

## Lyrics

Songs are to be SUNG and HEARD. So good lyrics are different from other kinds of poetry. Lyrics go by quickly. The listener can't re-read, and there are no visual clues or punctuation symbols on a page for guidance. To fit the short time span the songwriter uses compressed phrases. Pauses, corresponding to musical rests, are important too. To communicate the message the writer may repeat important lines, especially in a chorus. Songs that move us have combinations of meter and rhyme that reinforce the message of the words.

### Meter

The meter of a lyric is the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. These patterns usually match the stressed and unstressed beats of the musical rhythm. A popular meter in the English language is "common meter" used for instance in the Robert Burns' song, My Love is Like a Red Red Rose:

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /

My love is like a red red rose

˘ / ˘ / ˘ /

That's newly sprung in June

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /

My love is like a melody

˘ / ˘ / ˘ /

That's sweetly played in tune

The <sup>˘</sup> mark above the syllable indicates an unstressed syllable—let's call it "da"

The <sup>ˈ</sup> mark indicates a stressed syllable—let's call it "DUM"

Then we can "scan" the lyric

da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM

da DUM da DUM da DUM

da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM

da DUM da DUM da DUM

We see that common meter has a rhythmic pattern of four strong beats alternating with three strong beats. Try scanning "Mary Had a Little Lamb," another example of common meter.

Next week, when we will be talking about musical rhythms, we will see that common meter fits perfectly with many 8-bar musical phrases. Can you think of some popular songs that use common meter?

Notice that common meter propels the listener through all four lines. After hearing the three stresses in line two, we just can't rest until we hear the fourth line with its three stresses.

Another popular meter has four strong beats in each of two successive lines, a "couplet." Two couplets, or three couplets are often placed in succession for a song verse or chorus. George Harrison uses the couplet pattern in the chorus of his song "Something"

‘ ‘ ‘ ‘

You're asking me will my love grow,

‘ ‘ ‘ ‘

I don't know, I don't know.

‘ ‘ ‘ ‘

Stick around, and it may show,

‘ ‘ ‘ ‘

But I don't know, I don't know.

Try scanning John Mayer's chorus in his song "Daughters."

‘ ~ ~ ‘ ~ ~ ‘ ~ ~

Fathers, be good to your daughters

‘ ~ ~ ‘ ~ ~ ‘

Daughters will love like you do

‘ ~ ~ ‘ ~ ~ ‘ ~ ~ ‘ ~ ~

Girls become lovers who turn into mothers

~ ‘ ~ ~ ‘ ~ ~ ‘ ~ ~ ‘

So mothers, be good to your daughters too

In this chorus at the end of line two the listener takes a little break to digest the message in the first two lines. The next pair of lines has a new idea and a new rhythm to match. Note that this pattern is a bit unexpected and that the end leaves the listener feeling up in the air, compared to the lines of "My love is like a red red rose" or "Mary had a little lamb." Sophisticated songs use combinations of shorter and longer line lengths to accelerate or slow down the song action, throw the listener off balance and highlight the theme.

For an elegant description of meter in songs, you can read “A perfect match” on lyricist Pat Pattison’s website at <http://www.patpattison.com/perfectmatch/> .

In the coming weeks try scanning the verses of the songs you hear. See how the meter works to produce or reinforce the feeling of the song.

### **Rhyme**

Rhyme, like meter, turns on feeling and makes a lyric memorable. Who can forget a grade school autograph:

Roses are red  
Violets are blue  
Sugar is sweet  
And so are you.

The ditty above rhymes blue and you at the ends of lines two and four. This is a “perfect rhyme.” Perfect rhymes are *syllables* with the *same vowel*, the *same ending consonant*, and *different beginning consonants*. Can you remember some songs with perfect rhyme?

These days we recognize that many perfect rhymes have become trite. Think yearn /burn and desire / fire / higher. These combinations have been used so often that they may make the listener groan or turn off to the song. To produce memorable lyrics songwriters use different types of related syllables collectively known as “imperfect” rhyme. “Family” rhymes are syllables with the *same vowel*, *different beginning consonants* and a *related ending consonant*. Examples of family rhyme are red / pet and cliff / hiss.

Other types of imperfect rhyme *add* or *subtract* a consonant after a vowel. Examples are deed /be, sows / mow and free / peace. Can you think of popular songs with additive or subtractive rhyme?

An invaluable songwriter’s assistant is a RHYMING DICTIONARY. In early stages of song development it pays to make a list of key words in the song (hydrology / hydrologic / cycle / water) and look up all of the perfect rhymes. Then play with family rhymes and additive and subtractive rhymes. Your lists will set off a chain of ideas and associations to set the song in motion.

In later studio sessions we will talk song types and about placement of rhyme in the lyric to produce different emotional effects.

If you want to work on lyric writing there is great guidance in the series of books by Pat Pattison.

Pattison, Pat (1991) Songwriting: Essential guide to lyric form and structure. Boston: Berklee Press. [www.berkleepress.com](http://www.berkleepress.com)

Pattison, Pat (1991) Songwriting: Essential guide to rhyming Boston: Berklee Press. [www.berkleepress.com](http://www.berkleepress.com)

Pattison, Pat (1995) Writing better lyrics. Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books.