



The Documentary Songwriting Method

A Teaching Artist Guide

DocSong partners with musicians and communities to transform stories into songs that heal, empower, and inspire.

Quick Overview

This method is a collaborative, step-by-step process that supports anyone—regardless of musical background—in co-creating a meaningful, high-quality song.

1. Story: identify a clear, specific moment
2. Poem: condense the story into essential lines
3. Lyrics: find structure and a refrain
4. Melody: shape music from natural speech
5. Chords: support the melody with chords
6. Refine: align words and music
7. Bridge (optional): add contrast
8. Record & Share: complete and document the song

Step 1: Draw Forth a Story

Goal: Identify a clear, personal story to build the song from.

Set the container

- Introduce the process in simple terms (we'll turn a story into a song together)
- Clarify time, steps, and what will be created
- Name that the storyteller can pause, skip, or redirect at any time

Guide the story

- Focus on a specific moment (not a whole life story)
- Look for a beginning, middle, and end
- Encourage sensory detail (what did you see, hear, feel?)

Check the story

- Is there a clear moment or turning point?
- Can you picture what's happening?
- Is there emotional content (joy, fear, confusion, relief, etc.)?

If needed, ask

- “What happened right before that?”
- “What were you feeling in that moment?”
- “What did you notice around you?”

Step 2: Distill into a Poem

Goal: Shape the story into a concise, expressive text.

- Copy the full story (keep the original intact)
- Highlight lines or phrases that:
 - Move the story forward
 - Show the setting or action
 - Carry emotion
 - Sound strong when spoken aloud
 - Feel memorable or specific
- Delete everything else
- Repeat until only essential lines remain

Shape the poem

- Break lines where there is a natural pause
- Keep language close to how the storyteller speaks
- Group lines into verses (sections of the story)
- Leave space between verses for a possible refrain

Step 3: Shape into Lyrics

Goal: Find a structure and identify a refrain (chorus).

Look for refrain ideas

- A line that captures the main feeling or message
- A phrase that repeats naturally in the story
- A line that feels strong, simple, and clear

Test placement

- At the beginning (to set the tone)
- After each verse (most common)
- At the end (to close the story)
- Try multiple options out loud
- Repeat lines to hear how they land
- Combine lines if needed to create a chorus

Step 4: Create Melody

Goal: Develop melody from the storyteller's natural speaking voice and melodic instincts.

Start with speech

- Choose one verse
- Have the storyteller read it out loud
- Listen for natural rhythm and emphasis

- Encourage a steady pulse (tapping hand, foot, or body)

Move toward singing

- Ask them to stretch or sustain certain words
- Try speaking on a single pitch, then vary it
- Record short attempts (multiple takes)

Shape the melody

- Add space between lines
- Move phrases slightly before or after the beat
- Raise or lower pitch on important words
- Repeat sections to build familiarity

Check singability

- Is there time to breathe?
- Do phrases feel natural in the mouth?
- Can the next pitch be found easily?
- Does it feel comfortable and satisfying to sing?

Step 5: Add Chords

Goal: Build out song with accompaniment

- Identify a comfortable key for the storyteller's voice
- Start with basic chords (I, IV, V)
- Try minor chords to shift mood (ii, iii, iv)
- Use additional chords (VII, Major 7) only if helpful
- Keep choices simple and supportive of the melody

Step 6: Refine Lyrics

Goal: Adapt lyrics to fit the designed melody and structure

- Adjust words to better fit the melody
- Shorten or lengthen lines as needed
- Reorder lines for clarity
- Bring back lines from the original story if they now fit
- Make sure rhythm and syllables align with the melody

Step 6.5. Add a Bridge (Optional)

Goal : Provide contrast and return to the main idea

- Change something noticeable (pitch, pace, or mood)
- Keep it short (often 2–4 lines)
- Use it to shift perspective or add reflection
- Lead clearly back into the main section (verse or chorus)

Step 7: Record & Share

Goal : To honor the creative process and the story, and share it with others

Check the song

- Clear structure (verses, chorus, optional bridge)
- Feels complete as a full piece

Test performability

- Could another singer learn it?
- Can a listener understand the story on first hearing?

Record

- Rehearse together until comfortable
- Record a simple version (voice + instrument is enough)
- Label recordings clearly (date, take, version)

Share

- Confirm how the storyteller wants to share (private or public)
- Send recording via email or text, or prepare for performance

Close the session

- Ask the storyteller how the process felt
- Invite optional reflection or feedback

Guiding Principles

- Move at the pace of the storyteller
- Preserve the storyteller's language whenever possible
- You are shaping, not rewriting
- Prioritize clarity over complexity
- Focus on listening as much as creating
- Keep the process simple and flexible

This guide is meant to support teaching artists in real time.
Adapt as needed based on setting, participants, and available time.

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