

CHAPTER THREE



Songwriting 101

Songwriting is a very personal activity. I don't believe there is a wrong or right way to do it (of course there are rules like grammar and punctuation so that people can understand what you have written, but you can still develop your own personal style). You just have to write, write and write some more, and write what feels right to you. Writing is a way to express, a way to deal with issues, and a way to keep a personal history.

Writing is where knowledge and imagination come together. I enjoy writing poems, stories, jokes, and essays, but songwriting is my favorite form of writing. As a songwriter who is also an educator, I decided I really needed to have goals to give me guidance and direction. Even though I strongly believe "just because it's fun" is reason enough, I recognized that I needed a purpose for songwriting in schools. So I designed the following goals.

MY GOALS

Keep the learning active and actively engage all students in their own personal learning.

Offer activities that challenge students, focus on the learning process, and help students connect with their own creativity.

Goals and objectives are necessary for guidelines and structure, but they must be flexible. We really need to teach students to enthusiastically enjoy and use the learning process in their writing. When their focus is on the process instead of on an end product, the students have more room for successful outcomes.

As a songwriter, I love the learning process. I love the hunt for ideas, the work, and the excitement of the new song. I know that my Mom and Dad may be the only ones to really like 90% of what I write. But the other 10% will be great. And I always know that some of what I throw away can be recycled for other writing projects. The learning process keeps me from getting discouraged.

As writers, our goal is to write, draft after draft. Focusing on the process helps students clearly see that the more they write, the better writers they will become. Especially if, with their peers, they form a learning community. In my ideal community we all actively listen, create, express, share, and offer feedback.

Give all students their day(s) on center stage. It takes lots of nerve and confidence to get up and share something as personal as a song, poem, or story. It can seem like people are not only critiquing your work, but also you the writer. But when they are ready to, students need to share what they have written. Sharing with peers, and getting their feedback, is an important part of the learning process.

Prepare students to be respectful, responsive audiences who will share critiques that are meant to help each other improve. Let students know that they may disagree with their classmates' comments and criticisms, but that writers need to be good listeners and accept others' critiques of their topics and writing style. Make sure your students know that listening to audience feedback doesn't mean you have to agree or accept 100% of the suggestions, but that hearing good, positive feedback can do nothing but help you as a writer. If your critics are speaking from the heart and have really thought out their comments, you'll at least want to think about what they have said, as this could present options or angles you hadn't previously considered.

It's important to be aware of the audience you are writing for. Knowing, as you write, what you stand for as a writer, how much

of your own personal opinions you wish to share, and what response you are looking for, will help when forming a response to your audience's comments. As your students are writing, they may want to ask themselves, "Is this something that my peers, students my age, from anywhere, can relate to and say 'Hey, that's happened to me,' or 'I know exactly what you are talking about.' Or will their response be something like 'I really have no idea what you are writing about?'"

ON FEEDBACK

As the teacher, you'll have lots of options for making sure your students have the opportunity to share their work with their classmates, and to encourage constructive feedback. Set up clear class rules, and make sure your students understand the guidelines for giving—and getting—feedback.

You might consider working with other teachers to set up opportunities for your students to share their work with other classes, or even with other grade levels. Maybe you could work with your principal to coordinate a special school-wide sharing assembly (like the ones we hold after my visits to schools). Think how cool it would be to arrange to do special visits with other schools or districts.

Giving Feedback

Writers like clear, constructive, sincere feedback. Encourage your students to really take the time to think about what they have just read or heard. Tell them to take notes and put thought into their comments. Make sure they can state, in plain words, what it is that they are trying to say. Tell them to avoid general feedback like "Yea, it was okay" or "your writing is good." Instead, they might suggest that the piece reminds them of another poem or song. Encourage them to state their reasons why. Tell them that they need to mention it if parts of the lyric

or poem don't make sense to them, but remind them of how important it is for them to be supportive and clear.

Getting Feedback

When you are being critiqued, it's often hard not to take criticism personally. Tell your students that they must be good listeners when they are getting feedback. Remind them that their peers are there to help them become better writers, and that they need to know where their writing isn't working as well as they might hope. Being an open-minded listener is so critical here. Tell your students to accept criticism in the same light that they offer criticism when they are reading someone else's piece.

Here are some helpful hints to share with your students when they are looking for feedback, whether they are writing for school, for music lessons, or for any reason:

Put your writing in a folder, maybe accompanied by a tape of you reading it. Make sure your piece is properly titled, and that all multiple-page pieces are in order and include page numbers. Leave the folder in a place that friends and family members can get to it and borrow it.

You may want to **write a little blurb to accompany your writing**. Try to help the reader understand your feelings when you wrote it, what inspired you, and any other information that help sets up the piece, but doesn't totally give away what you are writing about. Let the reader/listener come to their own conclusions about what they are reading.

Let the person reading or listening to your writings know what you are looking for regarding feedback. Do you want a proof reader? Do you want general or more specific/descriptive feedback? Would you like to know the strong points, best lines, great phrases? How's the rhythm and flow? Would you like to know if audience could follow and understand your writing?

Would it be helpful to know if they think your writing is too personal to be universally understood?

Give the person critiquing your writings some time when you are not around so they can read, reread, and think about what you have written. Hopefully they will have enough time to put your writings aside for a day or so, and then come back and read them again. If you have let your reader/critic know what you are looking for regarding feedback this will help them. Encourage your readers to take notes so that they will be able to offer specific suggestions and comments.

Set up a time when your reader/critic is done to meet in a relaxed atmosphere where you can talk about the writings. **Have a list of questions prepared** to ask the reader about your writings: Is my writing style easy to read and follow? Am I too wordy? How is the plot and character development? How is my spelling? What were some lines from my writing that really caught your attention or that you thought were really good? Is this strong writing? Where are the weaknesses? Is the topic I have chosen to write about one that other readers can relate to? Does my writing hold your interest? Does my writing make sense to you?

The sky's the limit regarding questions that you can prepare for your critic/reader. Make sure that your questions will obtain the information that you are seeking. Encourage the reader to ask you any questions that they may have regarding use of a word, the opening line of a paragraph, plot and character development, etc. Make good use of your reader/critic and let them know that you sincerely appreciate their time and efforts.

Remember, often times writers want immediate feedback, even though they know it's at the wrong place or the wrong time. You might be tempted to walk up to a friend or classmate and hand them a piece of writing and say, "Please read this and tell me what you think," and then stand right there as they try to read.

There are times and occasions when this type of feedback can work, but usually it pressures readers to say the first thing that pops into their heads, which may be very disappointing to you, as it is not the meaningful feedback that you were looking for. In most cases, it is better to give the reader/critic time to do a good job and not put them on the spot.

To close, remember: “If we feel it, we own it. We don’t fight it, we write it. Draft after draft our goal is to write.”

Happy writing!

