

Musical Theatre Songwriting - 2021

1. Write Active Songs

- Show, don't tell.
- Move the plot, theme, characters forward. Do not be in the same place at the end of the song as you are at the beginning. Something or someone needs to change, be acted upon. The song needs an arc.
- Don't repeat yourself. Try not to repeat choruses. Verse-A-A-B-A song form works better for Musical Theatre than pop song form (verse chorus verse chorus, etc.)
- Song lyrics should sound like dialogue set to music, not poetry. The lyrics are meant to be heard, not read, so take care with prosody (the stress and intonation patterns of a line or sentence) and syntax (the rules that govern the structure of a line or sentence). Don't contort the language to force rhymes to fall at the ends of lines. For example, "And then I came into the room" vs. "And then into the room I came.")
- Avoid soliloquy songs. If you must write one, earn it.

2. Song Form

- Verse-A-A-B-A song form works well for Musical Theatre (Broadway Musical Style). It's the form that was most often used by all the greats from the golden era of musicals (Rogers & Hart, Rogers & Hammerstein, Kander & Ebb, Cole Porter, George & Ira Gershwin, Lerner & Loewe, Stephen Sondheim, Jule Styne, Jerry Herman, Irving Berlin, Frank Loesser, Bock & Harnick, etc.). Many contemporary musical theatre writers still use this form, though (Flaherty & Ahrens, Jason Robert Brown, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Schonberg & Boublil, Ashman & Menken, Stephen Schwartz, etc.).
- Almost all the Beatles songs are A-A-B-A, incidentally.

Examples of Verse-A-A-B-A:

Over the Rainbow: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4J5gXGlkC3g>

Somewhere That's Green: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9bpRFFpDoc>

Back to Before: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaL11b-Lcso&list=PLR6xxrBA5JR0yk6vEUMYNK_QV-tygDQp3&index=3

Your Daddy's Son:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xeAXnQg11q4&list=PLR6xxrBA5JR0yk6vEUMYNK_QV-tygDQp3&index=20

Blackbird (Beatles): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Man4Xw8Xypo>

3. Be Specific

- Musical theatre songs are no longer used as pop songs on the radio, so there's no need to generalize
- Avoid "Villagers on the Green" numbers
- Block (stage) the song while you're writing it, give the character an action to help with specificity.

4. **Keep it simple**
 - “Brevity is the soul of wit.” If you can say it in one line instead of a verse, do. If you can say it in a word instead of a sentence, or a one-syllable word instead of a four syllable word, do.
 - Complicated and sophisticated do not, necessarily, mean “good”.
5. **Rhyme Perfectly**
 - An imperfect rhyme lands like a wet dishcloth. A perfect rhyme goes “ping”, and can turn a mildly amusing lyric into something very clever and/or funny.
 - Pop songs may not rhyme perfectly, but the audience has the opportunity to hear the song many times, and can read along with the jewel case cover or find the lyrics on the web. In MT the audience only has one chance to hear and understand the lyric.
 - It’s not cheating to use a rhyming dictionary, dictionary, thesaurus – any tools that can help you and save some time.
 - You don’t *have* to rhyme at all, but if you choose not to rhyme, use different vowel sounds, so the listener doesn’t think you were trying to rhyme, but failed.
6. **It is the composer’s job to arrange the music**
 - Don’t hand your orchestrator a lead sheet. It shouldn’t be his job to harmonize your song.
 - It is the way a melody is harmonized that is the stamp of the composer, not the melody itself. For example, “No One is Alone” is a common tune (“The Candyman”, etc.). It’s the way Sondheim arranges/harmonizes it that makes it uniquely his.
7. **Don’t allow the writer’s hand to show**
 - Don’t show off your prodigious vocabulary (unless the character for whom you’re writing has a prodigious vocabulary). Make sure your characters speak in their voices, not yours.
8. **Say it without saying it.**
 - Come in through the back door.
 - Explore metaphor, simile, imagery, and alliteration

Examples:

Waving Through a Window: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfnMvo87fQU>

Green Finch and Linnet Bird: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1GPRwr5boM>

Adelaid’s Lament: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3peRhL90gEs>

9. **Be prepared to drown your babies.**
 - “Musicals are not written, they’re rewritten.”
10. **Never Underestimate Your Audience!**

Examples of Verse-A-A-B-A Musical Theatre Songs:

"Somewhere Over The Rainbow"

Songwriters: Harburg, E Y / Arlen, Harold

VERSE:

When all the world is a hopeless jumble
And the raindrops tumble all around
Heaven opens a magic lane
When all the clouds darken up the skyway
There's a rainbow highway to be found
Leading from your windowpane
To a place behind the sun
Just a step beyond the rain

A1:

Somewhere, over the rainbow
Way up high
There's a land that I heard of
Once in a lullabye

A2:

Somewhere, over the rainbow
Skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true

BRIDGE (OR RELEASE):

Some day I'll wish upon a star
And wake up where the clouds are far behind me
Where troubles melt like lemon drops away above the chimney tops
That's where you'll find me

A3:

Somewhere, over the rainbow
Blue birds fly
Birds fly over the rainbow
Why, then oh, why can't I?

CODA:

If happy little bluebirds fly
Beyond the rainbow
Why, oh, why can't I?

Someone to Watch Over Me

By George and Ira Gershwin

VERSE

There's a saying old says that love is blind
Still we're often told seek and ye shall find
So I'm going to seek a certain girl/lad I've had in mind
Looking everywhere, haven't found her yet
He's the big affair I cannot forget
Only man I ever think of with regret
I'd like to add his initials to my monogram
Tell me where is the shepherd for this lost lamb

A1:

There's a somebody I'm longing to see
I hope that he turns out to be
Someone to watch over me

A2:

I'm a little lamb who's lost in a wood
I know I could always be good
To one who'll watch over me

BRIDGE:

Although he may not be the man some girls think of as handsome
To my heart, he carries the key

A3:

Won't you tell him please to put on some speed
Follow my lead, oh how I need
Someone to watch over me
Someone to watch over me

Example of A-A-B-A:

YESTERDAY – THE BEATLES

Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away.
Now it looks as though they're here to stay.
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Suddenly I'm not half the man I used to be.
There's a shadow hanging over me.
Oh, yesterday came suddenly.

Why she had to go, I don't know, she wouldn't say.
I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday.

Yesterday love was such an easy game to play.
Now I need a place to hide away.
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Example of Saying it without saying it:

I Don't Remember Christmas

From Starting Here, Starting Now

By David Shire and Richard Maltby Jr.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPzzjaDd4Uo>

I was standing in the bedroom
When it suddenly came clear
That at last I don't remember
That at one time you were here.
All that stuff that used to haunt me
Like your robe behind the door?
For the first time, I don't notice
That they're not here anymore.

And I don't remember summer,
I do not remember fall,
So it's possible December
Never happened after all.
Did we trim the tree together?
I can't get the image through,
'Cause I don't remember Christmas
And I don't remember you.

Later on, to my astonishment,
I did not feel a tug
When I walked into the living room
And saw that sheepskin rug.
All those pesky little echoes,
They're all gone without a trace.
It was good to know I could grow
Unaccustomed to your face.

'Cause I don't remember Easter
Or the rainy day we met.
Did we really have some good times?
Come on, tell me, I forget.
Did I think that you were springtime?
It's all vanished in the blue,
'Cause I don't remember Christmas
And I don't remember you.

If she wants to leave you...well, let her,
Says a practical voice in my head.
Any sensible man would forget her...
Forget her...forget her...

So Thanksgiving never happened
And Bermuda is a blur,
And I'm not the type to waste time
Over things that never were.
Were you really my obsession
Till our ship of pleasure sank?
No, I guess I must have dreamt you,
'Cause the whole year is a blank.

And I don't remember crying
And I can't recall your touch,
'Cause I'd never be so stupid
As to open up so much.
Did I really say I need you?
No, the words just don't ring true,
'Cause I don't remember talking
And I don't remember laughing
And I don't remember wanting
And I don't remember needing
I do not remember April
I do not remember Tuesday
And I don't remember Christmas
And I don't remember you.

Example of Verse-A-A-B-A, Metaphor, Imagery, rhyme, etc.

MY COLORING BOOK

By Kander & Ebb

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UE0UWwanPag>

For those who fancy coloring books
As certain people do
Here's a new one for you
A most unusual coloring book
The kind you never see
Crayons ready?
Very well
Begin to color me

These are the eyes that watched him
As he walked away
Color them gray

This is the heart that thought
He would always be true
Color it blue

These are the arms that held him
And touched him
Then lost him, somehow
Color them empty, now
These are the beads I wore
Until she came between
Color them green
This is the room I sleep in
That I walk in and weep in and hide in
That nobody sees
Color it lonely, please

This is the man
Whose love I depended upon
Color him gone