

EPISODE 036

Knowing Which Lyric Lines & Ideas To Keep Or Throw Out – How To Answer The Question Of Relevancy.

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-036

[00:00:00] Hi, this is Melanie from Stories in Songs - Writing the Lyrics.

Have you ever listened to a song only to end up confused because something in the lyrics seemed off? Did you struggle because something was missing or didn't understand why something was included because it didn't seem relevant?

In today's episode, I want to talk with you about how you can figure out what's relevant to include in your lyrics and what you can leave out. I'll let you in on the secret and show you the tools that support you in making the decision to keep and eliminate lines, sections, or the overall idea.

After all, the goal is to write a lyric where the entire lyric, its different parts, and the way they work together are all in sync.

So if you are intrigued to discover the tools to determine

- which lines belong in your narrative
- which building blocks to use
- and find the right words to effectively communicate all the details and events of your lyric to your audience.

... then this episode is for you.

I know this might sound too good to be true. But truly, when you are open to diving into the craft of storytelling with me, you'll see that those tools do exist. Even though we're just gonna scratch the surface today to avoid any overwhelm, please remember that it takes



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time, intention, and attention to learn and apply those tools, but your efforts will pay off in ways you can't even imagine.

TEASER

Coherence is a Lyric's Main Goal

[00:01:58] Now, before we get started. I heard of this detailed concept first in the Story Grid Guild, in a training by Leslie Watts and Danielle Kiowski. And as always, I'm taking what I'm learning about the craft of storytelling for writing novels, and I'm applying it to writing lyrics. Because there are similarities and there are also differences. And since not every lyricist wants to be a full-fledged storyteller or novelist, let's condense it to what we as lyricists and singer/songwriters can learn and how we can use the power of storytelling for our lyrics.

With that said, and thanks to Danielle and Leslie for giving me the means to start this exploration, let's start talking about those amazing tools that help you determine what's relevant in your lyrics as a whole and its different sections.

When writing lyrics, the goal is to create a coherent narrative so that the lyric, its different parts, and the way they work together are all in sync. Because if everything works well together like a well-oiled machine, you create satisfaction in the audience instead of confusion when they sense that something is not quite right.

And in order to write a coherent lyric, you have to understand WHAT you're doing and WHY every step of the way. It's all about figuring out what's relevant.

And the foundation of the yardstick of what's relevant and what's not in lyrics – be it the overall lyrics, its sections, or even lines – is to be very clear about the specific problem your song deals with.

A character in a song needs to face a problem.

[00:03:29] By now, you have probably heard me say this a lot. A lyric needs to contain a problem that the song's main character is trying to solve.



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If the lyrics don't start with a problem that interests us and that we need to hear how it's solved – or in storytelling terms speaking: there's no narrative gap that opens and that we need closed to release the tension – then our attention suffers.

We might not listen to the lyrics because why should we care? If there's no story, there's no takeaway from the song. And if the song doesn't have a message, it can't help us survive or thrive, or derive meaning.

So the problem is what makes the lyric so intriguing.

- It's what hooks your audience.
- It's the foundation on which you can build your song's big takeaway or message.
- And it's the starting point for your song's character's journey and the spark that may lead to their internal transformation.
- Only by solving a problem can a song offer guidance.

So when we continue to talk about coherence and relevancy, always keep in mind that the problem is our foundation to be able to decide what's relevant and what is not.

If your lyrics don't include a problem that your song's main character will have to deal with, the following tools will be useless.

1. The What If? Scenario

[00:04:51] Let's talk about the first tool that helps us figure out the root of the problem.

We wanna know what has caused the problem. And if you don't even know yet what problem you'll address, a What-If scenario will inspire you with two amazing possibilities to think about ways how a problem might arise.

Now, *as I have already said, and I'm repeating myself here*, when you write a narrative, it's all about the problem. Because when we have something to say about life and we want to communicate a certain message to our audience, generating a problem for our song's main character helps us determine what's relevant and what's not considering that problem and how to solve it. If something doesn't relate to the problem and its solution in any way, it's not relevant.

Now to better understand this, the problem we're talking about arises from the relationship between your song's main character and their environment.



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But let's be a little more specific.

The problem arises from the relationship between the context and the main character.

For clarification, the **context** is everything from

- the setting or, as we in the Story Grid call it, the alternate world, the environment
- its different character (including the song's main character)
- and the things within that context
- It's the place where the story events unfold, like a specific place, an organization, or even a system.

And the **song's main character**, or in storytelling terms speaking: the protagonist, that's the character we follow the most closely and relate to. They are the person that responds to the inciting incident that thrust their life out of balance. And they are the ones that must face the problem raised by the inciting incident and must actively respond in the story's climax.

And when we look at the relationship between the song's main character and the context, the first question to ask oneself is:

How well do they fit in their world?

That set up means that they will have a particular response to the problem as it arises.

And there are two possibilities to think about the relationship between your song's main character and their world.

Fish out of the Water-Scenario

[00:06:53] The first possibility is that your song's main character doesn't fit well into their world. In the Story Grid, we call this scenario: The FISH OUT OF THE WATER.

Let's name some story examples first before we talk about some songs with that scenario.

- So when you look at *The Lord of The Rings*, the hobbit Frodo knows only the world of the Shire. But he gets Bilbo's Ring which turns out to be the One Ring that the Evil Lord Sauron wants back to dominate and enslave the entire world of Middle Earth. So he has to leave the shire – the place he knows, and he has to travel through unknown landscapes, deal with different races, and learn how that world beyond the Shire works. He is a Fish out of the water. He doesn't usually live in that context.



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- The *first Harry Potter* book is the same thing. Harry is not used to living in a world of wizards. When he comes to Hogwarts, he's a fish out of the water, too. After all, he mostly knew the Dursleys and his little room under the staircase.
- But Fish out of the Water can also refer to stories where other characters create the setting of being a fish out of the water – which basically means not having experienced a particular situation before.
 - In *Die Hard*, McClane is a cop. But suddenly, he has to investigate a crime in which his wife is involved. That's totally new to him.

Now when we look at songs, there's ...

- *Hotel California* by The Eagles.
 - The song's main character is traveling around and he comes to the Hotel California. And he doesn't know that place. He thinks it's quite nice until its true and terrible nature reveals itself. He's a fish out of the water.
- *Lose Yourself* by Eminem
 - In that song, the song's main character Rabbit performs in a Rap Battle. But since that environment and the people in the crowd are not where he's used to, he's so nervous that he totally messes up. He's a fish out of the water too.
- *Welcome To The Jungle* by Guns N'Roses
 - Here the song's main character gets welcomed by a so-called Herald who foreshadowed what will happen to them in that new place they are in. Welcome to the Jungle, Fish.
- *Nothing Compares 2 U* by Sinéad O'Connor
 - In that song, the fish out of the water scenario or where the character doesn't fit well into their world, that's the world of heart-break. That's so new to them and nothing compares to being with that one person.
- *American Pie* by Don McLean
 - After the death of music legends, the song's main character doesn't recognize the world anymore that he once lived in. It was the day the music died for him, and everything changed. And he can't get used to this.
- *Hero of War* by Rise Against
 - the song's main character is a soldier that goes to war. He's completely unaware of what that experience will teach him about life.
- *The Black Parade* by My Chemical Romance
 - In that concept album, the main character has to deal with the terrifying news that he's dying of cancer. He's in hospital and he has to face things, he's never imagined. He's definitely a fish out of the water, too, in that context.



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Now those are some song examples regarding the Fish Out of the Water Scenario where the main character doesn't fit well into their world.

Strange Thing or Stranger Comes to Town - Scenario

[00:10:44] On the other hand, there's also the possibility that they fit in well but other people or things from outside (*that are not a good fit*) enter their world. In Story Grid, we call this: the STRANGE THING or STRANGER COMES TO TOWN.

Let's start with story examples first to get a hang of it.

- Now, the first one that comes to mind is *GODZILLA*. It's an enormous, destructive, prehistoric sea monster that gets awakened and empowered by nuclear radiation. And it comes to Japan and terrorizes that country. It's the strange thing that comes to town. The same storyline is also true for *JAWS*, or when *KING KONG* comes to New York, or in one of those *Jurassic Park* movies where the T-Rex suddenly walks through the city's streets.
- But it is also possible that a Stranger comes to town. And that's basically all those love stories where suddenly a new man or woman shows up. For the vampire Edward, that's Bella in *Twilight*. For *Bridget Jones*, it's Darcy at her mother's turkey curry buffet. That new person enters the world of the main character and upsets things. They are the cause of the problem, so to say.

In songs, we have, for example, ...

- *Billie Jean* by Michael Jackson
 - the song's character is at a dance and he meets that girl. And he dances with her and months later, she claims that he is the father of her child. She upsets his world a lot. She was the strange girl that came to town.
- *Summer of 69* by Bryan Adams
 - It's the summer after finishing school, so the song's main character is spending one last summer at home. And he meets that girl who's standing on her mama's porch. She upsets his world so much that years after meeting her, he still thinks about her.
- *Love Again* by Dua Lipa
 - The state of mind of the song's main character was about not believing in love anymore. But then this guy comes around who gets her in love again. The same is true for the Monkees' song, *I'm A Believer*, same concept.
- *I Saw Her Standing There* by The Beatles



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- This is another love song example where that one amazing person suddenly shows up. And they usually turn the character's world upside down. The same works in *Sold (The Grundy County Auction Incident)* by John Michael Montgomery or many more of those Meet-Cute Scenes.

Okay, now that you better understand what the relationship between your main character and their world may look like, you hopefully see now that this relationship of either

- being a fish out of the water
- or a stranger comes to town

is what causes friction.

And that friction gives rise to an unexpected event that becomes the problem. That's the **Inciting Incident**. It creates the problem the song's main character must solve. It's an unexpected event that arises because of an imbalance in the interactions between the context and the people and things within it.

And this unexpected event upsets the valence – either for good or worse. And the song's main character has to address it. They have to deal with that problem. And whenever there's a problem, there's also a goal state. That's successfully dealing with that thing that so unexpectedly upset their life.

To reach that goal, the character will have to do something to attain it. And that's exactly how we can decide what's relevant and what's not for our lyrics. So focus on that!

So let's wrap up what we've learned so far to create an inspiring What-If Scenario for our lyrics:

1. Firstly, we have to know what the world looks like in which we place our song's main character. Will they fit into that world or do they not?
2. Secondly, we have to decide WHO our main character will be.
3. and lastly, we have to know what's the inciting incident. That means, what's the event that causes a problem and forces the song's main character to deal with that problem to achieve their goal? Remember, what's problematic is what's relevant. So you want to think about what event and behavior and details tend to demonstrate the problem.

And why is it important to think about the context, the main character, and the inciting incident? It's because how the song is told and sung depends on what the song's narrative is about.



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If you want to find out a proven way how to come up with an Irresistible Idea for your Lyrics, make sure to check out my free web class: Uncovering Your Irresistible Lyric Idea. There's a link in the show notes, but you can also find it when you visit: storiesinsongs.com/courses.

Again, it's free so make sure to check it out. storiesinsongs.com/courses.

2. Narrative Device

[00:16:03] Now, let's continue with the tool 'Narrative Device'.

I know, this sounds very geeky as a storytelling term.

But it's not that hard. I promise.

So first, let's talk about what a narrative device is.

The **Narrative Device** is kinda like an What-If scenario. In Story Grid, we say: "The Narrative Device is a scenario or mental representation of someone communicating a story to a particular person to solve a specific problem."

So that What-If scenario (we just talked about) gets communicated as a story by an author to a single audience member to help them solve a specific problem. So it is a scenario or a situation where someone is telling a story to someone else at a certain time and place and for a particular reason.

In doing so, it revolves around what we've already talked about: the lyric's narrative or story, the what-If scenario, consists of ...

1. the context,
2. the song's main character,
3. the inciting incident,

So after you have thought about your What-If scenario (*the world, the main character, and the inciting incident*), it's time to think about WHO is telling the story to WHOM and WHY.

That means you have to find a suitable narrator who is a good fit to tell the narrative to an audience member that has a problem.

And by that, I don't mean you literally go out into the world and try to find a real human being whom you could hire as a narrator.



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So let me be clear about the terms.

- You are the **writer**. The lyricist.
- And the **narrator** is someone you think about or imagine. It's someone who is capable of telling the premise of your What-If story to someone to help them solve or shed light on a problem another person has.
 - The specific problem provides a relevance filter for writers when they consider whether each section, line or word tends to shed light on the single audience member's problem.
 - The narrator transmits the story.
 - This could also be, in case you are not the singer, a singer you think about who could identify with your lyrics and would be an ideal fit to communicate your narrative to their audience – because their audience is a good fit to the problem the song deals with, too.
- So when it comes to the **audience**, think about a single audience member. And the key here is to dial in on what problem they have and how they can benefit from hearing that song. Most importantly, that listener is a person with a problem related to the one the song's main character faces in the premise.

So, in storytelling terms, we say the narrator is transmitting the story to the audience. In songwriting, the singer is communicating the lyrics to their audience.

You want the narrator and the audience to be very specific people.

That specificity helps you generate the problem, which then generates the relevance for what you include in the lyrics.

When you bring that together, you have your narrative device.

So, everything you include in your lyrics should be relevant to the problem the audience has. And simultaneously, it's also relevant to the song's main character who faces that problem.

And that similarity is important because we want our audience to empathize with the character in our song. And we accomplish that by having the problem of the listener aligned with the problem of the song's main character.

And of course, we also need to know WHY – the purpose of it all.

The reason why we write the song and have a singer communicate it to an audience is that we want to shed some light on the problem the audience may have.



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So let's name some examples to better understand this concept of narrative device.

Let's look at the song: "*I'm A Believer*" by The Monkees.

- So the **What-if scenario** consists of the question of the context, the character, and the inciting incident.
 - the world is "Stranger comes to Town" because suddenly that girl appears in his normal life of continuous relationship disappointments
 - the song's main character is someone who thought love was only true in fairytales
 - and the inciting incident was another disappointment in love
- Now when it comes to the **narrative device**, we focus on the narrator, the audience, and the problem
 - Neil Diamond wrote that song. He is the songwriter. But he doesn't necessarily need to be the **narrator** who has gone through this experience himself. He could also just imagine that person and assign an imaginative narrator who is capable of telling that narrative because they had to face a particular problem.
 - The Monkees recorded that song in 1966. And Micky Dolenz sang it. In a way, he became the narrator, the **transmitter** of that narrative.
 - And if a song means something to you and you can identify yourself with the character's problem, the song becomes more believable. You become the narrator.
 - And the audience is someone who has a similar problem and who can benefit from your song. So in the case of 'I'm A Believer', it's probably another man who doubts that love is out there for him. It's been proven to him again and again that love only leads to feeling miserable.
 - And the **problem** the song addresses is the question of making the Heroic Choice and believing in love or making an anti-heroic choice by giving up completely.

Remember, the inciting incident gave rise to that problem. In the case of "I'm a Believer", the inciting incident was another disappointment in love. It was so devastating that the character became aware of the main problem. They thought love was out to get them. And they had to deal with that if they ever wanted a shot at getting what they wanted.

So let's wrap up Narrative Device.

The Narrative Device consists of three main components:



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- The **Narrator** is someone who is capable of telling the premise as a story to shed light on the problem another person has.
- The **Single Audience Member** is a person with a problem related to the one the protagonist faces in the premise.
- A specific **problem** that the premise can shed light on.

Before we move on to the next tool, let's just talk about how Narrative Device helps you figure out what's relevant.

As we've already said, narrative device is a mental representation of a What-If Scenario. In it, someone tells a story to help another person solve a specific problem that mimics the stories or a specific moment in our own lives. After all, we tell stories to entertain, but also to pass on wisdom and illuminate problems.

A problem hooks your audience and makes them want to hear how it's dealt with or how it is solved. That's what the audience wants to know. That's why the problem provides a useful relevance filter because it puts the focus where it ought to be: on a single listener of your song and what it can do for them.

As a result, the problem helps you as the songwriter decide what to include, when to include it, and how to say it.

And those decisions also inform the Point of View Choices of the story.

3. Point of View

[00:23:10] Now that we have talked about those tools and insights, lastly, let's look at the point of view.

And everything we've gone through – our What-if scenario and the narrative device – informs our point of view choices. We select the point of view that fits best to help the narrator illuminate the problem they want to help the Audience solve.

So the point of view choice is based on the best way to communicate your song's big takeaway to the audience.

For example, let's stay with our song example of *I'm A Believer* by The Monkees.



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That song has been written in first person narrative, it's primarily in the past tense with a link to the present ("*Then I saw her face, now I'm a believer*"), and it's wrapped in a subjective experience. It's all about feelings and not facts, right?

So how do we make those choices for our own lyrics?

First off, there are three choices point of view consists of. It includes the Person, Tense, and Mode.

So first, you gotta decide what's the storytelling **mode**.

This rather technical choice focuses on how the information is presented. The mode is either telling or showing. That means should the point of view create an objective account of the story or is it subjective?

So, showing is objective because you gotta show to the audience what happened so that they can make up their minds about it. You are not biased. It's all about the facts. It's objective, right. So you gotta show to help them make up their minds about it without influencing their opinion. So the showing mode is objective and immediate which creates the effect of being present and observing the events of the story.

And telling is subjective, because the narrator tells someone about that experience and how it made them feel and what it was like for them. So it's subjective, right? So the audience experiences the lyrics as if someone or something is collecting, collating, and sharing the events and circumstances of the narrative.

So that's the first decision you gotta make: Is the mode telling or showing, which means subjective or objective?

The next question concerns the **person**:

Person refers to the vantage point from which the narrative is presented to the listener.

Will you use the first, second, or third person? So you have to think about the relationship between the singer / your narrator and the audience.

And there could be four possible relationships that the singer has.

- Direct Address



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- Here, the singer (1st person, “I”) is talking to some second person (“You”) or right at the audience
- it’s the most intimate point of view
 - and it’s all about feelings, not facts
- Second Person
 - Second person is a tricky combination of 3rd person narrative (where we watch the character) and direct address (talking right to the character). But the first person “I” is never mentioned.
 - This is still very intimate but not as close as direct address because we miss the connection between the I and You.
- First Person
 - the singer as character/narrator is right in front of us. We feel like we know that person. We use I, but there’s no You. It’s a combination of first and third person.
 - Other important things to know about this POV
 - the narrator participates in the action
 - and reveals something about himself
 - he or she needs a good reason to tell us their story (resolution)
 - the audience knows something about the singer, who speaks directly TO the audience ABOUT other people and events
- Third Person
 - here the singer acts as a storyteller who simply directs the audience’s attention to an objective world neither the singer nor the audience is a part of

So knowing if your mode will be showing/objective or telling/subjective helps you to dial in on the point of view person – will it be first, second, or third.

If it’s all subjective because it concerns a person’s feelings, then your mode is telling, it’s subjective. You will probably aim for direct address or first person in most of the cases because Second Person is rarely used. It’s hard to pull it off. Because you don’t wanna sound like you’re preaching or sound unnatural because you repeat things that person already knows.

If there’s a good distance between the narrator and their audience and it’s more objective, more focused on the facts, then the POV person is probably third person.

So just knowing the mode helps you a great deal to dial in on the point of view person.

And the last choice you gotta make concerns the **tense**.



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The tense distinguishes the timeframe of the lyric's narrative.

Will you use past, present, or future tense? Or a combination because your song's narrative spans from the past to the present or even the future?

So you can see that point of view is a combination of technical choices that the songwriter makes to create the effect of the Narrative Device in the lyrics and present the narrative to a listener.

Summary: Relevance

[00:28:39] Okay, and by using those three tools of the What-If scenario, the Narrative Device, and Point of View, you can dial in on what's relevant and know what to keep in your lyrics and what to throw out.

So let me wrap up what that means again:

1. The What-If Scenario helps you figure out the root of the problem. Because we want our lyrics to revolve around one problem to make it interesting and relevant for our audience and our song's character at the same time.
 - a. So you gotta know will your song's character live in a world where they are
 - i. a fish out of the water
 - ii. or there's a stranger coming to town? What will it be?
 - b. Secondly, you have to decide WHO our main character will be.
 - c. and thirdly, you have to know what's the inciting incident. What's the event that causes a problem and forces the song's main character to deal with that problem to achieve their goal? Remember, what's problematic is what's relevant. So you want to think about what event and behavior and details tend to demonstrate the problem.
2. The second tool is the Narrative Device.
 - a. And I know, that phrase still sounds complicated and totally storytelling-geeky. But all it concerns is who is telling the story to whom to shed light on which problem?
 - b. So you have to decide WHO is the narrator of your lyrics?
 - c. Who is the single audience member?
 - d. and what problem do they have? That's it.
3. And lastly, you make your point of view choices.
 - a. You decide what's the mode: Will it be telling or showing?
 - b. Then you decide if it's gonna be first, second, or third person.
 - c. And lastly, you make a decision on the tense. Past, present, or future.



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And once you've made all those decisions, they'll guide you. Especially by always relying on the problem, you have the best tool to know what's relevant and what's not.

If you liked this episode and want to use those tools for your songwriting, I have prepared an overview of those tools for you. I created a PDF that lists everything we've just talked about.

Make sure to visit: resources.storiesinsongs.com to get FREE access to my library of amazing resources. All you gotta do is fill in your name and email, click the button, and you get access. It's that simple.

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Join me for our next episode when we'll talk about Attention Grabbing Opening Lines.

Show Notes

- I'm a Believer lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Universal Music Publishing Group
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