



# SONGWRITING 101:

An Introduction to Words & Music

Grades 3-6

## INTRODUCTION

Songwriting 101 teaches students the basics of songwriting, including song form and vocabulary, and establishes songwriting as a creative outlet to explore and process emotions, capture experiences, share stories, and express individuality. The program can be used to strengthen skills learned in traditional language arts units, promote social and emotional learning, and provide an interactive and collaborative writing experience with a professional songwriter.

Songwriting 101 begins with two 45-minute pre-lessons that prepare the class for their co-write session with a professional songwriter by creating a song outline. The pre-lessons encourage thinking about what students already know about songwriting while teaching them about the specific parts of a song. The post-lesson reinforces what students learned, allowing them to reflect on the songwriting experience. We recommend teaching these lessons three weeks before the songwriter workshop to allow time to write and submit the outline in preparation for the upcoming co-write.

The Teacher Resource Portal provides free support materials for Songwriting 101, including song lyrics for classroom projection, music videos, songwriter biographies, and more. In addition to Songwriting 101 materials, the Portal includes lesson guides, tool kits, and other primary sources that bring the museum into your classroom. To access the Teacher Resource Portal, visit [CountryMusicHallofFame.org/Education/Teacher-Resource-Portal/](https://CountryMusicHallofFame.org/Education/Teacher-Resource-Portal/).

Songwriting 101 is a precursor to Words & Music, the Museum's flagship education program. A rigorous step-by-step lyric writing experience, Words & Music supports standards in English language arts, music, and social and emotional learning, and culminates with an interactive performance by a professional songwriter who presents student lyrics as finished songs. For more information on Words & Music, visit [CountryMusicHallofFame.org/WordsandMusic](https://CountryMusicHallofFame.org/WordsandMusic).



The Highwomen



Little Big Town

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.1

Engage effectively in collaborative discussions with diverse partners.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.5

Refer to parts of stories, dramas, and poems when writing or speaking about a text, using terms such as chapter, scene, and stanza; describe how each successive part builds on earlier sections.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2

Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.5

Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.10

Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

### NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION STANDARDS

#### Standard 6

Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.

#### Standard 7

Evaluating music and music performances.

#### Standard 8

Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.

#### Standard 9

Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

### TENNESSEE MUSIC STANDARDS

#### Foundation R1

Perceive and analyze artistic work.

#### Foundation R2

Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

#### Foundation Cn1

Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to artistic endeavors.

#### Foundation Cn2

Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context.

### NATIONAL CORE ARTS ANCHOR STANDARDS

#### Anchor Standard #1

Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

#### Anchor Standard #2

Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

#### Anchor Standard #3

Refine and complete artistic work.

#### Anchor Standard #7

Perceive and analyze artistic work.

#### Anchor Standard #8

Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

#### Anchor Standard #10

Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experience to make art.

### SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INDICATORS

1A. Demonstrate an awareness of my emotions.

1B. Demonstrate an awareness of my personal qualities and interests.

2A. Understand and use strategies for managing my emotions and behaviors constructively.

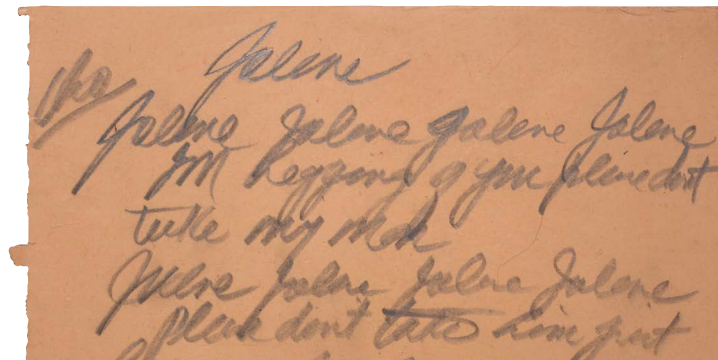
3A. Demonstrate awareness and consideration of other people's emotions, perspectives, and social cues.

3C. Demonstrate an awareness and respect for human dignity, including culture and differences.

4A. Use positive communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.

4B. Develop and maintain positive relationships.

5A. Consider and use multiple factors in decision-making, including ethical and safety factors, personal and community responsibilities, and short-term and long-term goals.



Dolly Parton's original "Jolene" manuscripts, 1973–1974

# Lesson 1: Introduction to Songwriting

## OBJECTIVES

- Students will share what they already know about songwriting and build on this understanding.
- Students will apply new vocabulary and concepts related to parts of a song.
- Students will formulate ideas for a song topic through brainstorming.

## VOCABULARY

Title	Verse
Subject	Chorus
Theme	Bridge
Hook	

## PREPARATION

- Visit the Teacher Resource Portal to access supplemental videos and teaching tools.
- Make copies of the “**Crowded Table**” and/or “**Happy People**” Student Lyric Sheets.
- Make sure each student has a notebook or a blank piece of paper and something to write with for brainstorm activity.
- Locate a recording of “Crowded Table” performed by The Highwoman and/or “Happy People” performed by Little Big Town to play for the class.

## TEACHER NOTES

Students may be more focused on the lyrics of the song if they listen to recording without viewing the music video.

Other songs that also work well for this activity include “Wordwide Beautiful” by Kane Brown and “Rainbow” by Kacey Musgraves. Teacher and Student Lyric sheets are not provided for these selections.

## ACTIVITY

40–45 MINUTES

### Brainstorm

**Prompt: Write everything you know about the parts of a song in one minute.** Afterward, divide the class in to small groups and ask each group to compile a master list. Ask groups to share their findings with the class. Make note of which parts the students mention, so you can prepare for the next activity.

### 1. Review or introduce the parts of a song.

Do this briefly as they will be discussed in more detail in the second part of the activity.

- The **title** is the name of the song.
- The **subject** is the topic of the song.
- The **theme** is the message the song.
- The **hook** is the part of the song that catches or “hooks” a listener’s attention, making the song easy to remember. The title and hook are often the same, and the hook is usually repeated throughout the song.

### NOTE:

The title, theme, and hook should work together to let listeners know what the song is about.

- The **verse** communicates the details of the song’s subject, such as who, what, where, when, why, and how. Songs usually have multiple verses.
- The **chorus** is the part that is repeated throughout the song. It is usually simpler than the verses, and it often contains the hook. The chorus summarizes the main subject, while the verses provide the supporting details.
- The **bridge** introduces a twist or new idea on the theme. It usually occurs toward the song’s end, and it has a different melody from the verses and chorus. Not all songs have a bridge.



## 2. Share song lyrics with students.

Distribute the “Crowded People” and/or “Happy People” Student Lyric Sheet. Listen to the song as a class and ask students to identify the song parts by filling in the blanks on the lyric sheet. Then listen to the song again, pausing as directed on the **Teacher’s Lyric Sheet** to discuss song structure and parts as a class. Discuss correct answers after everyone has completed the exercise.

## 3. Ask students to draw a box around rhyming words.

Once students have finished, explain that the **rhyme scheme** describes the pattern of rhyming words in a song. To help identify the rhyme scheme in these songs, instruct students to use the first two letters of the alphabet. “A” is used for the first line, and any other lines that rhyme with it are also labeled “A.” When you come to a line that does not rhyme with “A,” you will label it “B.” All lines that rhyme with this line will also be labeled “B.” When you encounter the next rhyming sequence, return to “A,” and then “B,” and so on. Work as a class to identify the song’s rhyme scheme (e.g., ABAB, AABB, etc.). Inform students that the chorus, verses, and bridge (if there is one), may have different rhyme schemes.

## 4. Discuss subject and theme further.

Mention that the subject is what the song is about, and the theme is the message of the song. Finally, go back to the song you have been analyzing and identify the subject and theme.

### **NOTE:**

The subject of “Crowded Table” is inclusiveness. The theme is how we can make a world where everyone belongs, despite our differences.

The subject of “Happy People” is happiness. The theme is that happiness is something that we all have to work towards, and that in order to be happy, we have to make others happy along the way.



## Lesson 2: Song Topic and Outline

### OBJECTIVES

- Students will analyze their common interests and experiences as a class and use them to brainstorm a song topic.
- The class will create a song outline using their chosen topic.

### VOCABULARY

Outline  
Subject (review)  
Theme (review)

### PREPARATION

- This is a group-write, so you will need a large space, white board, projector, etc. to write student ideas and document your class brainstorm.
- Make sure each student has a notebook or a blank piece of paper and something to write with for the brainstorm activity.



Custom-painted Royal typewriter used by Cindy Walker to compose her hit songs.

### ACTIVITY

40–45 MINUTES

#### 1. Discuss

Share with students that the most popular songs are about what people have in common, such as what interests, experiences, and emotions others can relate to.

#### 2. Brainstorm

Have students brainstorm a list of common human experiences. This list will eventually lead to potential song topics.

- List three common human experiences you might share as a class.
- List three things you think about a lot.
- Write down a funny memory that comes to your mind.
- Write down a happy memory that comes to your mind.
- Write down a sad memory that comes to your mind.

#### TEACHER TIP:

The goal is for students to come up with common experiences. Encourage students not to “overthink” their list. Go with what first comes to mind.



Little Big Town Grammy win 2016

### 3. Have students share their brainstorm topics.

Record their responses on the board and notate repeating or similar topics. Topics can be organized by color-coding or by using an organizational chart.

#### **BRAINSTORM EXAMPLE:**

##### **LOSS**

Family pet dying  
Losing a prized possession  
Breaking up with a girl/boyfriend

##### **SCHOOL**

Homework  
Recess  
The cafeteria

##### **SUMMERTIME**

Swimming  
Family vacations  
Summer camp  
Hot days  
Eating watermelon and hotdogs

### 4. Pick a song subject.

With the students' ideas on the board, point out the subject that has the longest list of related topics and make it clear to the students which common human experiences are the most prevalent in their class. Use this grouping to choose your song subject/topic.

#### **NOTE:**

In the example above, summertime would be your main idea and song subject.

### 5. Brainstorm a song theme.

Erase the other topics from the board, leaving just the chosen subject. Ask the class to brainstorm a theme, or message, they want to communicate about the subject. Ask the class to brainstorm more descriptive words, activities, feels, or ideas related to this subject and theme, and add them to the list. Stop when there is a substantial list of ideas on the board.

### 6. Make a song outline.

Explain that a song outline is a rough sketch of what the lyrics will communicate. Outlining a song is a useful way to help writers organize their thoughts. Using the main idea and details the students came up with, create an outline of the song together as a class.

#### **SONG OUTLINE EXAMPLE:**

**Verse 1 Topic:** Things I like about summertime

**Verse 2 Topic:** Places I go in the summertime

**Chorus Theme:** How much I love summertime

**Verse 3 Topic:** Things I do during the summer

**Bridge Topic (optional):** How much longer until summertime?

#### **NOTE:**

Remind the students that their co-writer may not follow this outline exactly.

### 7. Prepare students for the Songwriting 101 session.

Let students know that the songwriter will collaborate with the class on content of the song, the style of music, and other aspects of songwriting.

Students should prepare questions to ask the songwriter at the end of the program.



"Crowded Table," recorded by The Highwomen, won Best Country Song at the Grammy Awards in 2021.

## Post-Lesson: Song Topic and Outline

### POST-LESSON

15 MINUTES

**1. Lead a class discussion or assign a writing exercise on the following questions to reflect on their songwriting experience and the songwriting workshop.**

- What did you enjoy about writing a song?
- The next time you write a song, will you work alone or in a group? Why?
- Was songwriting easy or hard for you? Explain your answer.

- What skills are important to have to be a successful songwriter? How would you define success?
- Do you think all songwriters write hit songs? Explain your answer.
- Would you rather be a songwriter, a singer, or both? Explain your answer.

**Turn in your outline to the Country Music Hall of Fame® and Museum and include school/group name, grade level, and teacher name. The song outline is due at least two weeks before the scheduled songwriting workshop.**

It can be submitted via

**Email:**

Please make sure the outline is in the format above and attach to an email.  
[Lyrics@CountryMusicHallofFame.org](mailto:Lyrics@CountryMusicHallofFame.org)



WORDS & MUSIC FUNDERS



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**Teacher Lyric Sheet**

# Crowded Table

*Brandi Carlile / Natalie Hemby / Lori McKenna*

You can hold my hand  
 When you need to let go  
 I can be your mountain  
 When you're feeling valley-low  
 I can be your streetlight  
 Showing you the way home  
 You can hold my hand  
 When you need to let go


I want a house with a crowded table  
 And a place by the fire for everyone  
 Let us take on the world while we're young and able  
 And bring us back together when the day is done

If we want a garden  
 We're gonna have to sow the seed  
 Plant a little happiness  
 Let the roots run deep  
 If it's love that we give  
 Then it's love that we reap  
 If we want a garden  
 We're gonna have to sow the seed

Yeah, I want a house with a crowded table  
 And a place by the fire for everyone  
 Let us take on the world while we're young and able  
 And bring us back together when the day is done

The door is always open  
 Your picture's on my wall  
 Everyone's a little broken  
 And everyone belongs  
 Yeah, everyone belongs

I want a house with a crowded table  
 And a place by the fire for everyone  
 Let us take on the world while we're young and able  
 And bring us back together when the day is done  
 And bring us back together when the day is done

Pause the song when you see this symbol: 

**BEFORE LISTENING**

Discuss the **title** of the song.

1. Ask students what they think this song is about, based on the title.
2. Prompt students to look for places where the title appears as they listen to the song.

Prompt students to notice that the melody will change in the chorus.

**DISCUSS CHORUS**

1. Prompt students to discuss the theme. Ask for textual evidence for their answers.
2. Instruct students that this **theme** is the **message** of the song.
3. Ask students to identify the **hook** (the part that is repeated or makes the song easy to remember).
4. Point out that the **chorus** of the song is simpler than the verses.

Prompt students to listen to the way the music stays the same in the second **verse** even though the words change.

**DISCUSS BRIDGE**

1. Prompt students to notice the way the melody changes and that the **bridge** is shorter than the verses and chorus.
2. Ask students to discuss the new or different idea presented in the bridge.

**ANSWER KEY TO "CROWDED TABLE" STUDENT LYRIC SHEET**

- Song Parts (top to bottom): Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Chorus
- Fill in the Blank: 1. Title, 2. Chorus, 3. Verses, 4. Theme, 5. Subject, 6. Bridge, 7. Hook



**Student Lyric Sheet**

**Crowded Table**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

*Brandi Carlile / Natalie Hemby / Lori McKenna*

You can hold my hand  
 When you need to let go  
 I can be your mountain  
 When you're feeling valley-low  
 I can be your streetlight  
 Showing you the way home  
 You can hold my hand  
 When you need to let go

I want a house with a crowded table  
 And a place by the fire for everyone  
 Let us take on the world while we're young and able  
 And bring us back together when the day is done

If we want a garden  
 We're gonna have to sow the seed  
 Plant a little happiness  
 Let the roots run deep  
 If it's love that we give  
 Then it's love that we reap  
 If we want a garden  
 We're gonna have to sow the seed

Yeah, I want a house with a crowded table  
 And a place by the fire for everyone  
 Let us take on the world while we're young and able  
 And bring us back together when the day is done

The door is always open  
 Your picture's on my wall  
 Everyone's a little broken  
 And everyone belongs  
 Yeah, everyone belongs

I want a house with a crowded table  
 And a place by the fire for everyone  
 Let us take on the world while we're young and able  
 And bring us back together when the day is done  
 And bring us back together when the day is done

**FILL IN THE BLANKS**

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ is often the same as the hook.
2. Each \_\_\_\_\_ has the same words.
3. The \_\_\_\_\_ have different words but the same tune.
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ is the message of the song.
5. The verse gives supporting details about the \_\_\_\_\_, or topic, of the song.
6. The \_\_\_\_\_ introduces a twist or new idea. It is shorter than the verses and chorus.
8. The \_\_\_\_\_ catches a listener's attention and is usually repeated throughout the song.

**WORD BANK**

Bridge, Chorus, Hook, Subject, Theme, Title, Verses

Teacher Lyric Sheet

# Happy People

*Hailey Whitters / Lori McKenna*

Happy people don't cheat  
 Happy people don't lie  
 They don't judge or hold a grudge  
 They don't criticize  
 Happy people don't hate  
 Happy people don't steal  
 Cause all the hurt sure ain't worth  
 All the guilt they'd feel


If you wanna know the secret  
 Can't buy it, gotta make it  
 You ain't ever gonna be it  
 By takin' someone else's away  
 Never take it for granted  
 You don't have to understand it  
 Here's to whatever puts a smile on your face  
 Whatever makes you happy people

Happy people don't fail  
 Happy people just learn  
 Don't think they're above the push and shove  
 They just wait their turn  
 They always got a hand  
 Or a dollar to spare  
 Know the golden rule what you're goin' through  
 Even if they've never been there

If you want to know the secret  
 Can't buy it, gotta make it  
 You ain't ever gonna be it  
 By takin' someone else's away  
 Never take it for granted  
 You don't have to understand it  
 Here's to whatever puts a smile on your face  
 Whatever makes you happy people

These days it ain't always easy to find  
 They're the ones who you want standing  
 by your side  
 No time for greed, if they need some,  
 give 'em a slice  
 And we'll all be happy people

Well life is short  
 And love is rare  
 And we all deserve to be happy while we're here

Pause the song when you see this symbol: 

**BEFORE LISTENING**

Discuss the **title** of the song.

1. Ask students what they think this song is about, based on the title.
2. Prompt students to look for places where the title appears as they listen to the song.

Prompt students to notice that the melody will change in the chorus.

**DISCUSS CHORUS**

1. Prompt students to discuss the theme. Ask for textual evidence for their answers.
2. Instruct students that this **theme** is the **message** of the song.
3. Ask students to identify the **hook** (the part that is repeated or makes the song easy to remember).
4. Point out that the **chorus** of the song is simpler than the verses.

Prompt students to listen to the way the music stays the same in the second **verse** even though the words change.

**DISCUSS BRIDGE**

1. Prompt students to notice the way the melody changes and that the **bridge** is shorter than the verses and chorus.
2. Ask students to discuss the new or different idea presented in the bridge.



**ANSWER KEY TO "HAPPY PEOPLE" STUDENT LYRIC SHEET**

- Song Parts (top to bottom): Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Chorus
- Fill in the Blank: 1. Title, 2. Chorus, 3. Verses, 4. Theme, 5. Subject, 6. Bridge, 7. Hook

**Student Lyric Sheet**

# Happy People

*Hailey Whitters / Lori McKenna*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Happy people don't cheat  
 Happy people don't lie  
 They don't judge or hold a grudge  
 They don't criticize  
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 Cause all the hurt sure ain't worth  
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 Know the golden rule what you're goin' through  
 Even if they've never been there

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 And we'll all be happy people

Well life is short  
 And love is rare  
 And we all deserve to be happy while we're here

## FILL IN THE BLANKS

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ is often the same as the hook.
2. Each \_\_\_\_\_ has the same words.
3. The \_\_\_\_\_ have different words but the same tune.
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8. The \_\_\_\_\_ catches a listener's attention and is usually repeated throughout the song.

## WORD BANK

Bridge, Chorus, Hook, Subject,  
 Theme, Title, Verses