



Knowing your Lyrics

Forgotten the lyrics at gigs? Trying to remember the words to a song? Having problems memorizing songs for a show? Need a Hand?

Sooner or later, anyone who wants to become a singer has to tackle the task of learning the lyrics or words to the songs they intend to perform. Easy huh? Well it should be, but some people don't know where (or how) to start and others forget the words at a crucial moment in the song - for these and all others who need a bit of help & guidance we have created this page!!

Q. Do I need to learn the words?

A. If you are singing for fun, then it isn't necessary to learn the lyrics, however if you wish to become a singer and perform on stage or seek a recording career, then learning the words that make up the storyline for the song is essential. Think about it..... How would you feel if you saw your favourite artist reading the lyrics to one of their top hits from a piece of paper clasped in their hands? Hmmm, not too professional.

Q. What are the benefits of learning the lyrics?

A. Well, to start with, memorizing the words to a song allows you to concentrate on singing the song instead of trying to remember the words! Carrying a songbook or lyric sheet around hampers movement, preventing the singer from expressing themselves and making them appear nervous, even when they aren't!

Q. I've seen singers performing with a book on a stand - can't I do that?

A. Of course you can. Although what you may have seen is the singers 'track list' or 'pad' which contains sheet music for the musicians and songs listed in order of preference for the bands reference. If you have problems remembering the lyrics and need something to refer to on stage we have provided some tips below so that it doesn't look too obvious!

Learning the Words

It's important to understand that everyone has their own way of learning - what may work for one, may not work for another. There are several methods that can be used to help you learn the words to songs, try each method and combine one or more styles until you find what works for you.

Visual learners find it easier to have a printed copy to learn from and writing or typing out the words several times helps them to memorize the lyrics.

Auditory learners learn best from using practice tapes or practicing with an accompanist. 'Hearing' how the song is performed and singing along to the music provides a guideline for the singer which helps them to memorize the words.

Kinaesthetic learners find imitation, practice, touch and movement the best way to learn. Associating movements with the song can help to provide imagery, although more repetitions may be required as people who use this method have the most trouble memorizing music.

The best methods for learning the words to a song are repetition and 'Mnemonics' which is another word for memory tool. Mnemonics are methods for memorizing information that can be difficult to remember. A simple example is the '30 days hath September' rhyme. The principle of mnemonics is to use as many of the best functions of your brain as possible to store information.

Learning songs that are written in a foreign language can also be achieved by using the same methods. It also helps to hear the song performed by an artist singing in their native dialect. This aids the student in achieving the correct pronunciation and diction. Learning the meaning of the words will make them easier to recall and helps the singer to perform with more feeling.

Don't put off memorizing until the last minute! When performing there are lots of distractions and if you are dancing or moving it's easy to forget the words you should be singing! At first you need to concentrate hard to recall the lyrics so the more you repeat them the easier it becomes. You should keep at it until recalling the words becomes automatic, then you will ensure that even if you suffer from nerves or are distracted on stage you will remember the song!

Lyrics Exercises

Choose a short phrase then talk and sing the words repeatedly until you can sing it without looking at the music. Repeat this with the second phrase then put them both together, repeating from memory, keep doing this until you can repeat the whole song. When a large amount of songs need to be memorised for a theatrical show or opera performance, learn the ones you like the least first!

1. Read and repeat the words in short bursts - little and often is more effective than trying to cram it in over several hours.
2. Make notes about the songs theme and imagery.
3. Make a tape of yourself speaking and singing the lyrics.
4. Speak and sing the rhythm of the song.
5. Write or type the words whilst repeating them.
6. Associate foreign words with ones you already know.
7. Learn the words whilst playing a practice track in the car or when doing odd jobs.
8. Repeat the song every day, singing or saying the words out loud.
- 9 Associate each word with an image, combining these to create a journey through the song.
- 10 Memorise the words without the music then put it together with the music.
- 11 Your brain keeps working at night so run through what you have learnt before you go to sleep.
- 12 When learning 'harmonies' or 'backing vocals' record a tape of your part alone and one with all the other singers parts. Practice to your part then along with the other singer's parts.
- 13 Practice a verse whilst doing something repetitive (like washing up!)
- 14 Keep copies of the song everywhere! In the car, bathroom, by the telephone and practice the words whenever you can.
- 15 Carry a portable tape player and headphones with you where ever you go - listen to it on the bus, during tea breaks and during lunch breaks.
- 16 Reward yourself with a treat when you have successfully memorised the words and can sing it through in front of friends without referring to the words.

Once you have learnt a song, review it often to keep it fresh and reinforce the memory.

Tips for Readers

There are some singers who have real problems memorizing lyrics, to the point that they just cannot sing the song without referring to the words. Perhaps the singer deputises for others and requires a larger than usual repertoire of songs.

Whatever the reason the singer feels they need to have reference material on stage, there are a few things that can be done to avoid appearing amateurish and unprofessional.

Learn to 'read ahead' of the music. Quickly scanning the words ahead of the point that you are currently at allows you to look at the audience whilst singing - instead of at the music!

Try not to look at the words or sheet music unless you are really stuck! If you only need to look at the words occasionally for reference, put the music stand or sheet music at the side of the stage. Wander over between songs to take a quick look, keep talking to the audience or take a sip of water whilst you do this so that it appears natural and not as if you are really brushing up on the words!

Learn to 'improvise' or replace the words with your own if you forget the originals - it's not as professional and if you are performing a well known song then members of the audience will notice, but singing something rather than stopping altogether is more likely to 'jog' the memory and help you to pick up the song at a point you remember (like the chorus).

When using a music stand, avoid putting it right in front of you. Place it as far away from you as possible to the side most comfortable for reference and angle it slightly towards you.

If you are short sighted and unable to avoid placing the stand right next to you, lower it so that the audience's view is unhampered. Write the lyrics out in large print and place them in plastic 'anti-glare' pockets. You can purchase ready made folders with these attached in most stationary shops.

Try using 'Cue Cards' - one singer I know writes the first word or line of each verse and chorus onto a large card that is placed at the side of the stage. Reading the line enables her to remember the rest of the verse or chorus.

Cue Cards can also be used for audience participation - if you have real problems learning the words - write them out in large print onto a card, place them on a stand angled slightly towards the audience and invite them to join in!!