

Aim for the Bullseye and Avoid the Bull OR The Essence of a Lyric is Its "S"/ "N" s

The three key elements of a successful and enduring lyric are:

1. It must state one specific message, concept, or feeling
2. It must do it in a memorable way
3. It must appeal to a wide variety of listeners

All three of these elements must be present. If #1 is missing no one will know what is being said and there is no communication between writer and listener. If #2 is missing, no one will remember it tomorrow. If #3 is missing, no one will buy it, request it, or appreciate it. If any one of these is missing, you may still get a ‘flash-in-the-pan’ hit but it will not rise to the ranks of a classic. "Flash-in-the-pans" may occur because the music is catchy, because it's a novelty, because of the artist, or because it's a great recording, as opposed to a great song.

We've talked a great deal about concrete references...those words that address the listener's sensory paths to make a lyric seem real and easy to relate to. We've also talked about how people -- both writers and listeners -- are one of two types of perceivers. Either they look at “big” things like forests and faces instead of trees and lips. (“N” perceivers), or detailed things like trees and lips instead of forests and faces (“S” perceivers). (Note: “N” stands for *iNtuitive* and “S” stands for *Sensor*). Each has their own particular difficulty in trying to write a balanced lyric. The “S” writers can be very detailed, but may have a hard time finding a universal message to write about, or an overarching metaphor to tie the lyric images together. The “N” writers will address universal concepts (truth, justice, beauty, and love) but may have a hard time developing specific situations and descriptions that make the concepts memorable and accessible to the senses of a listener. *It is always important to remember that in the general population, “S” perceivers outnumber “N” perceivers by more than two to one. About 70% of the population is sensory-oriented. Thus, if your lyrics have no concrete references, you're losing 70% of your potential audience right away. Of all the aspects of human interaction, it is said that the S/N difference is the single biggest communication factor that can alienate two people from each other if neither is aware of it. If an "N" and "S" person both look at the same animal, one will see an elephant, the other will see a trunk, a tail, and ears, and each will say that the other is crazy, when in fact they are both right, and they both know they're right! Extreme “N” types, which are rare, are often totally misunderstood or are cast out by mainstream society and thus, the stereotypical eccentric and misunderstood artist/misfit image.*

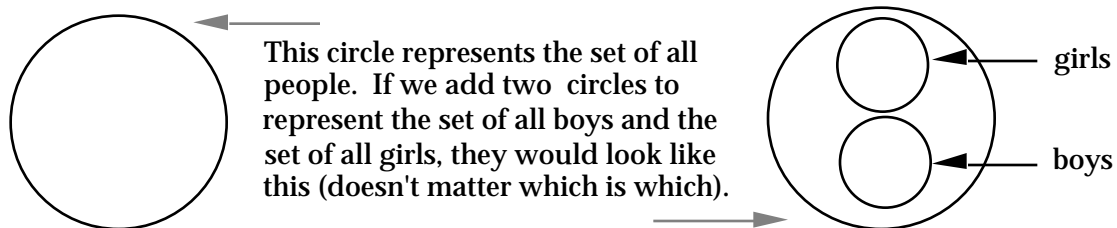
A successful lyric requires a balance of concept and detail, of content and form, of forests and trees to touch the masses. There is no right or wrong way to develop your own skill at balancing these things. It first takes awareness, then the commitment to work at it, then practice, and openness to good critique. It is very helpful to have a supportive songwriters group to interact with who are aware of the S/N difference. Sheila Davis' *Songwriters Idea*

Book addresses some aspects of the S/N difference, and I highly recommend it. Another approach to achieving balanced lyrics is to have a complementary collaborator. S and N teams who are aware of each other's strengths make a great pair.

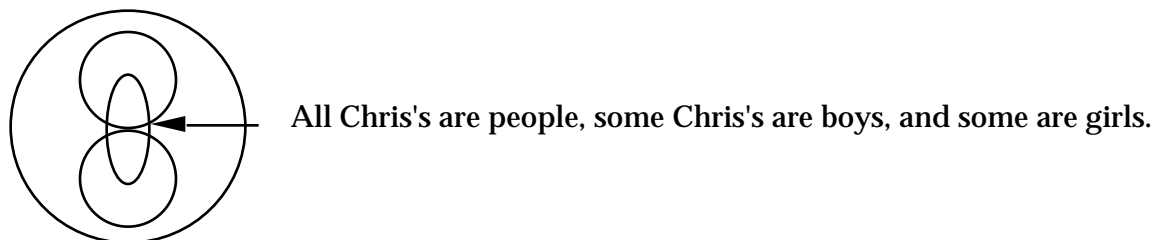
One quick test for seeing if your song has enough concrete references is to count all the nouns, and see how many are readily accessible through at least one sensory path e.g., *bee* is accessible via sight, touch, taste, and smell; *Fire* is accessible through touch, sight, sound, and smell; *Atoms* are accessible only through an electron microscope, thus are not readily accessible; *Beauty* lives only in the mind and does not come through the senses... you do not "see" beauty. You see a face, lips, a painting, a flower, and you interpret them to be beautiful or not. The sensory experience of seeing a face is universal, but interpretation of that face as beauty is personal and different from person to person.

However, an "N" perceiver might disagree, because to them, concept (*beauty*) is more important than things (*faces and lips*) ... but that's only 3 out of 10 in the general population, which includes record buyers, publishers, and producers. It is also important to note that among popular performing artists, the percentage of "S" perceivers is probably higher. The "N" performers are more likely to be on the fringes instead of the mainstream, or in the creative rather than the performing arts. The important point is that *if you are writing for the mainstream, trying to get your songs to artists, publishers or listeners, you are writing primarily for "S" perceivers.*

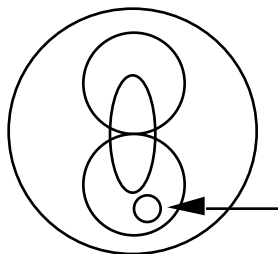
Here's a technique that might help. In trying to define ideas to write about or to use as vehicle for getting a message across, think in terms of groups or sets.



The "boys" circle is completely in the "people" circle because all boys are people (I know some girls might debate that, but that's a different topic). Likewise for the "girls" circle. The boys and girls circle don't overlap because no boys are girls and vice-versa (I know some folks might debate that too ...) Now let's add another circle -- all people named Chris.



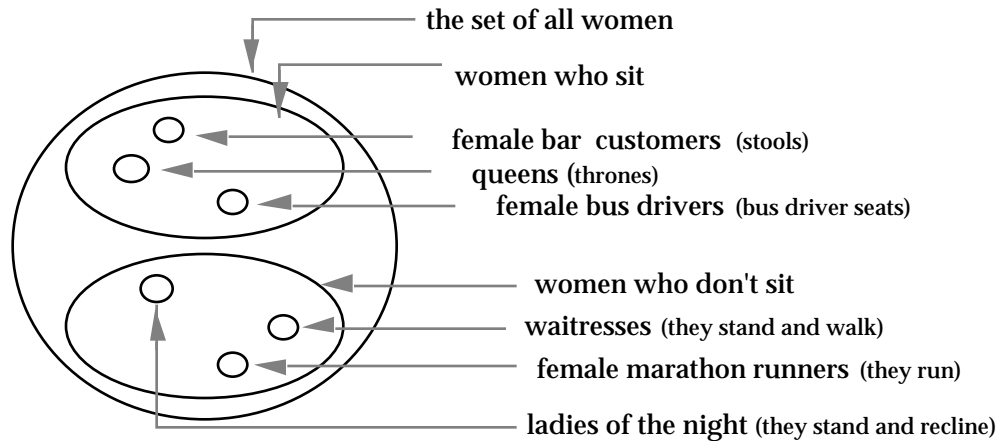
Now let's try one more thing.....



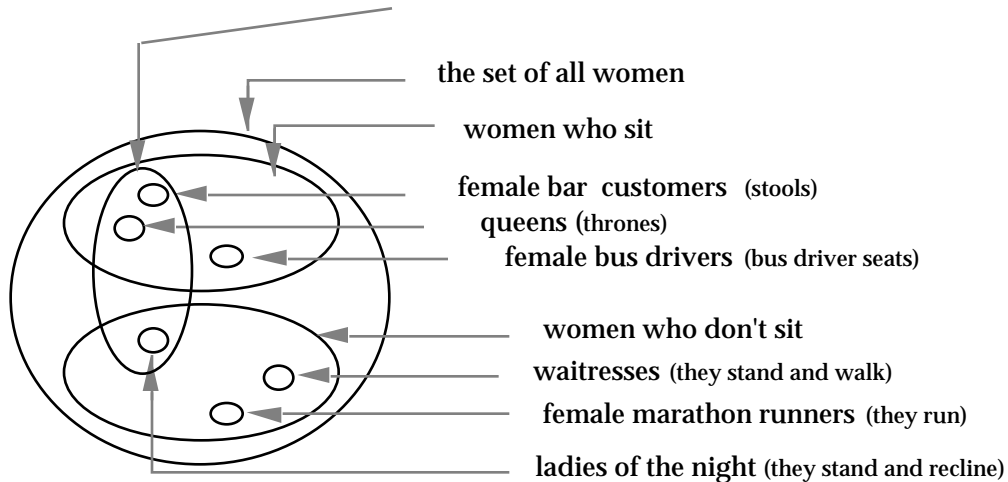
It's a person...It's a boy...It is not named Chris....
It's "A Boy Named Sue! "

It's concrete, unique, memorable, and it was a hit. It was an effective way to convey the "N" message of the song -- that love is sometimes expressed in ways which seem to be quite the opposite of love. Things that are concrete and unique will often turn up as bullseyes on these pictures of sets. When deciding what level of images to use, the deeper into the circles you go, the more specific you are being. Also, the deeper into the picture it is, the more it represents, thus the more chances of connecting with listeners. If we did the same exercise above with "vehicles" instead of "people", we'd have a level for cars, boats, trains, etc.. In the "train" circle, we'd have kinds of trains (Santa Fe, B&O, Illinois Central, etc.), and eventually, we'd have a singular circle inside of vehicles and trains and Illinois Central that said "City of New Orleans". Bullseye for Arlo Guthrie. The entire song is an excellent lesson in detail. It's an "S" presentation of an "N" concept -- the loss of past traditions.

For "N" perceivers, this technique is useful for going from the big ideas (forests) down to concrete specifics (trees and leaves). For "S" perceivers, who often start out with details, The reverse process, going from small inner circles to the larger outer circles, is useful for focusing the topic of your lyric, and finding one governing metaphor (a lyric should have only one!). For example, take an image of a woman sitting on a barstool surrounded by suitors. There are several sets (circles) here : women, women sitting, women in bars, and women surrounded by suitors.



Now add the next set, "women who are surrounded by suitors..."



We now see that the two detail sets of queens and female bar customers match at all the higher levels. Thus, a governing metaphor of "female bar customer = queen" will work. For tone constant detail-level metaphors, a bar becomes a kingdom, a barstool becomes a throne, a wine glass is a scepter, etc. Shel Silverstein used this governing metaphor and those details to write the classic "Queen of the Silver Dollar". The chorus is :

*She's the Queen of the Silver Dollar,
 She rules the smoky kingdom
 The scepter is a wine glass and the barstool is her throne...
 The jesters gather round her,
 Trying to win her favor,
 To see which one will take the Queen of the Silver Dollar home.*

Thus, a good metaphor can be identified by two independent detail circles that both lie in a common group of higher level circles. Country music has wide appeal because it generally has "S" oriented lyrics but is well balanced by "N" aspects like puns and word-play (e.g., the concept of infidelity expressed by saying "We live in a two-story house"; " the concept of

burning desire expressed by "There's not enough room in my Fruit-of-the-Loom to hold all my love for you; etc..). A good "S/N" balance is the "essence" of a successful lyric in any style of music.

What ever techniques you choose, and whatever genre you write in, the key points are:

- Lyrics must achieve a balance between detail and concept.
- 70% of the general population are detail-oriented, sensory perceivers, thus, concrete references are essential.
- Intuitive "N" writers will start "big" and must work down to details and specifics.
- Sensory "S" writers will start with details and must work upward to get focus of message and consistency of imagery.

In addition to the S/N difference, there are other aspects of people's interaction with the world that affect writer/listener communication. Two of these are the T/F difference (thinking vs. feeling) and the J/P difference (tried and true, predictable and resolved, vs. new, spontaneous, and open ended). We'll discuss these in future articles.

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The information presented here on S-N perception is based on the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) well researched and globally used indicator of personality preferences. For more information and to learn how to determine if you are a sensory or intuitive perceiver, refer to: *Type Talk* by Otto Kroeger and Janet Thuesen, Delta/Tilden Press, and *Please Understand Me*, by Kiersey and Bates, Prometheus Books.