

a small collection of SONGWRITING EXERCISES & TIPS from Isa Burke

FREE WRITING & OBJECT WRITING

Free writing, like positive affirmations or Disney songs, seems incredibly cheesy and stupid at first, but eventually you will be shocked by its power. There are tons of methods for free writing – and you can make up your own ways, too – but the basic principle is this: Start writing and don't stop. Set a timer. I usually start with five minutes, but try three, ten, fifteen minutes. Focus. Put your devices in another room. Write whatever comes into your mind. It doesn't have to make sense. It doesn't have to rhyme. It doesn't even have to be full sentences. It can be disjointed phrases. Sometimes I write the same word, phrase, or sentence several times in a row if that's what feels good. Just start writing and don't stop. Most of what you write will probably be garbage, and that's okay – that, in fact, is the point. Sometimes you need to expel some garbage to get to the one good lyric that makes the song. Or sometimes it's just that the act of writing gets your brain moving in the right direction, so that tomorrow you'll come up with something you end up keeping. Don't worry too much about what you'll get out of it. Just write.

Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, a book containing a course on creative reinvigoration, encourages the practice of "morning pages:" three pages of longhand, first thing in the morning, every day. I've been doing morning pages off and on for the last couple of years, and though I've never made it past week four of the *Artist's Way*, I find morning pages to be incredibly helpful.

At Berklee, I studied with Pat Pattison, who champions a free writing technique called "object writing," in which you essentially set a timer, pick an object, and write freely, using the object as a jumping-off point. Don't just describe the object, although describing the object can be more interesting than it seems. What memories do you associate with the object? Where, why, and how can you envision a person using or finding the object? In object writing, you are supposed to keep your writing grounded in the senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, and the two bonus senses, organic (the sense within your body – does your back hurt? Is your stomach growling?) and kinesthetic (the feeling of physical position and movement). The goal of object writing is to yield some of the concrete details that songs need in order to render their story more clearly.

THE DIETRICH STRAUSE RHYME EXERCISE

My friend Dietrich Strause is an amazing songwriter, and he showed me this amazing exercise that I have used numerous times. It's so simple and so brilliant. You know when you have a lyric that you love, but you can't think of a good rhyme for it? This exercise eliminates that problem. ELIMINATES IT. Here's how:

Start with an image that you like. It's often helpful to pull an image from your free writing! Let's use an image from a recent free write I did: "the paint is peeling off the back porch of my parents' house." Use your starting idea to make a list of interesting associated words:

paint, peel, porch, house, hometown, morning

Now make a list of words that rhyme with each of those words:

paint: complaint, restraint, faint, saint

peel: reveal, conceal, feel, heel, heal, reel, real

porch: scorch, torch, sort, church, stork (if you can't find many true rhymes, try words that almost rhyme – sometimes you can get away with it)

house: mouse, louse, grouse

hometown: (here's where you can get creative) run-down, burned out, know now, thrown out

morning: warning, warming

Keep going. Add more words to the first list so that you can create more rhymes. Now you've got a whole slew of words that rhyme with each other, and many of them connect to a central idea.

From there, you can start writing some lyrics. What does the "paint/saint" rhyme suggest to you? What about "peel/reveal"? Or "hometown/thrown out"? Let's try it:

*I sit out on the porch and stare at the peeling **paint***

*I never wanted you to think I was a **saint***

*I'm driving through the streets of my **hometown***

*Digging up all the memories I had **thrown out***

We're already like halfway to writing a song, I think. Isn't it genius? Rather than trying to fit rhymes into our ideas, we're starting with the rhymes and building our ideas from there.

SONG FORM AND SECTIONS 101

Wait, wait, wait. What is a verse and what is a chorus?

Here's a very quick primer on *song sections*. There are lots of different ways to structure your songs, and there are no real rules. You could find tons of exceptions to everything I'm about to say. But it's helpful to keep these general principles in mind so you can decide whether you want to play by the rules or not!

The **verses** of a song contain most of the plot development and details. In general, every verse has the same melody and chords, but the lyrics change each time.

The **chorus** of a song usually repeats without changing — the lyrics, chords, and melody are the same every time. The chorus often contains the title of the song, and it often sums up the central theme or idea of the song. It's kind of like the song's thesis statement.

The **bridge** basically functions as a plot twist in the song. It's there to provide contrast (musical or lyrical or both), and it often feels like an increase in intensity. If there's a section that kinda comes out of nowhere about two-thirds of the way through the song and sounds different than what you've heard before, that's probably a bridge.

Let's look at the Beatles song "With A Little Help From My Friends." This is a great example of a verse-chorus-bridge form. Listen to the song if you want, and read along as you listen.

Verse 1:

*What would you think if I sang out of tune?
Would you stand up and walk out on me?
Lend me your ears and I'll sing you a song
And I'll try not to sing out of key*

Chorus:

*Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends
Mm, I get high with a little help from my friends
Mm, gonna try with a little help from my friends*

This is a super chorus-y chorus!
It contains the title of the song and it kind of answers the verse.

Verse 2:

*What do I do when my love is away?
Does it worry you to be alone?
How do I feel by the end of the day?
Are you sad because you're on your own?*

Same general form and structure as the first verse, same melody and chords, but different lyrics.

Chorus:

*No, I get by with a little help from my friends
Mm, get high with a little help from my friends
Mm, gonna try with a little help from my friends*

Bridge:

*Do you need anybody?
I need somebody to love
Could it be anybody?
I want somebody to love*

A bridge!! This is a classic bridge: slightly more intense, and lyrically and musically different.

*Would you believe in a love at first sight?
and
Yes, I'm certain that it happens all the time
What do you see when you turn out the light?
I can't tell you, but I know it's mine*

And now we're back to the verse, then the chorus.

*Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends
Mm, get high with a little help from my friends
Oh, I'm gonna try with a little help from my friends*

This song actually ends with a second bridge, which isn't super common, and then a final chorus.

A couple other song sections:

A **pre-chorus** is sort of like a mini-bridge that happens between the verse and the chorus. It often serves to ramp up the tension to lead into the chorus.

A **refrain**, as opposed to a chorus, is a lyric (or sometimes a couple of lyrics) that repeats in each verse. Songs that have refrains usually don't have choruses. Lots of folk songs follow a verse-refrain form, rather than a verse-chorus form. A chorus is a separate section, whereas a refrain is part of the verse.