

EPISODE 040

## Steps Two and Three to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process

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See the show notes at [storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-040](https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-040)

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

In today's episode, we continue with steps Two and Three to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process.

If you haven't listened to [episode 38](#) yet where we talked about the character's literal action, please go back to that episode and listen to it. It's vital if you want to move forward with me in this episode.

I'll include a short recap, but listen to the full episode if you haven't yet.

So let's start with the show.

### TEASER

## Your Lyric Writing Compass Point

**[00:01:15]** In [episode 38](#), we talked about the first step that will lead us to creating our compass point for our lyric writing process.

Before we continue with step 2 and 3 in today's episode, let's recap the overarching strategy so that you know where we are and where we are going.

So, in step 1 – which we talked about in [episode 38](#) – we asked ourselves what the character or characters in our songs were literally doing. This step provided us with a clear picture to watch them act in our mind's eye.



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The second step concerns the characters' 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 at the end of today's episode, we will have those three steps laid out in front of us.

And then, we will combine them into one sweet sentence that will guide our lyric writing from start to finish. We do that so that we are able to formulate our compass point that will affect our writing and every decision we make so that we are able to communicate what we have to say in a way that will matter to our audience.

So keep in mind that each step 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 our 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.

## 1. Literal Action

**[00:03:40]** Okay, now let's move on to a short recap of the first step that we talked about in [episode 38](#).

In that first step we focus on the literal action. So that's what we can see the character's doing in our mind's eye – their actions or their words.

But we also take into account the number of characters present in the lyrics' narrative and 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.

And that step is important because what the characters literally do, ties back to the problem we want to shed light on. So that refers to what we want to accomplish with our lyrics. So



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with that in mind, we need to be clear about what activity or activities we want to show to let our audience see how our character's tackle that problem.

And in doing so, we only want to show the relevant actions to the problem. Remember, as we said in [episode 36](#), focusing on the problem helps us decide what's relevant and what's not.

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

In [episode 38](#), we specifically looked at the song "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor.

Here's the first section of it.

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



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So when it came to the literal action, we talked about that ex-boyfriend. We said he's living on a power hierarchy. He literally invaded her space. And he thinks that little-chained up person would come back to him.

On the other hand, we had this strong woman who went through their breakup. And she grew strong. She's living on the growth hierarchy, because she has evolved as a person. She has become more mature and she knows what she's worth and she has gained more meaning.

And that guy is the problem she's confronted with. So by seeing him again, it's like a test, if she can live up to her words or if she falls back into his arms.

And her literal actions show how she has changed. She walks into her home, finds him there, and throws him out. It's so great.

And that's the beauty of this song. She's not just saying she's over him, but her literal action shows us how far she's come. So she shows us with her actions that she will not fall for a guy like that again.

Now that we know where we left off last time, let's move on to the second step.

## 2. Above the Surface

### 2.1 A Character's Essential Tactic

**[00:08:57]** The second step moves from what we can literally observe the characters do into their internal state of mind. Now it's all about WHY are they acting the way they do?

So we think about things from our characters' perspectives. We think about what they want to accomplish, what they are thinking, and what their goal state is.

So when we look back at our example of *"I Will Survive"* by Gloria Gaynor, she wants to get rid of that guy. She wants him gone and not to bother her anymore. She wants to achieve this because she thinks: *"You have hurt me. You were the one to break up with me and break my heart. And I had to go through shit all by myself. And now you expect me to come crawling back to you? After all, you did to me? Piss off. I know what I'm worth. And I will find someone who truly loves me."*




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And what our character thinks and wants, their goal, and how they perceive the world around them ... that all decide how they will act to accomplish what they want. So their actions will be an expression of their essential tactic.

So the essential tactic is what the characters are doing  
 ...because of what they want  
 ... and because of the way they see the world.

In “I Will Survive,” the character throws out her ex-boyfriend because they want true love and because she has reached the understanding that she’s worth much more than how her ex made her feel.

So her essential tactic boils down to wanting to get rid of him.

- In the song “*Another Day in Paradise*,” the woman’s essential tactic is seeking help from strangers. And the passerby’s tactic in that song is not to raise any attention so he avoids any confrontation with that woman.
- In “*Billie Jean*” by Michael Jackson, the song’s main character wants to prove she’s lying.
- In “*Stan*” by Eminem, the fan’s essential tactic is seeking recognition from his idol.
- In “*I’d Do Anything for Love*” by Meat Loaf, the character’s essential tactic is winning her over.
- In “*Boulevard of Broken Dreams*,” the character wants to be found by someone.

So you can see in all of these examples that the key to expressing the character’s essential tactic is by using a transitive verb.

A transitive verb is a verb that requires an object.

You can shout. You can walk. We can talk.

And that’s it.

But when we say: He is looking, it opens the question: For what?

So “looking” is a transitive verb that requires an object.

And that object that belongs to that grammatical structure is the song’s character’s goal or their object of desire. It’s what they want.

For example, someone is...



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- seeking the truth
- wanting someone to love them
- getting to the point
- trying to get rid of someone
- offering a position
- empowering someone
- trying to impress someone
- praising someone

So we take our verb and link it directly to that grammatical object, which is their goal because our character's goals and what they want are closely tied to how they see the world.

## 2.2 The Purpose of Essential Tactics

**[00:13:26]** Essential Tactics are the key to creating conflict in our lyrics.

These transitive verb phrases express what characters are trying to accomplish to reach their goals because of how they see the world, themselves, and their situation.

If you're unsure what the essential tactic is for the song you're working on, look at your Inciting Incident. This unexpected event upsets the balance in the character's environment and gives them a goal. And then, the character uses a particular tactic to try to reach their goal. And that's their essential tactic.

In "I Will Survive," the inciting incident was the relationship breakup. That event threw the character's life out of balance. And the song starts right with this moment when she sings:

*At first, I was afraid, I was petrified  
Kept thinking I could never live without you by my side*

So the character's goal is to make it through this time and survive the heartbreak.

And she gets tested as her ex-boyfriend shows up again.

It's a turning point because she didn't expect him to show up and bother her again. And now it's not about the talk, but about walking the walk. She actually has to show that she's strong enough to survive without that guy.



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And her initial goal – surviving without that guy – turns into a goal that belongs to that global goal state: it's getting rid of him.

So when we look at that second step, the essential tactic refers to the essence of our song's character or characters.

And we need to know their essential tactic to ensure they act consistently from our lyric's beginning to their end and that they're always pursuing the same object of desire, have the same goal, or something along those lines.

So we want to ensure we have a clear sense of what each character is thinking and how that relates to their goal state. Of course, if unsure about what the character wants, you can always refer back to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Because there you find the universal human needs of human beings, their wants and their needs.

And that's always a great place to look where your conflict between characters can arise from. Okay. And it also helps you to find character goals that people can identify with. Because every human being experiences or has those needs or wants - at least up to a certain level.

So when we talk about essential tactics and literal action, the literal action is the expression (what we can watch) of what the characters are essentially trying to achieve. Okay. That's the big difference between those two things.

The woman in "Another day in paradise" is calling out to the man on the street. That's her literal action because her essential tactic is seeking help from strangers.

In "I will survive" the character's literal action was coming home and throwing out that guy. And her essential tactic was getting rid of that guy, not only from her home, but also from her life.

In "Stan" by Eminem, the literal action of the fan was writing letters to his idol. That's what we were able to watch him doing. But his essential tactic, that means why he was doing that, was because he was seeking recognition from his idol. That's what he wanted. And he did that because of the way he saw the world. He thought that he deserves that recognition. That's why he's writing those letters in the first place, because it all comes back to this essential tactic.

Let's move on to the last step to figure out our lyric message that we can use to guide our writing process.



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### 3. Beyond the Surface

**[00:17:52]** In the last step, we compare the initial situation of our song's character with the result or how it all turned out for them.

We do that neither from the audience's perspective or the camera viewpoint we had in step 1 nor from the character's perspective from step 2. Now it's all about you as the songwriter or your fictional hired narrator and the question of what you tried to accomplish with that lyric. It's all about the meaning of it all.

And we can do that by being clear about what state or condition our character is in at the beginning and the end of the song's narrative? And we want to make sure there's a change recognizable.

And it must be a change that matters. And a change that relates to a universal human value.

If you need to know more about Universal Human Values, listen to [episode 23](#) of the Stories in Songs Podcast to find out more about Universal Human Values. I'll include the link in the show notes.

So again, we have to look at our lyrics' narrative beginning and ending, compare them, and take note of what has changed. And the change must matter and relate to a universal human value.

In "*I Will Survive*," the character's initial state was feeling afraid and petrified. The character was kind of paralyzed by the breakup, which served as the inciting incident. The problem was how to deal with overcoming a life-changing moment like this? And out of that inciting incident arose the character's goal: wanting to survive heartbreak.

And the songwriters were aware of all of those things. And they clearly wrote with intention what they tried to bring across in that song. They wanted to show that in those moments when the ground is swept from our feet, we can actually grow stronger and even more confident because of the things that life throws at us. They wanted to show we have the power to deal with those moments – just like the character in the song did.

So they accomplished that by showing us the character's initial emotional state and mindset right after the breakup. Then they let us watch the character be confronted with her ex-boyfriend, only to show us that this character is indeed capable of surviving without that guy.




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So the change is recognizable from dependent to independent.

And we want to find words that express that shift. And we also do wanna assign valences to that change so that we know if the movement from one state to another was positive or negative – in the context of human value.

In “*I Will Survive*,” the valence is negative to positive. So we can say that in the context of the universal human value of love and that character's situation, being dependent on someone has a negative valence, while reaching independence is something positive.

When we look at song lyrics and that change and its valence, we specifically look at the problem the song's character dealt with. Did they solve it in a helpful way for the audience, or did they fail in doing so? Did they reach their object of desire? Did they get what they wanted? And did it turn out to be what they truly needed? Those things will help us see if the lyric ended with a prescriptive, a positive takeaway, or a negative, cautionary one.

### Direct Address, Conflict, and the Question of Who Wins?

**[00:22:07]** When you have narratives like “*I Will Survive*” with **two characters in conflict** with each other, you can also look at who wins the scene. For example, in 1:1 lyric narratives with opposing sides, we have two sides against each other. So if you know each character's goal, they should conflict with each other ... and one gets what they want, and the other doesn't.

The woman got rid of him, but he didn't get her back.

So it's better to have a direct conflict with a clear winner and loser.

In “*I'd Do Anything for Love*,” the song's main character is trying to win her over. He's trying to convince her that he'll always be faithful to her. And she doubts him. Maybe she wants to protect herself from heartache. And even though we don't get a resolution of how it all turns out between the two of them, the main character believes his words so much that we believe him too. So we feel like he's speaking the truth and therefore winning the argument about their relationship.

In “*I'm A Believer*” by the Monkees, the character strongly doubts the existence of love. But, in the end, he believed in the existence of true love. As a result, he won the love and defeated love in the sense of “being out to get him.”




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So, in a lyric with two characters present, the characters have an opportunity to display their conflicting interpretations of the global universal value. Someone will “win” at the end of the song’s narrative. And the other person will lose. That means that someone will get what they set out to achieve. The other one will fail to get what they want.

In lyrics, it’s also possible that if **the conflict between the characters is not resolved**, then the song might turn into a cautionary tale – at least if the character didn’t manage to overcome their problem.

You can see this in Michael Jackson’s song “*Billie Jean*.” The character almost desperately continues to deny that “*Billie Jean is not my lover, That kid is not my son*” until the song’s end. But, we don’t know if someone will start to believe him.

Because he experienced the same doubt.

He said: “Then showed a photo. My baby cried. His eyes were like mine. Oh no.”

That’s the doubt the character experiences in the song and with that we can’t believe what he’s saying, even though he says it until the end of the song “*Billie Jean is not my lover*”. Really? We are not sure of this.

And because we don’t have that resolution of who’s speaking the truth and who does not, this song turns into a cautionary tale and that is also the whole intention of that song.

Because his mother said: “*Be careful of who you love and be careful of what you do because the lie becomes the truth*”. And that’s exactly what happened to him in this song.

And because the lie and the truth become one thing and we know, like it’s not black and white anymore. It’s just some grayish thing. And we can’t tell who’s right and who’s wrong. So that’s the whole intention of that song.

And it’s done really, really good.

Of course, conflict can also arise from different situations, such as 1:1 confrontations. Nonetheless, it’s always important to consider how the situation changed from the lyric’s narrative from beginning to end.



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So when you do this third step to figure out what it all means and if it's going to be a positive or negative shift, keep in mind the result you want to show. That's the ending value of the lyric's narrative.

Lastly, let's bring all our three steps together to find out how those three steps in their combination can turn into a compass point to guide our writing process.

## The Lyric's Guiding Message

**[00:27:10]** When we talk about this one sweet sentence that can serve as our compass point, think of it like your lyric's controlling idea for our writing process.

A controlling idea boils down to a one-sentence outline of your lyrics' narrative. This controlling idea or concept should guide every word, line, or section.

So in our writing process, that controlling idea guides us by reminding us what point we try to make in our lyrics.

To have that controlling idea like our light in the dark, we want to combine the character's literal action, essential tactic, the universal human value, and what changes in one sweet sentence.

This way, we can see if everything fits nicely together and makes sense.

So let's just do that for some song examples.

- In "*I Will Survive*," we get the following guiding controlling idea:
  - → *Woman refuses ex-boyfriend's attempt to rekindle their love by throwing him out of her home because she is no longer dependent on him.*
    - So in that sentence, we have the character's essential action: "*The woman refuses his attempt.*" So we have the universal human value, which is *love*. We also have the literal action, which is *throwing him out*. And the value shift: *she is no longer dependent on him*.
- In "*Another Day in Paradise*," the controlling idea is something like this:
  - → *Homeless woman seeks shelter for safety by calling out to passersby until someone notices her and pays attention to her troubles.*
    - And someone does. In the first verse, we have the man passing by. In the second verse, we move closer to the woman. We can see she's been crying. Finally, in the last verse, we can see the lines on her




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face. So someone has stopped to pay attention to her. Beautifully done, right?

- In “I’m A Believer,” the controlling idea for the writing process could sound like this:
  - → *A man struggling to find love talks about how love failed him until his life gets turned upside down by meeting the one.*
- In “Eye Of The Tiger” by Survivor, we have:
  - → *Street Fighter keeps following his passion by continuing to fight while he’s already been rewarded for his efforts.*
- In “Welcome to the Black Parade,” we have:
  - → *Son of a leader tries to follow his father’s footsteps to lead his peers by playing someone he’s not until the acceptance of his own vulnerabilities turns him into the leader his father wanted him to be.*
- In “Billie Jean,” the controlling idea could sound like this.
  - *Billie Jean exploits a man’s status by claiming the man to be her child’s father while bringing her truth to public attention.*
- In “Stan” by Eminem, we have:
  - *Fan seeks recognition from his idol by writing letters to him and turns suicidal.*
- In “I’d Do Anything for Love,” we have:
  - *Man tries to secure his love by promising to do everything for love while bound to being faithful.*

## Lyric Writing With Intention

**[00:31:41]** Alright, those were just a few examples of what that controlling idea for your writing process could sound like. Most importantly, though, whether you take the time to write it out or not, when you sit down to write your lyrics, think about the three steps we’ve discussed in this episode.

That means to ask yourself what you want your audience to see in your lyrics. What’s happening? What are the literal actions of the characters? Also, be clear of the cast size and how stable or threatening the environment is.

Once you can see the characters’ movement through the created setting, which means giving your audience the answer to the question of Who, What, Where, and When... ask yourself why your characters are behaving the way they do. What’s their intention? What’s their essential tactic to reach their goal?



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And lastly, how does the situation or mindset of your song's character change from the beginning of the narrative to its end? Assign valences to it to know if the shift was positive or negative.

And lastly, you can combine those answers into one sweet sentence that can guide your writing process.

I have also prepared a worksheet for you. Go to [resources.storiesinsongs.com](https://resources.storiesinsongs.com), and you can get FREE access to my free library of helpful resources. The worksheet for this episode will be included there. So go to [resources.storiesinsongs.com](https://resources.storiesinsongs.com).

Now, if you're enjoying the show, it's safe to assume others as you would also enjoy it. Help them find it. So please rate and review the show on your favorite podcasting platform. Those people will appreciate it, and you'll feel great about yourself.

Thank you  
Melanie

## Show Notes

- The First Step to Creating A One-Sentence Lyric Outline To Guide Your Writing Process – <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-038/>
- FREE web class: Uncovering Your Irresistible Lyric Idea: <https://lyrics.storiesinsongs.com/idea>
- Another Day In Paradise lyrics © Concord Music Publishing LLC
- Welcome To The Jungle lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group
- 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](https://resources.storiesinsongs.com)




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