

Songwriting With Kids

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Available as a .pdf from www.TheProgramRoom.com

This is a summary of what I've learned through my own experience writing songs with kids. I've mostly worked with classroom-sized groups writing together, however it should be easy to adapt most of the ideas for working with smaller groups or individuals.

Materials

1. Use an overhead projector and transparencies (or a laptop and projector!)
 - A. They allow you to start where you left off last time
 - B. You can photocopy transparencies for a complete record of the process
2. Have a tape recorder or portable digital recorder handy
 - A. Essential for remembering melodies and rhythms
 - B. Record the song (at least) at the rough draft stage and at the finished stage
 - C. Kids absolutely love to hear themselves on tape! And it provides great feedback
3. Pencil and paper for the kids, comes in handy with older grades
4. Rhyming dictionary, dictionary, thesaurus
5. Hone your own skills. Come ready to be flexible and creative and have fun!

Ownership

1. Let the kids write their own song!
 - A. You are just there to guide the process.
 - B. Goals and schedule should allow kids maximum chance for success on their own
 - C. Step in only when really needed
 - D. When kids feel ownership of the song, it builds self esteem
2. Resist the temptation to fix problems yourself
 - A. Kids' solutions are often more interesting than yours
 - B. What seems problematic to you may not be to them
 - C. Kids can learn more discovering their own mistakes than through your intervention
3. Go for an original melody as well as original words. Kids can do it!
4. Disallow songs or ideas based on existing TV, movie, or video game characters.

Planning Considerations

1. Begin with the end in mind
 - A. What is the purpose of the song?
 - B. Will you perform the song - when, and for whom?
2. Numbers
 - A. How many kids or groups will be involved? How many songs will you write? How much time do you have?
 - B. Ideally one group will write one song, but a song can easily be passed along from group to group, which has its own advantages.
3. Know your school's policy on taboo subjects. I once spent two sessions on a Halloween song before I was informed the school wouldn't allow Halloween as a topic!
4. Think about what you personally are comfortable with.
5. Lay out the ground rules right up front with your kids so they know what to expect.

2nd - 5th Grade Groups

The middle grades are the most receptive to full-on group songwriting.

1. **Characteristics of the age group**
 - A. They are interested in writing a "good" song
 - B. They are willing and able to work as a group to accomplish a goal
 - C. They all want to contribute, though some may be shy about it
 - D. They can deal with their contribution getting changed or deleted.
 - I. To facilitate no hard feelings, discuss this possibility up front
 - II. Songwriting is a process - like a journey
 - III. Every contribution along the way helps us get to the final destination
2. **The title is an excellent place to begin**
 - A. Preselect a broad topic, or limited choice of topics
 - B. Brainstorm titles related to the chosen topic & write them down
 - C. Don't allow critique until everyone has a chance to contribute
 - D. Narrow it down
 - I. Ask each student to state which title, other than their own, they like best and why
 - II. Combine ideas where possible
 - III. Eliminate the least spoken for ideas
 - IV. For each title left, discuss what a song with that title would be about

- V. Repeat from 1 as necessary
- E. Once you have it down to two or three
 - I. If you have the option to work in small groups, create a group for each title
 - II. If not, vote - encourage students to write songs for the other titles on their own
- 3. Outline the Song**
 - A. Start with some brainstorming. Ask for words and ideas that might go into the song.
 - B. Focus on each aspect listed below as needed (in no particular order), using student's ideas from the brainstorming to spark discussion.
 - I. Point of view / Voice
 - a. 1st person, 2nd person, or 3rd person?
 - b. What imaginary entity (voice) is singing? It could be a person, animal, or even an inanimate object.
 - c. What does the voice know or feel about the topic of the song? What is the singer's attitude?
 - II. Setting / Situation
 - a. Place and time (in what context does the voice exist?)
 - b. Who or what is the song being sung to?
 - c. What is the back story - what happened before the song actually starts?
 - C. Vehicles
 - I. A vehicle is a repeating language structure that helps give logic to the way the words are arranged. (For kids: "A trick to help you arrange the words")
 - II. Vehicles not only make the writing easier but also more powerful and interesting
 - III. Examples:
 - a. Begin every other line with a question starting with the word why?
 - b. Every other line starts: When I..... Then I....
 - c. Each line starts with a number
 - d. Each verse follows the pattern: He saw... He heard... He knew...
 - e. The possibilities for vehicles are endless - limited only by imagination
 - IV. You can always discover a vehicle later in the process. Include one in your outline only if you stumble onto it early.
 - V. Don't try to explain all this unless an example presents itself. Be ready to suggest a vehicle based on students' brainstormed ideas.
 - VI. A given vehicle is carried out through only one section of a song: the chorus, the bridge, one verse, or possibly all the verses.
 - D. Structure - This is how you arrange the different sections of a song
 - I. A chorus embodies the message or theme, in general terms. Words and music are the same each time.
 - II. Verses support the theme with details. Music is the same each time but words change.
 - III. A bridge (usually follows two verses) adds new meaning or depth or provides a twist. Music and words are unique to this section.

- IV. Here are some standard pop song structures that work well
 - a. Verse/Chorus - VCVCVC...
 - b. Verse/Bridge - VVBV (Title is repeated as a stanza at the end of each verse)
 - c. Verse/Chorus/Bridge - VCVCBC (Use only if a bridge just screams out at you as being necessary)
- V. Here are some “kid song” structures that work well.
 - a. Verse Verse Verse (VVV) - one or more repetitions in a row.
 - i. Think “Mary Had a Little Lamb”
 - ii. or “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.”
 - iii. It’s ok for a song to be really short!
 - b. “Zipper” song - in this variation of VVV, each verse differs by changing just one word or concept.
 - i. “The Wheels on the Bus” is a classic example.
 - ii. This format is good for a “category” song - animals, colors, languages, etc.
 - c. “Cumulative” song - in this variation of VCVC, the chorus grows longer each time as concepts are added.
 - i. “There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly” is a classic example
 - ii. This format works well for conveying a chain of similar events
- E. Write down a brief description of the point of view, voice, setting, situation, and any vehicles you plan to use.
- F. Follow this with one sentence to summarize each section of the song.
- G. Once you have your outline, there is no one correct order in which to proceed...

4. Writing Lyrics

- A. Collecting Details
 - I. Brainstorm words and concepts that support each main idea in the outline. Sort these according to which section of the song they belong to.
 - II. Also give students a chance to think and write on their own - some will only participate this way. Collect papers and add the best ideas to the group collection.
 - III. Kids will try to write verses at this point - that’s ok but let them know they are ahead of the game. Everything collected now will be treated as raw material.
- B. Write backwards
 - I. Use your outline to help students keep themselves on track.
 - II. Write each section backwards. You might start with the last word of the last line of the last verse
 - a. The last line will drive a point home; it carries a punch. Make sure you agree what that punch is.
 - b. If your song is VVBV, the last line of the verse will likely be the title.
 - c. List all the important words that might work in that last spot and their synonyms
 - d. List rhyming words for those words
 - i. Use only words that might relate to the song.

- ii. Try to come up with several rhyming pairs.
- iii. For each pair ask how those words might be used to express the concept that will end your verse.

III. Follow a rhyme scheme

- a. Label each line - A's rhyme with A's, B's rhyme with B's, etc.
- b. Kids tend to want to group rhyming words tightly together; usually this does not serve to clearly express the ideas from your outline.
- c. Use a sketch of blank lines with the rhyming words at the end to illustrate how space needs to be filled. Like so:

- 1. ----- ? (A)
- 2. ----- head (B)
- 3. ----- fun (A)
- 4. ----- bed (B)

- d. If you are using a vehicle, fill those words into the sketch as well.
- e. The last line will carry the punch; the previous line could rhyme or not, and may be part of the setup.
- f. Consider a variety of rhyme schemes and line lengths. Go with what works best.

Examples of common rhyme schemes:

- i. A A B B
- ii. A B A B
- iii. A A B A A B
- iv. A B C B

IV. Once the ending punch is in place, fill in the line that will rhyme with it, then fill in the rest of the lines in your verse.

C. Establish a Pattern for the Verses

- I. The first verse will establish a pattern that all others must follow. This includes:
 - a. Rhyme Scheme / Number of lines
 - b. 2, 4, 6, or 8 lines are usual

II. Meter

- a. Just like in poetry class - remember iambic pentameter?
- b. Mark the stressed and unstressed syllables to show the pattern
- c. Stressed syllables will correspond to the beat in the music

III. Line Length

- a. Count the number of beats per line
- b. It's not necessary to slavishly follow the meter - just count beats

IV. Let the writing process determine the structural elements listed above for one verse, then analyze.

- a. How many lines, how many beats per line, what is the rhyme scheme?
- b. This may lead to a few quick revisions as students discover their own errors.

V. Now you can split into small groups to write the other verses, making sure to follow the established pattern

D. Writing the Chorus

- I. The chorus usually includes the title; either as the first line, the last line, both, or as the only line.
- II. Add more words than the title only if necessary - keep it short and memorable
- III. Be creative with repetition
- IV. Singing the title can be a good way to start
 - a. Go around the circle giving every student a chance to try it.
 - b. Encourage experimentation; added words, repetition, varying stresses, rhythms, melodies, etc.
 - c. Just see what happens!
- V. Rhyme scheme, meter, melody all should contrast with the verses
- VI. The chorus may pop out while you're focused on some other task - be ready to grab it if you hear it!
- VII. Sometimes what you think is a verse turns into the chorus or vice versa.

E. Writing the Bridge

- I. Provides a contrast with the verses or chorus in meter, rhyme scheme, and melody
- II. Lyrically the bridge raises the stakes, deepens the meaning, or provides a twist
- III. The writing process is similar to writing the first verse

5. Writing Melody

A. Kids are capable of writing their own melodies!

B. When to look at melody

- I. If the writing goes smoothly melody can come last
- II. If you get stuck with the writing, melody can provide a good break
- III. Melody can be a good place to start as well, especially when writing the chorus

C. How to proceed

- I. Choose one line to start with - perhaps the title
- II. Work on rhythm first
 - a. Demonstrate different ways the line could be laid out rhythmically
 - b. Speak the line while clapping the rhythm
 - c. Have each student try it, and ask that each try to make their own variation
- III. Now go around the room and have each kid sing that line in rhythm
 - a. Record each effort
 - b. The individual attempts may evolve into something
 - c. Or one attempt may get accolades from the group - go with that
- IV. Or sing the line as a group
 - a. Ask kids to listen to each other as they sing
 - b. Sing the line over and over
 - c. A melody may well appear out of nowhere
- V. Other approaches:
 - a. Circle the most important words. Then construct a melody that puts those words on higher pitches and other words on lower pitches.

- b. Allow the kids to use an instrument to work out melodies individually before sharing with the group.
 - c. Use a beat box or a guitar to create a rhythm for kids to sing with.
- VI. Once you have one line down
- a. Melody often follows a pattern of repetition - AABA or ABAC
 - b. Kids have a natural ear for such repetition and for whether the last line resolves or sounds incomplete
 - c. Repeat your favorite process from above for each new line. Always include what you have so far at the beginning so that the new line will flow.
- VII. Take it one section at a time. Write a new melody for each different section; repeat the melody when a section repeats.

6. Polishing

- A. You have a rough draft when
- I. Each section is filled in with words that rhyme in the right spots
 - II. The words basically say what you wanted them to
 - III. Each section has a melody
 - IV. You can sing through it together
- B. Now spend as much time as you have left polishing
- I. Sing the song together
 - II. Ask for hands - are there any spots that give you trouble? Look for:
 - a. Words that are difficult to sing
 - i. Most likely the trouble is in the way they scan
 - ii. This is called prosody - words should fit naturally with the rhythm of the music
 - iii. Simplify - substitute words with fewer syllables, or with stresses in the proper places
 - b. Words that are uninteresting or redundant
 - i. These words were just put in to fill space
 - ii. Look back to your brainstorming for details that didn't get put in
 - iii. Every word should contribute to the main idea and/or personality of the song
 - iv. You may discover and introduce a good vehicle at this point to make the writing more interesting
 - v. Use alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, simile, metaphor to keep it interesting
 - c. Words that are unclear
 - i. Someone may say - I don't get what this means
 - ii. You can't explain it to your audience, they have to understand it on their own!
 - iii. Change the words so that the meaning is clear
 - iv. This often comes up when compromise was made for the sake of rhyme or meter
 - v. You may have to brainstorm new rhyming pairs to fix the problem
 - d. Words that are grammatically incorrect
 - a. Don't compromise grammar either, for the sake of a rhyme
 - b. If a line has an unnatural word order, try turning it inside out to fix it
 - c. Look for a word in the middle that could become the rhyming word at the end
 - III. Sing the song for another class and get their reactions

Pre-K - 2nd Grade Groups

This group can write songs together with some extra guidance

1. Characteristics of the age group

- A. The process is more important to the kids than the result
- B. Every kid needs to hear his or her own words in the song
- C. You will have no shortage of crazy ideas
- D. It is difficult to get them to focus on one idea as a group
- E. Their attention span can be longer than you think if
 - I. They feel ownership of the song
 - II. They get to hear it / sing it a lot

2. Choose the song theme and structure ahead of time

- A. Use a theme and structure that will accommodate many wildly varying ideas
 - I. Choose the theme ahead of time yourself and start by saying “We’re going to make up a song together about ____.”
 - II. Have a structure in mind, but be willing to change it to fit the kids’ input
 - III. The AAAA song form (one repeating section) works best, i.e. many short (two or four line) verses.
- B. Some repetitive element or device is needed to hold the song together
 - I. It works well for each verse to have one line the same (a refrain) with the rest differing lyrically verse to verse.
 - II. The refrain can open the verse, possibly with a question, or close it, with a conclusion. It can be half a line long or a full line.
 - III. Come armed with a suggestion for the device, but be ready to let the kids alter your idea or come up with their own.
- C. No need to explain the structure. It’s best to start by getting kids’ input, then incorporate it into your structure. They’ll get the idea when they hear it.

3. Ask a simple clear question to prompt input

- A. Let your song theme and structure inform this question.
- B. Make it specific enough to focus their answers but also
- C. Open enough to provide a diversity of ideas
- D. Go around the circle; repeat the question and take one answer from each child.
- E. Encourage the kids to sing their answer if they want - listen for a melody you might use.
- F. Write the answers down as you go. Record them as well, especially if kids are singing.
- G. Don’t allow criticism from kids about one another’s ideas
- H. Don’t make any criticism yourself - accept all answers. Be prepared for surprises and unrelated ideas.

4. Rough draft

- A. Sing the song using your structure with all the answers plugged in
- B. Use the kids' melodies if they suggested any
- C. Give yourself free reign - just sing
- D. Don't worry about the quality, uniformity, or even absence of meter, rhyme, melody, etc. - just sing
- E. It may sound long and unstructured to you but the kids will love it
- F. Record it and listen back

5. Polishing

- A. Now that they've heard their ideas in context, the kids will start to get more ideas.
- B. Go around the circle again to ask if anyone wants to change their idea
- C. Keep the originals and write new ideas on a new sheet
- D. Some kids may copy others - that's ok - it shortens the song and may improve it
- E. Encourage the kids again to sing their own melodies
- F. Sing, record, play back, and repeat from step 2 as many times as seems fruitful

6. Further polishing

- A. Depending on how much time you have, your goal for the song, and the maturity of the group, you may wish to direct the song into a more useable form, with a constant meter, rhyme scheme, and melody
- B. Start with the line that works the best in each of these respects and tell what you like about it.
- C. Also work from their cues - if they seem dissatisfied with a line, start there. Try to help them discover the trouble themselves and fix it.
- D. Sample dialog: So we like verse three because the words at the end rhyme here and here. Do all the verses rhyme like that? What's one that doesn't rhyme? Can we make it rhyme? What words rhyme with ____?
- E. Try to preserve the essence of each original contribution.
- F. Make your own suggestions as needed, but make sure you get group approval of any change. (They will almost always approve of an improvement.)

6th - 12th grade

For this age, individual treatment works better than a group effort.

- 1. Characteristics of the age group
 - A. They are rugged individuals
 - B. They are heavily influenced by their own taste in popular music
 - C. They are too diverse in opinion to cooperate on a song

2. Group work on a song is unlikely to fly.
 - A. Art is a personal process at this age.
 - B. Only a certain percentage will be all that interested to begin with
 - C. Those that are will not want to make room for someone else's vision in their own song.
 - D. If there's a way to do it I haven't found it.

3. What will work
 - A. Groups of two or three might work on a song together. When possible pair a student talented with words and a student talented at music.
 - B. A group project that incorporates songs written by individuals (possibly all around a given theme), such as a CD or a review would be appropriate. If other nonmusical jobs, such as graphic design, can contribute to the project that can be a plus.
 - C. Group work should be confined to sharpening general skills and constructive critique methods.
 - D. Exercises can be assigned, with 10-15 minutes of individual work, followed by group evaluation. Or songs in progress can be presented to the group for evaluation.

4. Group critique.
 - A. A good critique method
 - I. will help every participant to feel safe in presenting their work and receiving feedback.
 - II. The writer should be able to receive feedback that will help him write his best song, as opposed to receiving opinions that are irrelevant to his own vision.
 - B. Liz Lerman's critique method
 - I. A group moderator is needed to insure that the format is followed and to help the writer and respondents express themselves clearly and respectfully.
 - II. Start by having the writer sing the song for the group. If he is uncomfortable singing, just reading the lyrics will do. If the song is incomplete the writer presents whatever portion is ready and explains what still needs to be done.
 - III. The response is a four step process. The order is important. You can always jump back to a previous step if needed, however you may not jump forward.
 - (1) Affirmations**
 - a. Each respondent offers positive comments or observations.
 - b. Be specific about elements of the song you like and why.
 - c. If you can't say something positive, make a neutral observation.
 - d. Make sure each respondent has one or two chances to comment - don't skip anyone.
 - e. Respondents are not allowed to repeat a comment that was already made.
 - (2) The writer asks questions**
 - a. The writer asks specific questions of the group. This allows the writer to bring up issues that he or she is concerned about with the song.
 - b. Respondents must confine their answers to address the writer's questions and not say more.
 - c. Some example questions would be, "What did you picture in your head during the second verse?" "Did you understand the ending - what did it mean to you?" "Was the melody catchy - can you still hum it?"

(3) Respondents ask questions of the writer.

- a. This is your chance to clarify the attitude or intent of the writer. What is he/she trying to accomplish with the song?
- b. Questions should not be veiled criticisms such as “Why didn’t you end it properly?”
- c. Questions should be true attempts to understand the writer’s intent, such as, “How did you want the ending to make your audience feel?”

(4) Suggestions

- a. Now is the chance for respondents to make suggestions. However, it is important to leave control with the writer.
- b. Respondents must ask permission each time before making a comment.
- c. Ask as specifically as possible without revealing the comment. For example, “May I suggest an alternate way to end the song?” (But not “May I suggest you change the end to (specific idea here).”
- d. The writer is allowed to say “No!” If he does, the respondent must respect that and refrain from making the comment.

Resources - here are a few URLs that might be of help

1. <http://songguru.blogspot.com> - My own blog called “Tips For Young Songwriters.”
2. <http://www.cmnonline.org> - The Children’s Music Network
3. <http://www.musesmuse.com> - The Muse’s Muse offers many great songwriting resources
4. <http://www.songu.com> - SongU is a great place for professional-minded songwriters to hone skills.