

EPISODE 038

The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

[00:00:00] Hi, this is Melanie, and welcome to the Stories in Songs - Writing the Lyrics Podcast.

Today we address the question of why we should look at the craft of storytelling when we write our lyrics – apart from the impact the power of storytelling has on our audience.

Today, I want to focus on our writing process.

Because at the end of the day, and what it comes down to is that when we sit down to write our lyrics, it's good to know where we are going. Otherwise, we're just writing words that are all over the place.

And that's going to feel messy to our listeners.

To avoid that messiness and write a good line or lyric section, we have to ensure that every part of the lyric does what it's supposed to. Engage and connect.

Of course, it's important that we write a good line or lyric section technically so that it has the proper structure and organization, but it's also important that it has the right function.

Because when those two things – the structure and its function – come together and we execute the lyric section well, and it's also there for the right purpose, that's when we write a good lyric.

Part of how we can do that is by looking at our point of view choices and the narrative device, which means: Who is singing the song's narrative to whom and why. And of course,



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

we also include a specific problem we want to shed light on in our lyrics because that problem helps us decide what's relevant to include and what to leave out.

And once we get a clear idea of what we are trying to accomplish, everything unlocks.

So if you look for a compass point that helps you write your lyrics with clarity and intention, this episode is for you.

TEASER

Your Lyric Writing Compass Point

[00:02:21] I know a lot of people are doing discovery writing or jamming – coming up with the words to their songs as they play the music.

So even if you are that type of songwriter and you are new to outlining a lyric or planning lyrics, you know, just hang in there and have an open mind to what I'm about to share with you.

Once you have these insights into what the craft of storytelling can do for your lyric writing process, it will unlock so many doors you might not have seen before.

The goal is that you can come up with your lyric's controlling idea, its big takeaway, or call it the message you want to communicate to your audience.

And apart from what that message can do for your audience, in today's episode, we focus on how that clarity of what you are trying to express in your lyrics can serve as a compass point.

It's like this approach that I'm going to show you can be like your map so that you know where you want to go with your lyrics.

So each step we're going to take relates to the one before. And all three steps lead up to the lyric's big takeaway that we're going to wrap in one short sentence, which will guide your writing process.

And each of those three steps serves as one aspect of how we look at our lyrics' narrative. So please remember this as we go through the steps. One feeds into the next, and they all come together at the end to form the lyric's message.



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

And here's a note: What we're going to talk about is one of the many tools of the Story Grid methodology. In Story Grid, we refer to it as the dynamics at the three levels of the story. They refer to the Story Event and Scene Analysis.

But I want to simplify things for you. So that's why I'm taking that tool, at least its gist, and we apply it to writing lyrics.

So that you know where that concept has its origin.

Now it's vital that you have an idea of what your lyrics shall revolve around. If you need help uncovering an irresistible lyric idea, watch my free web class, where we discuss finding the right idea worth exploring and turning it into a lyric. Just go to <https://lyrics.storiesinsongs.com/>, and you can watch the free web class.

Okay, now let's continue with the overarching strategy.

So here's what those three steps look like that help us create our compass point for our writing process.

At first, we ask ourselves what the character or characters in our songs are literally doing. This step provides us with a clear picture to watch them act in our mind's eye. We don't want them floating around in an empty space. So we will find at least one literal action we can picture them doing.

The second step concerns their essential tactic. So we will talk about what they are trying to accomplish and how that dictates how they try to attain a goal state.

And lastly, we look at what changes from the beginning of our lyrics to their end. And we will assign valences to that shift to be very clear if the lyrics' narrative moved from a positive place to a negative or vice versa.

And once we got those three questions answered, we will combine them into one sweet sentence that will guide our lyric writing from start to finished lyric.

So that's the idea.

Let's start with our first step.



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

1. On the Surface

1.1 Your character's literal action.

[00:05:59] Our first step concerns what's literally happening in our lyrics' narrative. So the question that we're looking at is what is our song's main character or characters literally doing?

Imagine you were a camera looking at their actions through your camera lens. What would you actually and literally see them performing?

- What actions do they take?
- What are they saying?
- What can you see from the outside?

Let's look at the first section of the lyrics to the song "Another Day in Paradise" by Phil Collins to illustrate this first step in the process. He sings:

*She calls out to the man on the street.
"Sir, can you help me?
It's cold, and I've nowhere to sleep
Is there somewhere you can tell me?"*

*He walks on, doesn't look back
He pretends he can't hear her
Starts to whistle as he crosses the street
Seems embarrassed to be there*

So what are those characters literally doing?

We have two characters in that first lyric section. The first one is a woman. Her literal action is calling out to the man on the street. So that's what we can literally watch her doing.

Now the second character, the man, he walks on. That's his literal action.

It's not him pretending that he can't hear her.

Because even if it's stated in the lyrics, we don't want to be projecting too much into the characters' minds at this point.

Just observe and look at how they're acting on your mind's stage.



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

And I can't stress this enough, but if our audience can picture our characters in their mind, the song lyrics ... it's like they gain another dimension. It becomes more real. We are not just hearing about them while they are invisible to us. We can literally picture them.

And besides, knowing the characters' actions also serves to

- get to know them and highlight something about them. It's like emphasizing a particular character trait or situation they are in,
- we can show how they are literally trying to tackle the problem they're dealing with,
- and their actions can either align with their goal or show some contradiction,
- or it just helps to shed light on the emotional state of the character

So let's look at some more well-known songs to illustrate more examples for this first step.

- In "*Boulevard of Broken Dreams*" by Green Day, our song's main character walks. The first line clearly shows the character's literal action and takes us right into the present moment and his world: "*I walk a lonely road.*"
- In "*Eye of the Tiger*" by Survivor, the song's main character rises up until he's back on his feet. It's quite interesting to note that he's also on the street. So they sing: "*Rising up, back on the street.*"
- In "*Stan*" by Eminem, the chorus shows the character's action: "My tea's gone cold, I'm wondering why I Got out of bed at all." The character just got out of bed. That's what they were literally doing. And the fan writes letters to his idol.
- In "*I Will Survive*" by Gloria Gaynor, the character walks back into her house only to find her old lover with a sad look on his face. So she walks back in, quite literally, she walks back into her old life. And then she throws him out.
- In "*Sweet Child O' Mine*" by Guns N' Roses, the action is very subtle, but it's there nonetheless. The character just looks at her.

It's interesting to note whenever we have a character that we can observe taking action – sometimes it's combined with setting descriptions – giving us the who, what, where, and sometimes even the when.

In other cases, you don't have that literal action that you can clearly observe in a song. In fact, there are songs like "*Nothing Else Matters*" by Metallica, "*I'd Do Anything for Love*" by Meat Loaf, or even "*I'm A Believer*" by the Monkees, where we don't get to watch the character doing any particular action.

In those cases, we still have to remind ourselves that the literal action of the first step also refers to a character talking. So it's totally valid, and in some songs, it's even better to just focus on what the character says.



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

So when you look at the character or characters in your lyrics, think about this step in terms of an activity they do. So they're talking, or they are arguing, or they are running, or they are eating, you know, just that basic stuff.

1.2 The Size of The Cast in Your Lyric

[00:12:20] Another important component of what's going on in the lyrics is looking at the number of characters in your song.

So that's our cast of characters. In songs with Direct Address, you mostly have a one-on-one scene. And so those two characters will be in direct conflict with each other.

And so you can imagine if you had a different cast size if you had a group or something like that, there are more sides at play. So this can be more complex.

For example, in the song "You shouldn't kiss me like this" by Toby Keith, we had two characters dancing, and the crowd around them was also included in the lyrics. This had a special purpose.

*They're all watching us now
They think we're falling in love
They'd never believe we're just friends
When you kiss me like this*

Including the crowd in that lyrics had a very special purpose. And if you are eager to find this out, then please listen to [episode 32](#). Off the stories and songs podcast. We talk about and analyze that song about the first kiss and you can take so much away from this one episode that I highly recommend you listen to it.

But to continue now with our size of characters and what it means for our literal action, I just want to bring this on as an example. But mostly when you have direct address and when we assume we see part of a dialogue, we have two side, two people that are in direct conflict.

And if you want to use narratives in your songwriting, there are two people in direct address. They should be in direct conflict because when there's no argument going on between them and they both have the same goal. Then there's nothing to tell. It's like if I ask you.



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

Do you want to go and eat ice cream with me? Yes, I would like to what song do you like? Oh, I like strawberry. Oh, me too. Oh. And here we are at the ice cream stand let's eat ice cream.

So, you know, no one wants to listen to that because it's boring. But when we are talking about narrative songwriting or lyrics that are able to make an impact on someone you always have to include conflict.

So that's why in direct address, we should always have two people in direct conflict.

Of course it's more like a monologue, but a monologue that is directed at someone. And the character speaking – your songs' main character – they should have a goal state and they should also be aware that the other person has different goals – even if they don't even know what that other person wants.

But still. It's in contrast with what they want. Okay. Just remember when you have direct address, your songs' characters need to be in direct conflict. They should have different goals.

So once again, let's look at the lyrics to the song "Another Day in Paradise" by Phil Collins:

*She calls out to the man on the street.
"Sir, can you help me?
It's cold and I've nowhere to sleep
Is there somewhere you can tell me?"*

*He walks on, doesn't look back
He pretends he can't hear her
Starts to whistle as he crosses the street
Seems embarrassed to be there*

So you can see that the woman and the man are in direct conflict. She's confronting him with a question because she needs his help. And he does not want to. Her goal is to find some shelter. So her human need she looks to fulfill is on the level of safety.

On the other hand, the man is not concerned with his safety. Instead, he does not want to be seen with a poor lady because he wants to secure his status. So he thinks about a whole other level of universal human needs. So when you look at it this way, the conflict arises from the clash of two universal human needs: one wanting safety and the other wanting status.



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

And that's something incredible to think about that you just need to know when you have more than one character in your lyrics or in your narratives and stories in general. That you need to know on what level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs they are. Because then they have different goals and then they're always going to collide when they are in conflict with each other or that that's how conflict is created. Because they have different wants.

1.3 Setting and Context

[00:16:58] We also want to think a little bit about the setting. So you want to be aware of what's happening around your song's main character.

In the song "Another Day in Paradise," we are on the street, and it's cold outside. So the environment is threatening to the woman in the song.

Or look at the song "Welcome to the Jungle" by Guns N'Roses. The character finds herself surrounded by many people, and in the first verse, it turns out that she can have fun if she's willing to pay the price. So their influence on her, their size, and where they are is also threatening. They sing:

*Welcome to the jungle. We've got fun and games
We got everything you want, honey. We know the names
We are the people that can find whatever you may need
If you got the money, honey, we got your disease*

So if she can pay, she can get her disease. That verse is so well-crafted. It has so much going on. There are lots of things coming into the character's world from the outside. So the song delivers a clear sense of where we are, our surroundings, and what's going on. We know what the song's main characters want and see their safety at stake. It's really threatening. And very well crafted.

So you can imagine it would be different if "Welcome to the Jungle" happened in a carnival setting. We wouldn't take their words seriously, and it would all seem like a show to us.

The same is true if the woman in the song "Another Day in Paradise" wasn't out in the cold, but the sun was shining. Then her need for shelter wouldn't seem that life-threatening. It would actually feel more secure and safe. If that were the case, the environment would be stable. So the conflict would have to mainly arise between her and the man. So we would



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

have to put more spice to the conflict so that we would care about her and her situation at all.

The Purpose of Literal Action

[00:18:58] In everything you do when you think about that first step of the literal action, the cast of characters, and the setting, keep in mind the activities you show need to shed light on the specific problem someone can have.

Remember, as we said in [episode 36](#), focusing on the problem helps us decide what's relevant and what's not.

So just as a reminder, what's the problem that the singer is trying to help the audience with?

Let's look at the song "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor.

Here's the first section of it. Gloria sings:

*At first, I was afraid, I was petrified
Kept thinking I could never live without you by my side
But then I spent so many nights thinking how you did me wrong
And I grew strong
And I learned how to get along
And so you're back
From outer space
I just walked in to find you here with that sad look upon your face
I should have changed that stupid lock, I should have made you leave your key
If I'd known for just one second you'd be back to bother me*

*Go on now, go, walk out the door
Just turn around now
'Cause you're not welcome anymore
Weren't you the one who tried to hurt me with goodbye?
You think I'd crumble?
You think I'd lay down and die?*

*Oh no, not I, I will survive
Oh, as long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive
I've got all my life to live*



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

*And I've got all my love to give and I'll survive
I will survive, hey, hey*

The problem is that she's confronted with her old love again, and he wants her back. So the question is will she fall back into his arms and forgive and basically give up on the hope of getting someone better for her, or will she be stronger than this and be true to what she's worth?

So one of the things the singer has to do and can do through literal action is to reveal the relationship between the setting and the people and things within it. That is the context.

So when we look at "I Will Survive," which was written by Dino Fekaris and Freddie Perren, we have the ex-boyfriend's character. And what does he do? He invades her space. We literally see that because he's back in her home. And we also notice that sad look on his face which tells us that he wants her back – after he was the one who broke up with her. We clearly get a sense of how naive that guy is. And we also see that he's living on that power hierarchy. He thinks he hurt her and she would come back to him. He believes he still has power over her. That sense gets even more clear when we listen to the second verse when she sings:

*I'm not that chained-up little person still in love with you
And so you felt like dropping in and just expect me to be free*

Now on the other side, what does the song's main character do? What's the woman doing?

Well, we can see that woman rise after being beaten down, going through heartbreak, and not knowing how to go on. But she does. She rises like a phoenix from the ashes, and she's become so incredibly strong. Not just that, but her worldview has shifted. She's more mature than ever before. She's not dependent on anyone anymore, but she is aware now that she has her strength. And the beauty is that she's not just saying she's over him, but her literal action is throwing that guy out of her house. So she shows us with her actions that she will not fall for a guy like that again.

Recap: Literal Action

[00:23:32] So, to recap, the most important takeaway from the first step is that we want to focus on the literal action.

So that's what we can see the character's doing in our mind's eye.



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

And so that's their actions or their words.

And we should also take note of the number of characters present in the lyrics' narrative. And what are their literal actions? And in that sense, we also want to pay attention to the surroundings to show if it's a stable or threatening environment.

And that's going to give us the answer to this first step.

Again, we do that because we want to keep our audience's attention by engaging them and making them interested in our lyrics. And we also want to excite them.

And what the characters literally do, well, that all ties back to the problem we want to shed light on. So that refers to what we want to accomplish with our lyrics. So with that in mind, we need to be clear about what activity or activities we want to show to make sure we make the argument. And those activities should be consistent with the problem we're addressing.

And by the way, we don't want to overload our song with character actions because that would distract our audience from what's important. So we only want to show the relevant things to the problem.

So just by being clear about this first step and listing the characters' literal action, the cast size, and picturing the environment, they're in, we can create a really compelling and exciting moment for our listeners.

So the character's literal action is nothing we should ignore. Or something that we treat as an afterthought. I hope you have seen how powerful the character's action in a song can be and how much they can contribute to a song's success. And that success is in direct relation to being able to shed light on a problem that the audience has that is mirrored in the song's character's situation.

So with that said, I hope — whenever you write lyrics now — that you think back on this episode, or at least remember the importance of the character's literal action. Study "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor to see how well the literal actions support the message of the song. There's a reason why this song is still so popular after decades after its release.

Next week, we continue with another bite-sized episode about Attention-Grabbing Opening Lines, which will be so great again. But after that, we will continue with step two and three so that we can create a one-sentence lyric outline to guide our writing process.



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038

So make sure you subscribe to the Stories in Songs Podcast to not miss any of the upcoming episodes.

With that said, see you next week.

Bye, bye Melanie

Show Notes

- FREE web class: Uncovering Your Irresistible Lyric Idea:
<https://lyrics.storiesinsongs.com/idea>
- Episode 037 – Attention Grabbing Opening Lines Part 1 – The Powerful Problem:
<http://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-037>
- Another Day In Paradise lyrics © Concord Music Publishing LLC
- Welcome To The Jungle lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group
- You Shouldn't Kiss Me Like This lyrics © Tokeco Tunes
- I Will Survive lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group
- Knowing Which Lyric Lines & Ideas To Keep Or Throw Out – How To Answer The Question Of Relevancy – <http://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-036>
- Finding Topics to Write about by Looking at Universal Human Values – <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-023/>
- Worksheet: <resources.storiesinsongs.com>



EPISODE 038: The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038