Saying more with fewer words

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PX7422
The Writers Voice
CW2

Introduction: The Economy of Ideas

One of the most striking discoveries that I have made during the Writers Voice module is the power of using language economically. Whilst I had some innate awareness, this was an aspect of lyric writing that I had not properly considered before. I have since noticed that many of my favourite song lyrics communicate big ideas with only a few words. For example, the opening verse of Queen of the Stone Age's 'No one knows' (Homme, 2002):

> *We get some rules to follow*
> *That and this*
> *These and those*
> *No one knows*

It is economical in virtually every sense; only one word dares to extend to a second syllable. It is four short lines that my four year old can read, and yet it causes my mind ponder Foucault's notions of the Panopticon (1975). Similarly Thom Yorke (2016) employs the repetition of a few short commonplace and unremarkable phrases (Kearney, 2016) to open up a song brimming with emotional weight:

> *Dreamers*
> *They never learn*
> *They never learn*
> *Beyond the point*
> *Of no return*
> *Of no return*

My own exploration, experimentation and redrafting during this module has been driven by the overarching question: '*How can my lyrics say more with fewer words?*'

I expect one reason for this is that the economy of ideas is an established part of my music composition and song structure. In the previous module, Musical Language for songwriting, I sought to incorporate aspects of minimalism and impressionism into my work; it now makes sense to me that my lyric writing would follow suit.

Journalistic Economy

Ralph Murphy (2013) likened songwriting to screenwriting, but whereas a screenwriter has upwards of an hour and a half to tell their story, most songwriters have about three minutes to do the same. In comparing the craft of writing song lyrics to that of writing novels, author Michael Chabon's asserted that 'the joy of lyrics as opposed to novels is their economy and their use of suggestion' (Lynskey, 2015).

When considering other forms of writing that place a high value on economy of language, I have been drawn to the practice of news journalism, with its emphasis on succinct clarity and the prioritisation of the most important elements of each story. Through research and conversations with journalists, I have learned about the commonplace practice of 'Inverted Pyramiding' (Scanlon, 2003); a practice in journalism thought to date back to the American Civil War and the invention of the telegram, and which is still being employed today by news organisations such as the BBC (Fowler, 2020; Pickup, 2020). There are clear parallels between this practice and that of 'Pyramiding' (Stolpe, 2007) in which a songwriter will 'progress song ideas from narrow to broad' (Ibid., 97).
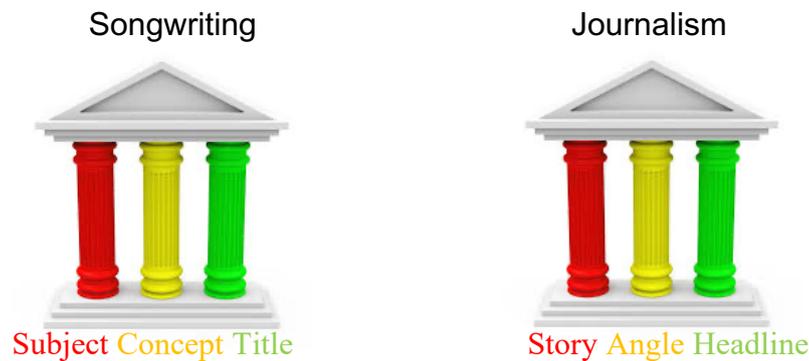
Journalism: Inverted Pyramiding (Scanlon, 2003)
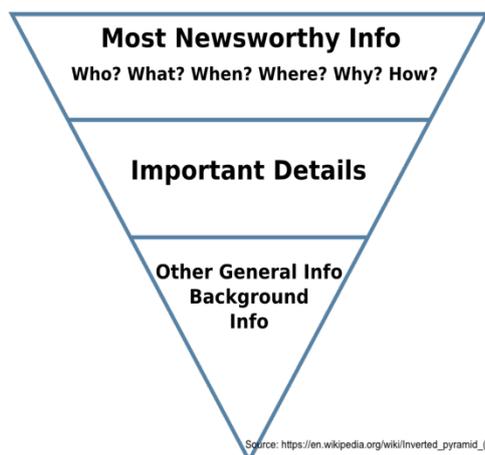
Songwriting: Pyramiding (Stolpe, 2007)

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inverted_pyramid_(jo
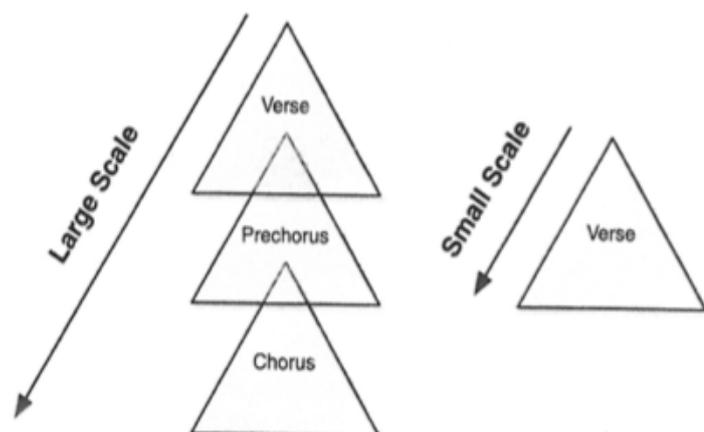
Similarly, Jonathan Whiskerd's 'Three Lyrical Pillars' (2020) seem very applicable to writing news articles:

Songwriting   Journalism

Subject Concept Title   Story Angle Headline

As a further experiment, I have adapted some well-known song lyrics to a common news article structure (see Appendix 2). This initial research suggests that it is worth continuing explore further what the practices of journalism can offer to songwriters.

Oceans

Through these enquiries I realised that my best chances of writing lyrics that '*say more with fewer words'* was to spend a lot of time thinking about the stories I wanted to tell and to take time to construct and reconstruct phrases that communicated multiple layers of meaning simultaneously. I found that the more time spent planning, considering, honing and refining song concepts, the more layered with meaning my lyrics became. Employing techniques such as 'Song mapping' (Hawkins, 2016), Toggling (Stolpe, 2007:56), and Archetypes & Monomyth (Blacklaw, 2020) have all contributed to layering meaning within my work, whilst maintaining a sense of control.

A good example is the song 'Oceans', where economy of writing and layered meaning is at its very core. The subject of the song is 'deepfelt needs'. The concept is to reference various natural elements needed for life within the lyrics, through a strophic hymn-like structure. The title is the key metaphor for the song. Originally there were only two repeated verses. Lines one and three focussed on external detail, lines two and four pointed to internal detail. The bridge was a single word.

> *Give me a sunset I can keep*
> *Give me sense that I am seen*
> *Give oceans*
> *Give me all things*

Give me a garden primed for growth
Give me a shelter beyond the cold
Wildwood burning
Deepening Yearning

I liked the repetition, the form and the phrases, but feedback in class was that this was in fact too succinct to adequately explore the ideas of the song and there was perhaps too much repetition. I realised that I'd in fact been *too economical* and set about redrafting the song. I ended up with four verses having developed both of my original second lines into verses of their own.

Give me a sunset I can keep
Flight of swallows upon the breeze
Give me oceans
Give me all things

Give me a sense that I am seen
As I am, not as I might have been
Leaves are falling
Colours fading

Give me a shelter beyond the cold
Ember days burned out long ago
Wildwood searching
Deepening Yearning

Give me a garden primed for growth
Roots that run deep in land left fallow
Bloom and burgeon
Peace resurgent

These extra lyrics give each verse a sense of 'breathing space' and enabled me to further develop my concept to reference each of Maslow's 'Hierarchy of needs' (1943), and I also realised I could add a seasonal journey through the progression of verses.

 The song concludes with reprise of the first verse with a slight change:

> *Give me a sunset I can keep*
> *Flight of swallows upon the breeze*

becomes

> *Give me a sunset I can seek*
> *Flight of swallows upon the breeze*

Changing the last word of the above phrase from 'keep' to 'seek' signals a shift from holding on to the past to embracing the future, connecting to Maslow's ideas of self-actualisation. It also suggests a change in the direction that the swallows are flying (the collective noun for a group of swallows is a 'flight'), referring to seasonal migration (RSPB, 2020) and the passing of time; a theme that is also alluded to by the progression of each verse. (see Appendix for complete lyrics)
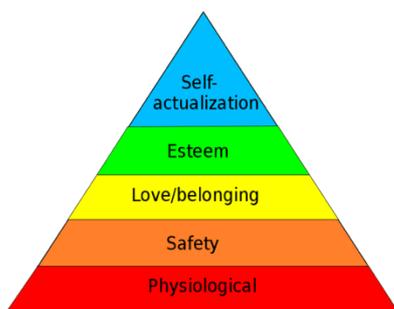
Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow's Hierachy of Needs	Natural Elements	Seasons
Give me a sunset I can seek	Water: Give me Oceans	V1 - Summer
As I am, not as I might have been…	Land: Roots that run deep in land left fallow	V2 - Autumn
Give me a sense that I am seen…	Light: Give me a sunset…	V3 - Winter
Give me a shelter beyond the cold…	Wind: Flight of swallows upon the breeze	V4 & 5 - Spring
Give me a garden primed for growth…	Fire: Ember days burned out long ago	V6 - Summer

Three layers of meaning attached to various lyrics

Rhyme

Assonance and internal rhyme plays a significant role in my lyrical style. I can trace this to the influence of Guy Garvey (2008):

> *So yes, I guess I'm asking you*
> *To back a horse that's good for glue*

Studying Pat Pattison's (2014) material on 'Concealed Aliteration' and 'Juncture' have developed my technique and grown my confidence to use rhyme as an effective device to create lines with multiple layers of meaning.

Concealed Alliteration

Tongue Position:

	Plosives			Fricatives					Nasals		
Voiced:	b	d	g	v	TH	z	zh	j	m	n	ng
Unvoiced:	p	t	k	f	th	s	sh	ch			

Pattison notes that the position of the tongue is in the same place for voiced and unvoiced plosive, fricative and nasal sounds and then moves progressively from the front to the back of the mouth as the sounds in the above table shift from left to right. He suggests that it is possible to create the sense of alliteration while employing a range of consonant sounds by moving vertically and horizontally through the consonant sounds in the order they are listed. This has proved to be a powerful tool.

Juncture

Considering how words connect has opened up further opportunities for creating layers of meaning within lines. Words that have a smooth legato flow from one to another can emphasise the inter-connection of ideas as well as sounds. For example the second verse of 'See/Saw' opens with:

> *Searing pain sends seizures*
> *Surging through me*

'Sends seizures surging' uses alliteration at the start and end of each word enabling the line to be sung legato. This is further emphasised by the concealed alliteration created by the close tongue position of the unvoiced fricative 's' with the voiced fricatives 'zh' and 'j'. The overall effect of 'seizures surging' is felt as one connected series of sounds reflecting the visceral nature of the idea.

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Conversely, 'Hunted By Innocence' uses a deliberately disjoined staccato in the second verse:

> *Can't breathe*
> *When you isolate*
> *To asphyxiate the accusing*

The stress on '-ate' in lines two and three, sung staccato, emphasises the disconnection associated with the notions of isolation and suffocation. This came to the forefront of my thinking when editing an early draft of the lyric which contained the alternative:
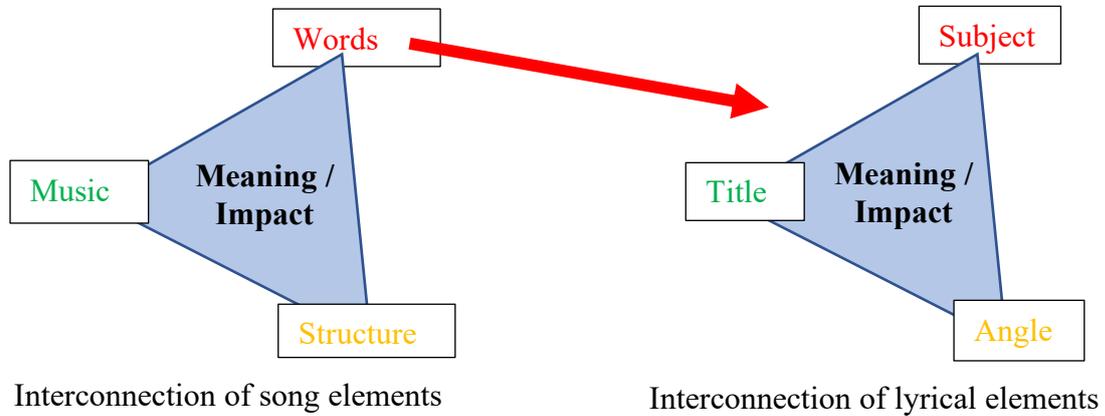
> *Can't breathe*
> *When the isolation*
> *Asphyxiates the accusing*

Here the word 'isolation' joins too smoothly to 'asphyxiates' and thus undermines the overall sense of detachment that the lyric is meaning to convey, hence the move to a more disjoined sound.

Conclusion: The Interconnection of Elements

Through the Creative Process module, I came to define a *good* song as being a 'balanced combination of words, music and structure' (Beales, 2018) Through the Writers Voice module I have developed a deeper appreciation of the interdependence that the various lyrical elements and approaches mentioned have on overall song meaning and impact. Just as I would argue the three core elements that make up a song can be viewed as a dynamic triangle, so too I would suggest that the three 'Lyrical Pillars' (Whiskerd, 2020) are helpfully viewed similarly, with each element impacting and influencing the shape and content of the other elements. Where this dynamic model is most useful, is when considering what the 'star players' (Rockberger, 2020) are within each work. Each of the other song elements, or in this case lyrical elements, can then be modified to increase the overall sense of meaning or impact. As these

examples have shown, it is the balanced combination of elements that is key to unlocking economical writing, or to put it another way: saying more with fewer words.

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        Words                                    Subject


Music        Meaning /                Title       Meaning /
              Impact                                Impact

        Structure                                  Angle
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Interconnection of song elements   Interconnection of lyrical elements

- 1625 words

End note

My confidence as a writer has certainly grown through this module. I would like to extend my thanks to Jonathan Whiskerd, Oli Rockberger and also my class-mates for the role that each played in my development throughout this module.

Appendix 1

Oceans

Give me a sunset I can keep
Flight of swallows upon the breeze
Give me oceans
Give me all things

Give me a sense that I am seen
As I am, not as I might have been
Leaves are falling
Colours fading

Give me a shelter beyond the cold
Ember days burned out long ago
Wildwood searching
Deepening yearning

Give me a garden primed for growth
Roots that run deep in land left fallow
Bloom and burgeon
Peace resurgent

Blow…

Give me a garden primed for growth
Roots that run deep in land left fallow
Bud and burgeon
Hope resurgent

Give me a sunset I can seek
Flight of swallows upon the breeze
Give me oceans
Give me all things

Research into similarities between journalist and lyrical structure and practice.

Correspondence with BBC News Online Journalist Sarah Fowler (2020):

'Hi Shane,

Good to hear from you. When writing stories for the BBC News website we follow the inverted pyramid structure. So we start with the most important information first, followed by second most important, followed by third etc - the idea is that if a reader gets bored after two sentences and clicks elsewhere on the internet, they will have at least read the most important info. We have quite a strict four line intro to stories that needs to fit into our specific news writing software, but it also helps to keep the introduction succinct and to the point, and removes any unnecessary language. The aim is to get the crux of the story - the whos, whats and wheres - in that initial paragraph. Often the fourth sentence tends to be the 'why this is important' / 'why you should read on' bit giving the context of a story or explaining its wider background. See the Israel story below:

Israel 'heading towards record fourth election'

Israel is facing the growing prospect of an unprecedented fourth election in just over a year after a deadline to form a government expired.

Its president passed the mandate to parliament after centre-left bloc leader Benny Gantz failed to seal talks to form a unity government in time.

If no-one else gets nominated within 21 days, new elections will be held by 4 August.

Israel has been in a political crisis after three inconclusive rounds.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-52322379

I can't actually find any guidance on the BBC journalism academy website, but the bitesize website explains it pretty well (it is targeting teenagers!)

https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zpmq9qt/revision/3

The rest of the story can be structured quite freely but making sure to include all of the information including quotes, keeping it balanced and representing all sides.

We've changed and adapted our news writing style in recent years to make it more accessible and less complicated. Part of this is how we select our

subheadings - helping to signpost readers to what will follow in the story. See the China Covid story below which uses questions to help structure the story: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-52321529

We often do this for the more complex stories because it really helps the writer to explain them properly (and often the person writing the story isn't a specialist so they'll need to go away and research it properly before answering the questions!)

With features and analysis there's a lot more scope to mix up the structure or completely throw it out the window - with original journalism we can be more creative in deciding how to tell a particular story. More often than not it starts with a very personal account or emotive quote. See the feature below:

Coronavirus at Smithfield pork plant: The untold story of America's biggest outbreak https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52311877

I don't know if I've answered your question properly or not... if not, let me know and I'll have another go. Stay safe & healthy! Sarah'

Re: approximate article length

'So if it's not a main news story we're massively discouraged from going over 300 words. If it's the top story then it can go to 8-900 words. Features tend to be max 1000 unless they are long reads in which case these can be 3-4,000.'

Conversation with Times journalist, Oliver Pickup (2020), centred around similarities that the impact of digital consumption has had on both journalists and songwriters.

I used the following comparison to restructure four sets of song lyrics as news articles.

News Article Structure	Equivalent Song Structure
Headline	Title
Byline	Artist/Songwriter
Lead	Chorus
Body	Verses
Quotes	Bridge
Conclusion	Tag

Below are the restructured lyrics to Firework, by Katie Perry (2010); Baby can I hold you, by Tracy Chapman (1988); War (What is it good for), by Edwin Starr (1970); and What makes you beautiful, by One Direction (2011). Publishing details are listed in Bibliography. Each song contains between 50 and 280 words, suggesting a similar length to the brief news articles referred to above.

FIREWORK

Katie Perry

Baby you're a firework, come on let your colours burst.

Do you ever feel like a plastic bag, drifting thought the wind wanting to start again? Do you ever feel, feel so paper thin, like a house of cards one blow from caving in? Do you ever feel already buried deep six feet under, scream, but no one seems to hear a thing?

Do you know that there's still a chance for you, 'cause there's a spark in you?

You just gotta ignite the light and let it shine. Just own the night like the Fourth of July.

"Baby you're a firework. Come on let your colors burst. Make 'em go "Oh, oh, oh!"
You're gonna leave 'em fallin' down down down"

You don't have to feel like a waste of space. You're original, cannot be replaced. If you only knew what the future holds - after a hurricane comes a rainbow.

Maybe a reason why all the doors are closed - so you can open one that leads you to the perfect road. Like a lightning bolt, your heart will glow. And when it's time, you'll know

Boom! Even brighter than the moon.

It's always been inside of you, and now it's time to let it through.

Baby Can I Hold You

Tracy Chapman

Baby can I hold you tonight? Maybe if I told you the right words at the right time you'd be mine.

Sorry is all that you can't say. Years gone by and still words don't come easily like "Sorry", "Forgive me" or "I love you".

But you can say "Baby"

War!
Edwin Star

What is it good for? Absolutely nothing.

Listen to me: oh, war I despise 'cause it means destruction of innocent lives. War means tears to thousands of mothers' eyes when their sons go out to fight and lose their lives.

War, it ain't nothin' but a heartbreaker, friend only to the undertaker. War is an enemy to all mankind. The thought of war blows my mind.

War has caused unrest within the younger generation. Induction, then destruction, who wants to die?

"War has shattered many a young man's dreams. Made him disabled, bitter and mean. Life is much too short and precious to spend fighting wars each day. War can't give life, it can only take it away".

Peace, love and understanding, tell me is there no place for them today? They say we must fight to keep our freedom, but Lord knows there's gotta be a better way.

What Makes You Beautiful
One Direction

If only you saw what I can see you'll understand why I want you so desperately. Right now I'm looking at you and I can't believe you don't know you're beautiful - oh that's what makes you beautiful.

Baby, you light up my world like nobody else. The way that you flip your hair gets me overwhelmed, but when you smile at the ground it ain't hard to tell you don't know you're beautiful.

You're insecure - don't know what for. You're turning heads when you walk through the door. Don't need make-up to cover up - being the way that you are is enough. everyone else in the room can see it. Everyone else but you.

So co-come on, you got it wrong, to prove I'm right, I put it in a song. I don't know why, you're being shy and turn away when I look into your eyes.

"Na na na na na na na na na na. Na na na na na na. Na na na na na na na na na. Na na na na na na"

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Starlings lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc

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Songwriters: Josh Homme / Nick S. Oliveri / Mark William Lanegan
No One Knows lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd., Universal Music Publishing Group, BMG Rights Management

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Daydreaming lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc

Appendix Discography

Katy Perry (2010) *Firework* Capitol 2010
Songwriters: Esther Dean / Mikkel Storleer Eriksen / Tor Erik Hermansen / Katy Perry / Sandy Julien Wilhelm
Firework lyrics © Peermusic Publishing, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Universal Music Publishing Group, Songtrust Ave

Edwin Star (1970) *War* Hitsville 1970
Songwriters: B. Strong / N. Whitfield
War lyrics © Stone Agate Music

Tracy Chapman (1988) *Baby Can I Hold You* Elektra/Asylum
Songwriters: Tracy Chapman
Baby Can I Hold You lyrics © Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd.

One Direction (2011) *What Makes You Beautiful* Syco 2011
Songwriters: Carl Falk / Rami Yacoub / Savan Kotchea
What Makes You Beautiful lyrics © Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd., Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, BMG Rights Management