

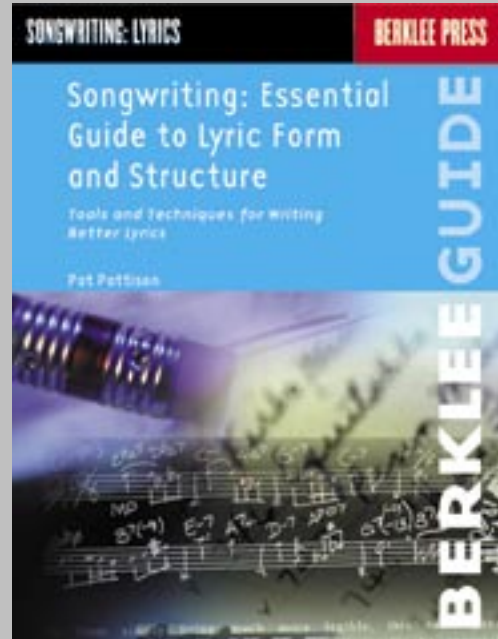
Berklee**Shares.com**TM

**FREE music lessons from
Berklee College of Music**

**Songwriting: Essential Guide to
Lyric Form and Structure**
Pat Pattison

Chapter 1
Number of Phrases: Getting Your
Balance

Check out Berkleeshares.com for more lessons
just like this one.



CHAPTER ONE

NUMBER OF PHRASES: GETTING YOUR BALANCE

Who are these children who scheme and run wild?
Who speak with their wings and the way that they smile?
What are the secrets they trace in the sky?
And why do you tremble each time they ride by?
-Fagen & Becker "YOUR GOLD TEETH"

The first thing to ask is "What is a phrase?" Phrases are sentences or natural pieces of sentences sometimes called "clauses." Here are some examples of phrases:

Who are these children
who scheme and run wild
who speak with their wings
and the way that they smile
what are the secrets
they trace in the sky
and why do you tremble
each time they ride by

As you **can** see, when Steely Dan (Donald Fagen & Walter Becker) wrote these lyrics, they wrote in phrases. Each of these lyric phrases also matches a musical phrase. You can see that the shorter phrases can go together easily and naturally to form longer ones.

Who are these children who scheme and run wild?

Are the longer or shorter phrases the real ones? They both are. The difference is that sometimes smaller phrases like

who scheme and run wild

depend on being part of something else to sound natural. But they still have an identity of their own, not like:

who scheme and

which is not a phrase at all. It clearly needs something else.

When you write music for lyric phrases, just remember that phrases made of notes are a lot like phrases made of words. Sometimes they are made to be part of something bigger

who scheme and run wild

and sometimes they are made to stand alone.

Who are these children who scheme and run wild?

Even short phrases often stand alone.

Why don't you tickle me?

He shouts.

She bites.

Any book on English Grammar has more than enough to say about phrases, clauses, and sentences. It is enough here to look at a few examples. For convenience, call them all "phrases."
Prepositional phrases:

After the rain, the birds sang madly.

Starships exploded *over* the shoulder of **Orion**.

Verbal Phrases:

Soaring on paper wings is risky business. (Gerund)

Barely cracking a smile, he bowed. (Participle)

The next phrases contain both a subject and a verb, but still depend on being part of something bigger. **Can** you see why?

Adjective phrases (modify nouns):

She longed for someone who would serve her forever.

Adverb phrases (modify verbs):

When the fog lifted, she turned for home.

Noun phrases (used as subject, predicate, or object):

What you see is a broken man. (Subject)

Sex is not what *it* is cracked up to **be**. (Predicate)

Hit the dealers where *it* hurts the most. (Object)

Each of the phrases has a word that connects it to a part of the main sentence. (Words like "who, what, when where, why, that.") These words turn the phrases into dependents rather than self-reliant individuals.

When you talk, you do not need a book on English Grammar. Talking comes naturally. A good little book on grammar might be a handy **thing** to have around. Not that you have to write proper sentences. Sometimes just for information.

EXERCISE 1: TRY DIVIDING THIS PARAGRAPH FROM HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S "THE BATTLE OF THE ANTS" INTO PHRASES. USE A SLASH (/) BETWEEN PHRASES TO SHOW WHERE THE DIVISIONS ARE. I WILL DO THE FIRST FEW TO GET YOU STARTED.

"I took up the chip / on which the three I have described were struggling, / carried it *f*into my house, / and placed it under a tumbler on my window sill in order to see the issue. Holding a microscope to the first-mentioned red ant, I saw that, though he was assiduously gnawing at the near fore leg of his enemy, having severed his remaining feeler, his own breast was all tom away, exposing what vitals he had there to the jaws of the black warrior, whose breastplate was apparently too **thick** for him to pierce; and the dark carbuncles of the sufferer's eyes shown with ferocity such as war only could excite.

LYRIC PHRASES/MUSICAL PHRASES

Like a happily married couple, lyric phrases and musical phrases should match. Putting them out of sync with each other usually ends up in disaster.

The examples below are rewrites of actual songs. I have changed enough words to protect the innocent (or maybe the guilty). The brackets show how long the musical *phrases* are. Slashes show where the lyric phrases are.

[Some days it's **simple/** but some **days** it's **not/**]

[Sometimes I wonder if there's **one** thing **we've got/**]

[**In common/** to stop us from drifting **apart/**]

"One thing we've got in common" sounds very strange when it is set in separate musical phrases. It is distracting and takes away from the emotion in the song. Like a love affair between opposites, it is an interesting but doomed experiment.

Here is another example:

[I know your schemes]

[Don't include **me/**].

There is a big difference between saying

1. "I know your schemes. Please don't include me.

and saying

2. "I know (that) your schemes don't include me."

Decide which one you mean, and then write your musical phrases to match. When musical phrases and lyric phrases are the same length, problems do not crop up.

BALANCING/UNBALANCING

If you count, you will find eight short phrases in the verse of "Your Gold Teeth II." If you count their combinations into longer phrases, you **will** find four. Either way, the even number of phrases helps make the structure feel balanced. An odd number of phrases would seem awkward:

Who are these children
 who scheme and run wild
 who speak with their wings
 and the way that they smile
 what are the secrets
 they trace in the sky
 each time they ride by

It would have seemed balanced if it had been:

Who are these children
 who scheme and run wild
 who speak with their wings
 and the way that they smile

or even if it had been:

Who are these children
 who scheme and run wild
 who speak with their smiles
 what are the secrets
 they trace in the sky
 each time they ride by.

If you look at the way phrases stack up into sections, you will have a better understanding of balance. Still, you may **ask** what difference it makes when a section is balanced or unbalanced.

The answer is that unbalanced sections create a **sense** of forward movement, while balanced **sections stop** the motion. Like a juggler, you rely on moving and stopping to create special effects in your act. Balancing or unbalancing sections of your lyric can serve at least three purposes:

1. Spotlight important ideas,
2. Moving one section forward into another section,
3. Contrasting one section with another one.

Look at **each** of these:

1. Spotting important *ideas*

This is the easiest and most practical use of balancing. When a section has an even number of phrases, the last phrase, the balancing position, is a perfect place for important ideas because it is a place where the lyric structure stops moving. It shines a spotlight on whatever you put there. You should use the position well. Here is a simple example from Buck Ram:

Yes I'm the GREAT PRETENDER
Pretending that I'm doing well
My need is such, I pretend too much
I'm lonely but no one can tell

The last phrase is in the even-numbered position, balancing the section. This position spotlights the last idea, "I'm lonely but no one can tell." It seems to be a very important idea, almost a summary of the section. So putting it in balancing position spotlights it effectively.

As a writer you must decide which ideas are most important, and then put them where they are the most likely to be noticed. The balancing position is always a good place.

EXERCISE 2: REARRANGE THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLES SO THE MOST IMPORTANT IDEA (TO YOU) IS IN THE BALANCING OR STOPPING POSITION. (RIGHT NOW "LOVELY AS A SONG" IS SPOTLIGHTED.)

- a. WOMEN OF THE EVENING (Keep this here)

Help you get along
Here and then they're gone
Lovely as a song

Rewrite:

- b. If you think you need me
If you want to please me
Try another time
Learn to read the signs

Rewrite:

2. Moving one section **forward** into another section

Moving is important when you intend to connect one unbalanced section to another equally unbalanced section. The example below balances three phrases with three more phrases:

[Who are these children who scheme and run wild who speak with their smiles
[what are the secrets they trace in the sky each time they ride by.

Using an odd number of phrases to unbalance a section works wonders if you want to build up pressure, for example, in a transitional section between verse and chorus.

Baby can you see it
Baby can you see it
Baby can you see it

Repeating the same phrase three times creates dramatic movement, but you can get the same effect using different phrases too. The pressure to move forward builds up simply because you feel the need for a balancing position.

One more time to reach you
One more time to touch you
One more time to tell you

EXERCISE 3: TAKE AWAY A PHRASE OR ADD A PHRASE TO UNBALANCE EACH OF THE EXAMPLES BELOW.

Example: Look at Mr. Smart Guy
Cheating in school
Stealing it from someone else
Playing it cool

Rewrite: Look at Mr. Smart Guy
Cheating in school
Playing it cool

Your turn.

- a. Unlist your number
Slip under cover
Split for the summer
Take on a lover

Rewrite:

- b. I wonder who you're seeing in your dreams
What fantasies you follow in your sleep
I'll watch beside you till the morning light
While you go chasing shadows through the night

Rewrite:

3. *Contrasting one section with another one.*

This is the third practical use of balancing. When you already have a balanced section, you can write another section to match it except at the end, where you unbalance it, usually by adding another phrase.

THE GREAT **PRETENDER**

by Buck Ram

verse 1: O yes I'm THE GREAT PRETENDER
Pretending that I'm doing well
My need is such, I pretend too much
I'm lonely but no one can tell

verse 3: Yes I'm THE GREAT PRETENDER
Just laughing and gay like a clown
I seem to be what I'm not, you see
I'm wearing my heart like a crown
Pretending that you're still around

In this case the extra phrase in the last verse is a surprise. Of course, the balancing position in verse three is spotlighted, but the surprise extra phrase spotlights both lines, especially the last phrase.

This unbalancing strategy is also useful when you have two verses that lead into a chorus. Make the first verse completely balanced, then unbalance the second verse by adding an **extra** phrase. This unbalancing will make it move forward into the chorus. The first and second verses of Kevin Cronin's "CANT FIGHT THIS FEELING" provide a good example.

I can't fight this feeling any longer
And yet I'm still afraid to **let** it flow
What started out as friendship has grown stronger
I only wish I had the strength to let it show

I tell myself that I can't hold out forever
I say there is no reason for my fear
'Cause I feel so secure when we're together
You give my life direction
You make everything so clear →

Unbalancing the second verse makes it move forward. It throws it into the air, just like **jugling**. Notice that if you reverse the two verses, the motion stops.

EXERCISE 4:

A. UNBALANCE THE SECOND VERSE OF THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLE BY INSERTING EXTRA PHRASES TO MAKE IT MOVE FORWARD.

verse 1: Some girls have the restless touch
 Way they hold you lets you know
 They'll get you burning for a whiie
 Start you up and let you go

verse 2: Some girls have the leaving touch
 They'll hold you once and move along
 It's hard to keep 'em satisfied
 Morning comes and soon they're gone

Revision of verse 2:

B. BALANCE THE SECOND VERSE OF THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLE TO MAKE THE MOTION STOP.

verse 1: Gold from Acapulco
 '49 Desoto
 Running for the border
 Partners in crime
 Danger's getting closer
 Go a little slower
 Engine's overheating
 Starting to whine

verse 2: Agents from the Bureau
 Traacherousand thorough
 Waiting at the crossing
 Biding their time
 Moving to surround us
 Desperation hounds us
 Closing in around **us**
 Trouble coming down now
 Close to the line

Revision of verse 2: