



Week 4:

Lyric Writing –  
Prosody & Meter

For an in-depth look at psychological principles in the effectiveness of visual imagery and figurative language, see chapter three, “The Imagination of the Listener” on page 52.

## Prosody and Meter

Prosody is the agreement of lyric and music. Ideally, you want the emotional tone of the music to enhance the song’s message. If the lyric has an “up,” positive message, it would generally be unwise to set the music in a minor key. Minor chords tend to suggest pain, longing, despair, loss, and sadness. The melody line can also be used to illustrate the lyrics. If the ascending melody for Jimmy Webb’s “Up, Up, and Away” or Curtis Mayfield’s “Move On Up” were written as a series of *descending* notes, the result would have sounded ludicrous. It’s also possible that your message might be enhanced by doing just the opposite of what feels natural, for effect—but that should be a conscious choice, not an accident. A good example is Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s “Mack the Knife,” a dark, grisly lyric with a jaunty, happy melody.

Other factors can contribute to bad prosody. Watch for combinations of words that might be *heard* as entirely different phrases: *What do I know?/What a wino?*; *Let the winds take hold/Let the wind stay cold*; or *’Scuse me while I kiss the sky/’Scuse me while I kiss this guy* (which became the title of a very funny book, *’Scuse Me While I Kiss This Guy and Other Misheard Lyrics* by Gavin Edwards). A similar problem exists with adjoining words that end and begin with the same sound. Phrases like *teach children* or *strange journey* will give a good singer an anxiety attack because there’s not enough space between similar consonant groups to allow the tongue to recover. Make certain that what listeners hear is what you *want* them to hear, and that the singer can easily sing what you write.

The best way to make sure your lyrics will sing well is to sing them as you write them. Sing your lyrics at the tempo they’ll be performed. Some lyrics that look fine on paper and sing easily at a slow tempo may tie a singer’s tongue in knots when you increase the tempo even a little. If the words feel at all awkward in your mouth or don’t sing smoothly, change them.

Some words, such as *long* and *cool*, carry their own emotional meanings that may feel wrong when sung over short, choppy notes. Action words like *jump*, *run*, *crash*, and *flash* may feel out of place in a slow ballad, but right at home in a high-intensity rocker.

One of the most important elements of prosody is the metrical pattern of the lyric. You can achieve good prosody by choosing a meter that emphasizes natural speech patterns and ties them effectively to the musical pulse and melody. It should allow the words to fit comfortably with the music, without putting the accents on the wrong syllables or squeezing too many words into too little musical space.

If you were paying attention in English class instead of daydreaming about being a rock star, you would probably already know the material that follows. You just didn’t think you’d ever need to use it, right?

Why do you need to know about meter? You may not need to remember the names of the patterns, but you should know that they are options to be considered and that they can be used for emotional effect and for variety. Few things are more deadly than an entire lyric in perfect iambic pentameter, and the melodies to those lyrics don’t usually save them. When was the last time, by the way, that you heard someone use iambic pentameter in a conversation? So let’s go back to English class again.

Regular groupings of stressed and unstressed syllables are called *metric feet*. We usually hear them in groups of two or three, though pentameter means *five feet*. Those most commonly used in poetry and lyric are:

NAME OF METRIC FOOT	EXAMPLES	ACCENT FOOT
iamb	in- <b>sane</b> , good- <b>bye</b> , to- <b>night</b> for <b>good</b>	ta <b>TUM</b>
trochee	<b>heal</b> -thy, <b>lov</b> -er, mon- <b>ey</b>	<b>TUM</b> ta
anapest	go- <b>ing out</b> , ma- <b>king sense</b> , un- <b>der-stand</b>	ta ta <b>TUM</b>
dactyl	<b>po</b> -e-try, <b>ul</b> -ti-mate, I'm o-kay, <b>you're</b> o-kay	<b>TUM</b> ta ta
spondee	<b>down-town</b> , <b>star-ship</b> , <b>head-long</b>	<b>TUM TUM</b>
amphibrach	be- <b>liev</b> -ing, con- <b>cern</b> -ing, I <b>love</b> it	ta <b>TUM</b> ta

The emotional impact of a song can be greatly influenced by your choice of meter. Spondees (TUM TUM) have a very deliberate feeling. Iambic pentameter (ta TUM/ta TUM/ta TUM/ta TUM/ta TUM) is the most commonly used meter and has a long history in English poetry, probably because it's closest to human speech. It's good for seriousness. So are dactyls (TUM ta ta).

Three-syllable meters, particularly anapests (ta ta TUM/ta ta TUM/ta ta TUM), have a lightness about them that doesn't suit them for particularly heavy subject matter.

Though overuse of the same meter can be monotonous, just enough repetition can create tension to set a listener up for a dynamic change of meter. In songwriting, you need to repeat the metric feet in a way that not only makes them fit comfortably with the musical pulse, but *emphasizes the intended meaning of the lyric*.

As an illustration, let's take a line that could have several meanings and work it to find its best setting.

I need/you in/my life/      A duple meter (two syllables per foot) emphasizing need, in, and life. In  
(iamb)      doesn't take the emphasis particularly well because it's a weaker word.

or

I need/you in/my life/      Another duple meter emphasizing I, you, and my. Feels more natural.  
(trochee)

I need you/in my life/      A triple meter (three syllables per foot) emphasizing you and life.  
(anapest)

or

I need you/in my life/      A triple meter emphasizing need and my.  
(amphibrach)

Depending on the length of notes and rests, these versions could be done in either 4/4 or 3/4 time.

Try your own melodies with these variations. Sing them out loud. You'll find your melodies changing with each variation to *accommodate the meaning of the line and the musical meter*. This

is a process that should happen regardless of whether you're writing melody to lyric, lyric to melody, or lyric alone. Once you get used to it, the process goes very fast.

Let's try a straight 4/4 with equal emphasis on each note.

	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	
4/4	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	It feels a little stiff this way and life held this long, is a little strained. Better to make life a beat shorter and end in a rest.
	I	need	you	in	my	life			

How about emphasizing 1 and 3?

	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	
4/4	/	-	/	-	/	-	/	-	Not bad, but it would again be awkward to hold life. You can also add to the emphasis of you by raising the melody on that word.
	I	need	you	in	my	life			

Still emphasizing 1 and 3, you can use a pickup, starting the lyric before the downbeat.

		1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	
4/4		/	-	/	-	/	-	/	-	This gives you the chance to use the accents and maintain your choice of emphasis.
	I	need	you	in	my	life				

		1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	
2/4		/	-	/	-	-	-			By using eighth notes, you can emphasize need and life. Eighth notes also give the line more urgency.
	I	need	you	in	my	life				

Let's try leaning on the backbeat, 2 and 4.

	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	
4/4	-	/	-	/	-	/	-	/	We're still accenting the in here, but can deemphasize it by raising the melody on both need and life.
	I	need	you	in	my	life			

Still accenting the backbeat, you can delay the line and try an eighth note feel again.

	1	+	2	+	3	+	4	+	
4/4	-	-	/	-	-	-	/	-	This one feels good, too.
			I	need	you	in	my	life	

Now let's switch to 3/4 waltz time.

	1	2	3	1	2	3		
3/4	-	-	/	-	-	/	-	A little stiff—too predictable.
	I	need	you	in	my	life		

	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	A little smoother with more room for a singer to play with the words.
3/4	-	/	-	-	/	-	-	/	-	
	I	need		you	in		my	life		

	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	More interesting, less predictable.
3/4	/	/	-	/	/	-	/	-	-	
	I	need	you	in	my		life			

or with a pickup ...

	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	Again, more interesting with room for a singer to move.
3/4	/	-	-	/	/	-	/	-	-	
	I	need		you	in		my	life		

## Lyric Context

Context can do so much to enhance the power of a lyric. Let's take a scenario in which a young guy takes his girlfriend home. When they get to her parents' house, he leans over to kiss her goodnight and she turns her head away. At this moment, he knows the relationship is in trouble. He may have wondered or been worried before, but *this* is the pivotal event.

Now let's change the context of this event. Instead of picturing the two of them alone together, imagine that he's standing with a group of other guys and the girl is coming down the street. As she joins the group, the guy pulls her over to kiss her, but she turns her head away. The same gesture is now much more powerful because we see him embarrassed in front of his friends. We can make more inferences from the second scenario: the fact that he wanted her to kiss him in front of his friends shows his possessiveness, and perhaps his insecurity. So the stakes, and consequently the drama of the situation, are increased. The only thing that was different was the context: the scene surrounding the event. I see many, many songs from inexperienced writers that could use that extra bit of imagination to create a more powerful context.

Let's look at the situation presented in Jon Ims's "She's in Love With the Boy" (see chapter five, "Writing and Rewriting 'She's in Love With the Boy'" on page 103). If Ims had started the song with Tommy and Katie in the drive-in, it still may have been a decent song. But by first describing Katie's boredom in the context of her isolated little town, he gives the song both a backdrop and a setup that enhance the drama of the "pivotal event." She *needs* to get away and we can't help wondering if the possibility expressed in the line "Even if they have to run away" isn't fueling her love and desire to escape an overprotective father.

## Clichés

How often have you heard: *feel the pain, by my side, set me free, lost without you, broken heart, all we've been through, hold me close, my foolish pride, all night long, give you my heart, want you, need you, love you, all my love, more than friends, never let you go, more than words can say, when you walked into the room, when you came into my life, when I first saw you, dream come true, call on me,*

*our love is forever*—and the ever popular *oh baby*? Then there are the cliché rhymes: *hold (take my) your hand/understand/be your man. Dance/take a chance/romance. Kiss you/miss you . . .* and on and on. Of course *you've* never been guilty of using any of these worn-out phrases and rhymes. But just in case you're thinking about it, I'll try to answer the questions I know you'd want to ask.

Every time I turn on the radio, to any format, I hear clichés often the same ones that are in my songs. Those songs are hits, so how can you say that clichés don't work out there in radioland?

Most of the songs you hear on radio are written by the artists who perform them. In those cases, there are few, if any, gatekeepers who are willing or able to criticize the artist's songs, particularly once the artist has become successful. Most artists are signed because they have a great sound, a great look and a vocal style that allow audiences to recognize them instantly—not because they sing great lyrics. Also remember that a lyric by itself is neither a song nor a record. If you're a lyricist, you may hear those cliché lines and disregard the other factors that have put the song on the radio. A dynamic, engaging melody and a groove ideal for the artist's style contribute to the success of the *song*, and a great arrangement and creative production contribute to the success of the *record*. No matter what A&R reps say about the songs being *the* most important factor, it ain't *necessarily* so—though in the mix of ingredients, lyrics are very important in pop ballads and country songs.

**So it's more important to avoid clichés if I'm not an artist?** It's always important to avoid them, but if you're a writer submitting songs to artists who don't write (or who write but also record "outside songs" in hopes of getting a hit whether they've written it or not), you go through the gatekeepers. Your song passes the ears of publishers, producers, and A&R reps who, no matter how young, have already heard thousands of songs. They've heard all the worn-out lines and predictable rhymes mentioned above—and more. They know that, in order to compete with the songs submitted by the world's most successful writers (or songs by the artist's spouse, or songs by other writers signed to their producer's publishing company), your song has to be *better* than theirs. It has to be so unique that *they* would not have thought of it, and so compelling that they know it would become a hit for someone else if they don't record it themselves. Lyrics full of clichés are viewed as lyrics that *anyone* could write: not unique, not compelling.

**How can I avoid using clichés?** The best way to avoid clichés is to write with as much specific detail as possible about your own personal experiences and trust that you tap universal emotions. Also, if you've heard the line before, push yourself until you find a new way to say it.

**But thirteen-year-old kids haven't heard those clichés nearly as often or for nearly as many years as the gatekeepers. So they're not clichés to them, are they?** True enough. But do you want to look back years later and be embarrassed, even if your songs are successful, realizing that you missed an opportunity to have made them great songs?

**Can't I use clichés in a creative way?** Absolutely. How often have you heard *break my heart*? Now tell me how often you'd heard "Unbreak My Heart" before the Diane Warren song became a major hit for Toni Braxton. Warren took a cliché and did something so simple and obvious that writers all over the world are kicking themselves for not thinking of it first. Your job is to think of it first.

In this chapter, I've explored the major areas that concern you as a lyric writer. There's a *lot* more to learn. If you're serious about being a songwriter, you'll read everything you can on the subject (see the bibliography for some suggestions), but there's no better and faster way to improve than to write constantly. When you do, you'll create your own examples and encounter problems that will give a practical context to what you read.