they want to change the order of the lines or the verses around, that is fine; just because they wrote one verse first, it doesn't mean that it needs to be sung first

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As part of this exercise ask students to choose one of their favourite songs and:

- Analyse the rhyme scheme in the verse, and the structure of the verse as couplets (two-line bits)
- Find out if any rhymes then come back later in the verse, if so what effect does that have?
- Analyse what is taken forward by each new verse of the song. Is anything revealed that was hidden before?
- Encourage students to base their verses on the same model

FINISHING THE SONG

By now, students should have a song structured Verse 1, Chorus, Verse 2. (There may be more or fewer than two verses.) In a six-week project, students may only get as far as this, and it is a good achievement if they do. But if they have the opportunity, they could now extend and refine what they have already written. The student prompt sheets are designed to provide some questions and ideas students might consider if they are unsure about how to finish their song.

PERFORMING AND RECORDING THE SONG

Performance opportunities can provide motivation for students to finish their songs, and also a sense of achievement when performing music of their own creation to others. Therefore, we would strongly recommend building in some form of performance at the end of any songwriting project – either recording student work and uploading it to NUMU (www.numu.org.uk), students performing to their classmates, or performing in a school or local concert.

NOTE

Your Music Service, Local Authority, local radio stations or other organisation may well run songwriting competitions for young emerging talent in which your students could enter their class-work into. Also, NUMU (www.numu.org.uk) is a great way for students to publish their own music, as well as receiving reviews and comments from other students.

OPTIONAL OUT-OF-HOURS LINK

Consider establishing a songwriting club, ideally with a music technology link, for budding songwriters to continue with their work. The *Writers Unblocked* resource developed by the Leeds pathfinders, gives some ideas for developing songwriting as an extra-curricular activity. Download it from www.musicalfutures.org.uk/songwriting

GENERAL

- Regular and frequent peer review of developing work is important as this helps students to see how others' work is developing
- As an end assessment for the unit, give each student a sheet with basic levelling criteria on and ask them to mark every group's songs. They should be asked to find positive things to say as well as questions they would like to ask the writers about anything they felt didn't work as well

- Ensure that students with Special Educational Needs receive the right sort of support – either focused teacher support or older students working alongside students
- Stretch Gifted and Talented students by asking them to compose in a style which is unfamiliar to them, or setting a challenging topic for the song
- Encourage students to make use of music technology (for example creating beats/backing tracks to rap over) where appropriate
- Upload student's songs to NUMU (www.numu.org.uk), and use the blogging tool as a means of recording musical and lyrical ideas as songs progress
- Consider developing a cross-curricular project with the English department, with lyric-writing forming part of a creative writing course

FAQS: SONGWRITING

The following provides some guidance on questions that may come up when running a songwriting project.

Should students use rhymes in their lyrics?

Rhymes play an important role in the effect of a song. Because people expect them, there is often a feeling of disappointment if they are not there. However this doesn't necessarily mean they have to be used.

If students need a rhyme, but can't find one, they could try changing the order of words in the sentence to have a different one at the end (for example 'leave for the town right away' changed to 'leave right away for the town'). However, no rhyme at all is usually better than a sentence which doesn't sound right (for example 'right away, for the town you must leave').

A half-rhyme can sometimes be used. For example, 'town' and 'now' are sort of rhymes in:

'Really got to go,
Got to get to town,
There's no time to lose,
I must be there now'

However, if this gets taken too far it often doesn't work. This will depend on other things, such as how rhymes are used elsewhere in the song. Encourage students to try saying the phrase out loud and listen to it carefully. If they have to do this a few times before they are happy with it, it probably isn't good enough. Rhymes need to be made by matching the strong syllables: 'singing' rhymes with 'ringing' and not with 'one thing'.

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Another professional songwriter trick is to use the same word again, for example:

'There's no time to lose,
Got to get to town,
It's all far too late, and I
Have to be in town'

A rhyming dictionary can be a useful resource to have available for students to refer to. Or they could write their own collection, based on the topic of the song.

Does it matter if it is difficult to sing the words?

This doesn't matter provided that somebody can sing the words. But as students probably won't want their songs to be show-off pieces for clever singers, encourage them to do all they can to make the words singable, either by changing the speed or rewriting the music.

Using one note per syllable can work well (unless students are looking for a specific effect). It is always effective to match strong beats, rhymes and words which are important to the message of the song.

Some words are more easily sung on high notes than others and some words are more easily sung in fast succession than others. Changing words can often help, for example 'get down quickly, please take care' is more difficult to sing quickly than 'come on down and take more care'. (Students could be asked to analyse why.)

If the words could easily be mistaken for others, this could either be a disaster or a triumph depending on what effect your students want. (Did he sing 'robber banned' or 'rubber band'?)

Does the rhythm come first from the words or the music?

It depends, and it could be either, but what is important is that the words and music fit well together rhythmically.

When speaking the words, you would be unlikely to have long extended syllables in the way that you do when singing. From this point of view, the music is more important in giving the rhythm. But in all other respects it is the other way around, the song will work if the rhythm fits the words and it won't work if the rhythm doesn't fit the words.

What if a student is struggling with writing tunes to lyrics?

Encourage your students to repeat their lyrics in rhyme with the accompaniment, and gradually a simple tune should come. If it doesn't, they could try writing a simple chord sequence and choosing one or two of the notes of each chord in turn, singing the words on those notes until the chord changes. Then sing the next bit on notes from the next chord. Again, a tune is likely to emerge gradually. Another approach is to write the tune first and then add the lyrics.

Often, during the course of working on a song, the tune will change as people keep singing it, and this can mean it gets better.

One of my students' songs sounds like somebody else's, but they don't want to make big changes.

Sometimes changing just one small part of a tune can make a lot of difference, especially if it is the first, last or highest note. Encourage your students to try to find another note which fits with the chord and carry on from there. Then, they may be happy to move a few more notes around.

Another method is to keep the notes the same but change the rhythm. For example, a tune that starts with four even notes will sound very different if you make the first note longer and the next three shorter. This may also mean changing the words.

Students may also consider changing the chords. This can have a surprisingly strong effect on how the tune sounds.

What if the verse and chorus sounds the same?

Suggest that your students try:

- ◊ Changing the harmonies within either the verse or the chorus
- ◊ Changing the key within either the verse or the chorus
- ◊ Putting the musical lines in a different order
- ◊ Adding an extra line in the verse, possibly a repeat
- ◊ Changing the texture or the basic beat (for example swing the chorus)

Alternatively, unless their song is of the kind where this doesn't matter (as in some kinds of Blues, for example) it might be worth writing a new tune for one of the sections.

Students are saying their song sounds boring

Is this because they keep repeating the same idea? Could they say the same thing in different ways? Encourage them to try changing one or two words to see what happens. Or try changing where the main word (which relates to the topic of the song) is placed; at the very beginning or end of a line is often good. Changing the order of the verses may help.

In a good song, there should be a balance between repeated elements and new things. This will depend partly on the style of the song. It is worth students analysing good songs to find the moment when something new is brought in.

Sometimes, words sound dull because they are not focused on one subject and wander between different ideas. Unless this is the whole point of the song, students could improve lyrics by making sure that they keep to the subject. You could also encourage them to think of a new image to express their ideas (if something is boring, maybe it feels like having to 'live with your head full of porridge'; if someone is beautiful, maybe that person 'makes you feel like rain is made of fizzy blue water') or to come up with a surprising way of saying what you think, by exaggerating ('the lesson lasted a million years') or using unexpected words ('he plays football like a soapy superstar').

The effect of a song comes from all of its elements, so what may sound a dull lyric when spoken can be fantastic when sung. Other helpful changes may arise from considering the following:

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- Does the music contain too many lines with the same tune following one another?
- Do the chords always come in the same order and end the same way?
- Does the bass line only ever play the main chord note on the first beat of the bar?
- Could the highest note in the tune get moved towards the end of the section?
- Could the rhythm in the accompaniment get adjusted slightly to change the feel?
- Is the tempo right?
- Is the texture always the same?

What if the group disagrees about something in the song?

This can be the result of having a few students with strong creative ideas in the same group. Encourage everyone to try out all of the ideas, ensuring everybody's suggestions get heard. They may then discover what works best, and choose from all the available material.

Encourage students to play different versions of the song to other people – students from other groups for example – whose opinions they trust, and ask for comments.

Sometimes, a compromise is possible (using different versions in different verses, for example). But ultimately students are going to have to go with one agreed song. If they are performing it themselves, encourage them to go for what they can perform best.



PROJECT SNAPSHOT

The following splits the materials into six lessons. The various interlinked activities are separated out as individual exercises, but students should be reminded that, when they write a song on their own, they may want to deal with things in a completely different order. This process could and should take place over as many weeks as students need; some exercises may each need two or three lessons. This is just a guide to illustrate one way of structuring a songwriting module in a six-week period.

Lesson	Content
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to songwriting project (5 mins) • Discussion of song topic ideas and lyric ideas (10 mins) • Students go into small groups and begin working on song topic and lyric ideas (40 mins) • End discussion: initial ideas and problems (5 mins)
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and discussion of developing and reviewing lyrics (10 mins) • Students in small groups continue working on topic and lyrics (40 mins) • End discussion, sharing of some lyrics (10 mins)
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and explanation of jamming on musical ideas and improvisation (10 mins) • Students in small groups begin creating musical material through jamming and improvising (40 mins) • End discussion: problems, ways forward, etc (10 mins)
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and discussion of writing a chorus (10 mins) • Students in small groups begin to write a chorus for their song (40 mins) • End discussion, some performances (10 mins)
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and discussion of writing a verse (10 mins) • Students in small groups begin to write a verse for their song (40 mins) • End discussion, showing session (10 mins)
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction and discussion of putting verse and chorus together (10 mins) • Students in small groups practice putting their verse and chorus together (20 mins) • Final performances, recording session, evaluation (30 mins)