

The background of the entire image is a dark, textured wooden surface. In the upper left, a portion of a lined notebook is visible, showing several horizontal lines. In the upper right, the rim of a dark-colored cup, likely containing coffee, is partially visible. The text is centered over this background.

THE 30-DAY LYRIC WRITING CHALLENGE

ED BELL



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CONTENTS

Introduction: How This Works	i
Day 1: The Perfect Rhyme Challenge	3
Day 2: The Color Challenge.....	5
Day 3: One-word Title Search.....	7
Day 4: Free Write #1	9
Day 5: Phrase Brainstorm.....	11
Day 6: The Near Rhyme Challenge	13
Day 7: Word Field #1	15
Day 8: The Action Challenge.....	17
Day 9: Quick Chorus #1.....	19
Day 10: Word Pairs Brainstorm	21
Day 11: Free Write #2.....	23
Day 12: The List Making Challenge	25
Day 13: The Consonance Challenge	27
Day 14: The Big, Beautiful Challenge	29
Day 15: The Simplicity Challenge	31
Day 16: Longer Title Search.....	33
Day 17: Conversational Phrases.....	35
Day 18: Playing with Meter.....	37
Day 19: Word Field #2	39

Day 20: The Sh*t You Love Challenge	41
Day 21: Contemporary Rhymes Search.....	43
Day 22: Song Idea Search.....	45
Day 23: The Assonance Challenge	47
Day 24: The Vulnerability Challenge	49
Day 25: The Opening Line Challenge.....	51
Day 26: Quick Verse	53
Day 27: De-tongue Twister Challenge.....	55
Day 28: The Universal Truth Challenge	57
Day 29: Quick Chorus #2.....	59
Day 30: Verse Rewrite.....	61
Take a Bow – Now What’s Next?	63

ABOUT THE SONG FOUNDRY

At The Song Foundry it's our mission to share great songwriting ideas with the world. At thesongfoundry.com we publish articles about songwriting, host free videos on various songwriting topics, and offer Skype songwriting coaching worldwide.



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INTRODUCTION: HOW THIS WORKS

Hello – and welcome to *The 30-Day Lyric Writing Challenge*, a series of short but powerful challenges to get you writing lyrics smarter and faster.

The only way to become a better songwriter is to get plenty of practice, so that's what these thirty challenges are going to help you do.

Each challenge is designed to take exactly 10 minutes, so plus the two or three minutes you'll need to understand what each challenge is and why it's important, setting aside 15 minutes each day for 30 days is all you need to do to complete the full set.

When you do the challenges is up to you – but it's a good idea to pick the same time every day to help make it become a habit. (Pro tip: first thing in the morning is a *great* time – before work, family and any other life distractions get in the way.)

All you have to do to complete the challenge is commit to those thirty daily slots, spend a moment to make sure you understand each challenge, then start the countdown and do nothing else until the time is up.

If you've read my book *The Art of Songwriting* you'll know I'm not a huge fan of songwriting drills or exercises because I think the best way to improve your songwriting skills – by far – is to try things out and go where your curiosity leads. So in creating these challenges

THE 30-DAY LYRIC WRITING CHALLENGE

I've made sure to keep them far away from any kind of abstract drills and exercises: they're genuine, real-life things songwriters do to turn a blank page or screen into a finished lyric.

And because they're challenges more than exercises, you can bring whatever level of skill you have already – without feeling like you're out of your depth or they're way too easy – and the challenges will still push you to level up on each particular skill.

You're going to practice coming up with new song ideas. You're going to practice coming up with useful rhymes. You're going to practice rewriting lines to simplify them. And you're going to practice coming up with details and specifics that can make a lyric shine.

As you work through the challenges, I'm also going to tell you a bit about *why* the challenges matter – not only what you're doing but why (and how) it's going to help you as a lyricist. I'll do that to try and explain why these challenges are more than just exercises and to help give you the drive and perspective to give the challenges your best shot.

With each challenge I'll also give you a target to aim for – something like, 'come up with at least six perfect rhymes for each of these words.' They're all based on what seems like a challenging but achievable goal for most songwriters. Of course, you might not be most songwriters, and that's fine: if you don't quite hit the target some days, that's fine, and if you reach the target well before 10 minutes is up, that's also fine – just keep going until the time's up.

Either way, quality is much more important than quantity with these challenges – and most important of all is sticking out the 10 minutes, without fail, for 30 days in a row. As I said, the only way to improve your songwriting skills – or any creative skills, for what it's

THE 30-DAY LYRIC WRITING CHALLENGE

worth – is by putting in the time and putting in the practice. So if you want to see results, it's up to you to stick it out.

I designed the challenges to take 10 minutes each day partly so you can focus on one specific skill in each challenge, but also so they'd fit into any daily schedule. If you're super keen and have time, you could do two or three challenges each day and get through them in less than a month. I obviously recommend sticking to the 30-day plan, but as long as you find thirty regular slots to get through the challenges, it's all good.

One last thing – you'll need a pen or pencil and a blank pad of paper for the challenges. And I definitely recommend you save what you create, in case you want to use any of those ideas in a real song later – you never know what might come in useful.

So there we are. That's pretty much everything you need to know before you dive in.

So let's do it.

**THE 30-DAY LYRIC
WRITING CHALLENGE**

[DAY 1]

THE PERFECT RHYME CHALLENGE

For your first challenge, let's start with something straightforward: a perfect rhyme search. As you probably know, rhyme is a really common and effective way of giving a lyric structure and making it easier to remember.

Sure, in real life you might use the Internet or a rhyming dictionary to help you find rhymes, but you also want to be quick at coming up with them on your own.

Quick reminder: perfect rhymes are exact matches like 'cat' and 'hat', not 'cat' and 'hurt'. They can also be more than one syllable: like 'cravat' and 'acrobat'. Watch out for identities – like 'fine' and 'define', that just repeat '-fine' – and also any words you have to mis-stress to force a rhyme – like 'LOOK-ing' and 'Bei-JING'.

Why it matters: Training your brain to churn out rhyming words – especially rhyming words that are connected in meaning – on demand is an essential songwriting skill.

DAY 1 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Find at least six perfect rhymes for each of these words:

[1] hair

[2] set

[3] show

[4] shine

[5] long

You can try cycling through the alphabet – ‘at’, ‘bat’, ‘cat’, ‘dat’ ... – but also try free associating: resting your mind against the word and seeing what other words it sparks.

For bonus points, try to find rhymes that are connected in meaning – e.g. ‘late’ and ‘wait’, both about time – and/or rhymes that are more unusual or unexpected somehow.

And like I said in the introduction, if finding thirty rhymes in ten minutes is a walk in the park for you, that’s great. Just keep going. See how many more you can find before the time’s up.

[DAY 2]

THE COLOR CHALLENGE

Today's challenge is about reaching for the perfect word. Writing music in songwriting is much more about the overall vibe or feel, but lyric writing is a different challenge because your specific word choices can have subtly different effects on the lyric overall.

In general, lyrics work best when they're simple, but a great lyric usually steers clear of anything too obvious or clichéd. Sometimes, reaching for a word that's not hyper-unusual but equally not everyday is a way of turning an average lyric into an interesting one.

Why it matters: Training yourself to push beyond the first or most obvious word that comes into your head is a great way of turning an average lyric into a good one, or a good one into a great one.

DAY 2 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Think of at least twenty words to describe color that aren't any of the following:

black

white

red

blue

green

yellow

purple

brown

Feel free to be as creative as you like. As well as more obvious colors that aren't on the list, you could also look for adjectives that describe other qualities but suggest color – like 'ashen' or 'luminescent'.

[DAY 3]

ONE-WORD TITLE SEARCH

Coming up with great titles is an essential part of the songwriting process. Sometimes it's the first thing you do. Sometimes you decide on a song's story or situation before you try and express that through a title. As long as your song ends up with a title that fits its story or situation well, it's all good.

Today you're going to try the title-first approach. You're looking for words that both grab your listeners' attention and encourage you to write something different and imaginative.

Why it matters: Choosing a great title is part of writing a great song. Sometimes all you need is that great word or phrase and everything else starts to fall together.

DAY 3 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Come up with at least twelve one-word song titles that really grab people's attention or just sound compelling to you.

There are no rules about what these should or shouldn't be, but emotionally-charged words, or dramatic words, or words about some kind of pain or conflict tend to work really well – e.g. crazy, paradise, fever, fallout.

[DAY 4]

FREE WRITE #1

Today's challenge is the first of two free writes. If you've never tried free writing before, it's a great place to start when you're not completely sure what the lyric could be about or could be trying to say. It's a way of getting ideas and phrases down on the page that you can craft into a polished lyric later.

The challenge is really simple: write for 10 minutes without stopping. Don't filter, don't edit. Just write.

90% of what you write might be terrible – and that's fine. 95% of what you write will probably come out in free prose – without any structure, shape or rhyme – which is also fine. The goal is to get the raw material you might build your song out of on the page, without judging it or filtering yourself in any way. The goal is just to write, non-stop, and see what happens.

Why it matters: Sometimes the hardest part in starting a lyric is knowing what you're trying to say. Free writing is a great way to give you the raw material of words, phrases and ideas you can craft into a lyric later.

DAY 4 CHALLENGE



Free Write: Pick an emotional moment in your life. Write about it in free prose for ten minutes without stopping or editing yourself.

[DAY 5]

PHRASE BRAINSTORM

Saying something fresh in a lyric means avoiding anything that sounds too obvious, overused or clichéd.

At the same time, one of the keys to writing a great lyric is coming up with words or phrases that sound natural – like the things people naturally say, and the ways people express themselves in real life.

Today's challenge is about coming up with phrases that do both of those things.

Why it matters: In lyric writing it's important to say things that sound both fresh and natural. Training yourself to gravitate to words and phrases that do both of these is an essential part of writing great lyrics.

DAY 5 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Think of at least ten phrases that express the idea 'I love you' or 'I'm there for you'.

Have some fun with this – this challenge isn't just about looking for synonyms or rewording those two phrases. For example, 'I've got your back' and 'Call me' are both great everyday phrases that express the idea 'I'm there for you' in a more interesting way. Try finding ten more.

[DAY 6]

THE NEAR RHYME CHALLENGE

The very first challenge was about finding perfect rhymes to a list of given words. Today's challenge is the same, except you're looking for near rhymes – also called half or slant rhymes.

Half rhymes are any rhymes that are not quite perfect – like 'cat' and 'sack', or 'through' and 'shoot'. You'll hear how '-at' and '-ack' are almost the same sound but not quite, and ditto '-ooh' and '-oot'. Not every song (or songwriter) uses tons of near rhymes – but plenty do because they can stop a lyric sounding too square or formal, and they open up lots of other rhyming possibilities.

The kind of rhymes you use in your songs depends mostly on personal taste and the conventions of the styles or genres you work in, but whatever you write, being able to draw on different types of rhymes is an important songwriting skill.

Why it matters: Training your brain to churn out rhyming words – including different types of rhyme – on demand is an essential songwriting skill.

DAY 6 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Find at least six near rhymes for each of these words.

[1] truth

[2] enough

[3] free

[4] behind

[5] far

Again, you can try cycling through the alphabet – ‘at’, ‘bath’, ‘cart’, ‘date’ ... – but free associating to see what other, more unexpected near rhymes are out there is a great idea, since there are tons more near rhymes available than perfect rhymes.

In this case, some of the words are two-syllables – all a stress on the second syllable – so you can rhyme any one-syllable word or two-syllable word with a stress on the second syllable (e.g. ‘behind’ and ‘round’).

And as for how near the rhymes have to be? Use your own judgment. If you used ‘truth’ and ‘cow’ in a song, would anyone think you intended a rhyme? Probably not. How about ‘truth’ and ‘cult’? Maybe. See what sounds convincing to you.

[DAY 7]

WORD FIELD #1

Lyrics are built out of individual words, so crafting a great lyric means being good at finding the right words to express what you're trying to say in the way you're trying to say it.

Today's challenge is about practicing that skill by connecting words with similar meaning. Then connecting those words with more words of similar meaning. Some people call this a 'word field' or a 'word web' or a 'semantic field', but what matters is the way it will help you to build a lyric out of related words.

Just like with free writing, you might not use every word you come up with to write your final lyric, but the act of putting them all down will give you more words to play around with when you do.

Why it matters: Training yourself to access your broader vocabulary and connect words with similar or related meanings will help you write lyrics faster and choose more suitable or more interesting words.

DAY 7 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Word Field: Start with the word ‘purpose’ and spend ten minutes coming up with related words and words related to those words.

For example, you might start with a word like ‘meaning’ – which is similar to the word ‘purpose’ in being the thing that drives you in your life. Then you might connect the word ‘meaning’ with the word ‘definition’ – which is similar to the word ‘meaning’ in the sense of the literal meaning of a word or phrase.

It’s up to you how you do this – some people put the starting word in the center of a blank page and connect all of the others with lines. Some people just let it come out more freeform. However you do it, just spend ten minutes coming up with as many words as you can. Aim for at least forty.

[DAY 8]

THE ACTION CHALLENGE

Nice work – you’re a whole week in.

Today’s challenge is about the things people do. Because, if you hadn’t noticed, what people say they do is not always what people actually do. And, if you haven’t noticed, what people actually do is nearly always a better representation of who they actually are and what they think than the things they say.

In songwriting, you often hear this expressed as the principle ‘show don’t tell’ – because it’s always more captivating to talk about the moonlight streaming through the window than just to say the night was dark. In the same way, lyrics that talk about how she cries herself to sleep are always more evocative than lyrics that just say ‘she was heartbroken’.

Why it matters: Songs are about people, and people show us who they are in what they do. That’s why compelling lyrics make sure to show and not just tell.

DAY 8 CHALLENGE



10 mins

Come up with at least ten things a shady lover might do behind your back.

If you've ever had the luck of being with a shady significant other, you'll know first-hand they don't sit you down and say 'Hey, this isn't working'.

Instead, they *do* things that show that they're shady. They don't answer your calls. They're distant and aloof. They slide into someone else's DMs. Try and come up with at least ten other things somebody who's flaky, deceptive or just not interested might do that show you they're flaky, deceptive or just not interested.

[DAY 9]

QUICK CHORUS #1

Next up is a different kind of challenge: you're going to write a complete song section today.

I'm going to give you a lyrical hook – the word or phrase that's repeated in your chorus and encapsulates what your song is about – and ask you to build a complete chorus around it. (The lyrical hook a song uses in its chorus is usually also its title, by the way, though there are exceptions.)

Ultimately, this challenge is about filling the gaps in a lyric to

...that's it for this preview.

To complete the full 30-Day Challenge, pick up a copy at

thesongfoundry.com/30-day-challenges