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Lyric Writing: Writing From the Title

Lesson 1:
The Function of a Title

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Lesson 1[Topic 1](#)**Topic 2**[➔ Page 1](#)[Page 2](#)[Page 3](#)[Activity 1](#)[Topic 3](#)[Topic 4](#)[Activity 2](#)[Activity 3](#)[Activity 4](#)[Activity 5](#)[Activity 6](#)[Activity 7](#)[Topic 5](#)**Course Contents**[☰ Syllabus](#)[➔ Bookmark](#)**Communication**[📢 Announcements](#)[📄 Class list](#)[🗣️ Discussion](#)[💬 Chat](#)**The Function of a Title**

Some songwriters believe that a song title is simply what you finally decide to put at the top of the page—something you decide on after you’ve finished the song—something that provides an interesting angle on the lyric content. Though this practice has many advocates, especially in rock and folk genres, it misses the point of what a song’s title is and what it should do. It treats a title as a poet, novelist, or short story writer would treat a title. A song title differs markedly from a poem’s title.

In songs, your title isn’t just something you put at the top of the page. It is the centerpiece of your song—the target area that every aspect of the song aims for. It is the main focus of the song, controlling everything else. If there are elements in the song that don’t relate to the title somehow, they don’t belong in the song.

By contrast, a poet can always be assured that his/her reader will see the title before entering the poem. Thus, a title in a poem is a pair of glasses the poet hands you to look at the poem through. They may be any color—dark, rose, blue. They may be magnifying glasses, or even binoculars looked through from the small end. They help you to see the poem, sometimes in a way that has nothing to do with the actual words of the poem. Let’s say this is our poem:

Running barefoot down the
beach, smelling the salt
air
feeling the cool of the wet
sand

Okay, not a great poem, but it’ll do.

[← Previous Page](#)[Next Page →](#)

Lesson 1[Topic 1](#)**Topic 2**[Page 1](#)[➔ Page 2](#)[Page 3](#)[Activity 1](#)[Topic 3](#)[Topic 4](#)[Activity 2](#)[Activity 3](#)[Activity 4](#)[Activity 5](#)[Activity 6](#)[Activity 7](#)[Topic 5](#)**Course Contents**[☰ Syllabus](#)[➔ Bookmark](#)**Communication**[📢 Announcements](#)[📖 Class list](#)[🗨️ Discussion](#)[💬 Chat](#)**The Function of a Title**

Let's try some titles. Read the poem through completely, even though you've read it once already.

MORNINGS IN NANTUCKET

Running barefoot down the
beach, smelling the salt
air
feeling the cool of the wet
sand

This title focuses us on a place, in fact, on an island. It creates a more specific picture than the untitled poem. The title focuses us and gets us ready to appreciate a lovely moment, or, really, a continuing series of lovely moments, since "mornings" is plural.

Here's another one. Be sure to read it all the way through:

FALLING IN LOVE

Running barefoot down the
beach, smelling the salt
air
feeling the cool of the wet
sand

This could work a few ways. It could mean "Falling in love feels like this." Or it could mean "This is what we were doing when we fell in love." Maybe more.

Now look at this. Again, be sure to read it all the way through:

GRANDPA

Running barefoot down the
beach, smelling the salt
air
feeling the cool of the wet
sand

Now we have been turned into observers, rather than participants.

Or this:

PRISON LIFE

Running barefoot down the
beach, smelling the salt
air
feeling the cool of the wet
sand

As you can see, the poem gets a different look every time. A title is important to the poem—a focusing device, preparing us to consider what comes next in a certain way. Poets spend a lot of energy choosing their titles.

[← Previous Page](#)
[Next Page →](#)

Lesson 1[Topic 1](#)**Topic 2**[Page 1](#)[Page 2](#) **Page 3**[Activity 1](#)[Topic 3](#)[Topic 4](#)[Activity 2](#)[Activity 3](#)[Activity 4](#)[Activity 5](#)[Activity 6](#)[Activity 7](#)[Topic 5](#)**Course Contents** [Syllabus](#) [Bookmark](#)**Communication** [Announcements](#) [Class list](#) [Discussion](#) [Chat](#)**The Function of a Title**

When a poet doesn't title a poem, the editor will have to index the poem by its first line. But when you read,

anyone lived in a pretty how town

...followed by the first line,

anyone lived in a pretty how town
with up so floating...
--e.e. cummings

or,

somewhere i have never traveled, gladly beyond

somewhere i have never traveled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes...
--e.e. cummings

...you are not reading it as a title. The title's function in a poem is to focus our attention in a specific way, and to include it in the poem itself is usually redundant.

[Previous Page](#)[Next Activity: Practice Exercise](#)

Lesson 1[Topic 1](#)[Topic 2](#)[Activity 1](#)**Topic 3** **Page 1**[Topic 4](#)[Activity 2](#)[Activity 3](#)[Activity 4](#)[Activity 5](#)[Activity 6](#)[Activity 7](#)[Topic 5](#)**Song Titles**

Not so with songs. A songwriter can never be confident that the listener will be in the presence of a title before listening to the song, especially in the circumstance that songwriters salivate over: on the radio, in drive time. Your song is usually the fourth song in "Here come another ROCK BLOCK! Ten in a row without interruption from WBOS!" You're lucky if they even name the artist, and then after the "Rock Block" is over, just listed hurriedly before nine minutes of commercials for Stridex Medicated Pads and the station and concert promos that are about to follow.

So a song title is not a focusing device. It is, rather, an indexing device for the centerpiece of the song—the most memorable part—the thing you ask for when you go to the record store or shop iTunes to buy.

That is, the title of a song DOES and indeed, SHOULD appear in the song. Over and over. In the most spotlighted positions possible. You should work hard to make sure your title is prominently displayed and repeated, so people will remember it, and, therefore, be able to reimburse you for your intellectual property—for your hard work and years of sacrifice and dedication to the art and craft of writing great songs.

If you are writing a song that has a a chorus, your title should appear in a prominent place in the chorus. You could put it in the opening line. You could put it in the closing line. You could put it both places. Try to repeat it in the chorus if possible.

If you are writing a song without a chorus, as in a verse/verse/bridge/verse song (AABA), your title should appear prominently in each verse. Modern practice is to end each verse with the title. Earlier practice, from the 1920s through the mid-50s, placed the title at the beginning of each verse. Either place, it is prominently displayed. Because the title appears prominently in each verse section, the listener will remember it easily. There will be no question what the most important statement is in the song. There will be no question what to ask for when you call the radio station to make a request. No question when you go to iTunes or the record store. Everyone will be happy.

Of course, that doesn't mean that songs always contain their titles. It just means they should. I looked long and hard to find "The Breakup Song" by the Greg Kihn Band after hearing it, title unannounced, on the radio. The title was nowhere to be seen in the song. And how about the "59th Street Bridge Song?" It's hard enough for a song to become successful without putting your potential buyers through the extra obstacle of figuring out what to ask for.

 [Previous Activity Page](#)
[Next Topic: Kinds of Titles](#) 

[Course Home](#) -> [Lesson 1](#) -> **Topic 4 Page 1****Lesson 1**[Topic 1](#)[Topic 2](#)[Activity 1](#)[Topic 3](#)**Topic 4** [Page 1](#)[Page 2](#)[Activity 2](#)[Activity 3](#)[Activity 4](#)[Activity 5](#)[Activity 6](#)[Activity 7](#)[Topic 5](#)**Course Contents** [Syllabus](#) [Grades](#) [Bookmark](#)**Communication** [Announcements](#) [Class list](#) [Discussion](#) [Chat](#)**Kinds of Titles**

There are so many kinds of titles. Shiela Davis' *The Songwriter's Idea Book* proceeds, section after section, listing titles that contain colors, places, days, months, numbers, female names, book titles, antonyms, idioms, axioms, metaphors, similes, and more. Check it out. The examples are interesting and stimulating.

Do all titles have something in common? Is there any thread that links all these different examples?

- A title should distill and express the central idea of the song.
- A title should be the target area that everything else in the song aims at.
- A title should be able to be developed as the song progresses, so that it gains more impact as we gain more information. (In this regard, read chapters 5 through 8 in *WBL*.)

DNA Titles

Should a title also be interesting? Think of "Black Velvet," "The Great Pretender," "The Tracks of My Tears," or "Cleaning Out My Closet." These are bristling with meaning and possibility. They grab and hold our attention because of the DNA they themselves contain.

DNA titles are wonderful when you find them. They contain a huge dose of meaning. You can start imagining where they might lead almost immediately.

 [Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#) 

Lesson 1[Topic 1](#)[Topic 2](#)[Activity 1](#)[Topic 3](#)**Topic 4**[Page 1](#)[Page 2](#)[Activity 2](#)[Activity 3](#)[Activity 4](#)[Activity 5](#)[Activity 6](#)[Activity 7](#)[Topic 5](#)**Course Contents**[Syllabus](#)[Grades](#)[Bookmark](#)**Communication**[Announcements](#)[Class list](#)[Discussion](#)[Chat](#)**Kinds of Titles****Parasitic Titles**

But how about titles like "And They Do," or "All I See is You?" In themselves, they aren't especially interesting. But, in the context of a lyric, they could work very well:

In the early rush of morning
Trying to get the kids off to school
One's hanging on my shirttail
Another's locked up in her room
And I'm yelling up the stairs
Stop worrying about your hair, you look fine

Now they're fighting in the back seat
And I'm playing referee
Now, someone's got to go
the moment that we leave
Now everybody's late
I swear I can't wait till they grow old

AND THEY DO
That's how it is
It's just quiet in the morning
Can't believe how much you miss
All they do
And all they did
You want all the dreams they dreamed of to come true
AND THEY DO

Or this:

Southern stars at night
Stretch across the skies
They blossom like sweet magnolias
In diamond points of light
Beauty so rare
But I don't care
ALL I SEE IS YOU

These title might appear to be ordinary or bland, but when the lyric arrives at the title, everything seems to come together and make sense. You get the "ah-ha" feeling that Shiela Davis talks about. Because this second type of title gets its character and interest from what it attaches to, let's call it a "parasitic" title.

Parasitic titles are a bit more reluctant to cough up any DNA. You have to work pretty hard to find an interesting situation or context to make them stand out as something special. "I Believe" and "All I See is You" are good examples of parasitic titles.

[Previous Page](#)[Next Activity: Monday's Assignment](#)

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