

# SONGCRAFTERS COLORING BOOK

## *by Bill Pere*

### Writing in the Key of “W”

It is generally acknowledged that the most difficult part of songwriting is coming up with a really good lyric...one that expresses what you want in a new and memorable way and which reaches and touches a diversity of listeners. A large part of the difficulty is in finding the balance points between specificity vs. blandness, and imagery vs. vagueness. It is not easy to be very specific yet colorful, and to get a clear message across memorably in three minutes. Cleverness with words is important, but is not enough by itself. It takes more than that to provide the substance. There are some general principles which, if followed, can make you more aware of the clarity of your lyric. One key principle is “writing in the key of “W”. When you think you are done with a lyric, ask these things:

**Who, What, When, Where, Why, hoW....** By the end of your lyric, have all of these things been conveyed clearly to a listener? **Who** is singing? To whom are they singing? Are any third parties being referred to? **What** is happening? What does each verb and each noun refer to? **When** is the action occurring (day/night/present/past/future/what century)? **Where** is this taking place (in a home, in a bar, in Cleveland, in my mind, underwater)? **Why** are the characters saying and doing what they do? Why do they feel as they do? Why are they motivated to take those actions? **How** did things get to be this way? How will they be resolved? How does each character feel?

If you do not know the answer to any of these questions, you may have to do some re-thinking about your lyric. Remember, it is perfectly reasonable to conclude that for a particular lyric, it doesn't matter at all to know where it is happening or when it is happening. However, that is not the same as not knowing the answer. If you consciously conclude that some of the above are not critical to your message, then the answer is “any time” or “anywhere”. The thing to avoid at all costs is creating confusion by not being specific when it does matter, or by leading the listener to believe that it matters.

As an exercise for yourself, look at some of your lyrics and see how many of the W's can you answer in the first verse? Here's an example from the first verse of a song about P.T. Barnum:

<i>Town of Bridgeport, nineteenth century time</i>	(where and when)
<i>Phineas T. Barnum was making the headlines</i>	(who and what)
<i>With the voice of Jenny Lind, and General Tom Thumb</i>	(How he was making headlines)
<i>He'd set up the events and watch the crowds of people come”</i>	

This is an example of straight expository writing... a series of facts. Very specific, but not necessarily colorful or exciting. However, this kind of writing has its

place when you look at TV theme songs (Gilligan's Island, Beverly Hillbillies, Brady Bunch ... all the facts about the premise of the show are there in less than two minutes). Let's have a look at another example from Harry Chapin's "Dance Band on the Titanic"

*"Mama stood cryin' by the dockside  
She said 'Please son, don't take this trip'  
I said 'Momma, sweet Momma, don't you worry none,  
Even God couldn't sink this ship'..."*

What do we know from just these four lines? A mother is standing at the dock as her son is about to depart on a ship. She is worried. He loves her, and he is confident about the success of his upcoming trip. Thus we know who (mother and son), where (dockside), when (departure time), and how they feel.

The effectiveness of lyrics like these come not only from the specificity of the W's, but also because it employs another of the important principles of a good lyric... "Show it, don't tell it!"

To say "He smiled" is specific, but not colorful. To say "The corners of his mouth were looking up" conveys the same information by showing an action." "I'm lonely" can become "the bed's too big without you"; "I talk on the phone a lot" can become "This phone's growing into my ear". The next lines of the above, instead of saying "the ship left" say "the whistle blew, they turned the screws, it churned the water into foam..."

A great deal of information can be conveyed in the first few lines of a song, freeing up the rest of your valuable syllable-space for developing your ideas or painting your images. Consider this opening couplet:

*"I slip out the back door in the dead heat of summer  
The city streets swelter, the sweat turns to steam..."*

What do we know? Where (city) and When (summer), we know it's very hot, and that the singer (Who) is engaged in a secretive activity. Here's another:

*"Hot August night, and the trees hanging down and the grass on the ground smellin sweet  
Move up the road to the outside of town and the sound of that good gospel beat"*

What do we know? In these Neil Diamond lines, (which also contain 6 rhymes, assonance, and alliteration), we know When (August, night), Where (edge of the road leading out of the town), What is going on (gospel music), and How the air smells.

This type of lyric writing is both journalistic and cinematic, like describing the world through movie cameras where the lenses can zoom in and out and scenes can pan and cut between locations and characters, providing all the relevant information. It is the art of using words to reach the visual centers of the

listener's mind. And considering how many people rent videos, go to movies, and watch TV, it makes for effective lyric writing.

Thinking of your songs visually is a powerful means of developing effective lyrics. Sometimes, you can "see" the whole song before you even have any words, and your lyrics can then be a matter of describing what you "see". If you can't form a picture, go back and look at every noun in your lyric. How many of them are concrete things you can see and touch (moon, chair, table, book, beer), and how many are intangible (happiness, loneliness, truth, beauty). If there are no concrete reference in your lyric, it will be impossible for you or a listener to form a picture, and you cannot answer the W's. I have seen lyrics presented at workshops that contain 20-30 nouns, but not one single concrete reference, and the typical audience feedback is that they are "confused". Specificity takes practice, but can yield big rewards in the way you touch your listeners.

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