

A collection of blue and teal musical notes and four-pointed stars scattered across the upper half of the page, following the diagonal split between the yellow and teal backgrounds.

**National
Literacy
Trust**

Change your story

**National
Year of
Reading
2026**

Soundtrack your story

**With author and
broadcaster Jeffrey Boakye**

A large, solid teal rounded rectangle at the bottom of the page, serving as a design element or placeholder for a call to action.

Warm up

This activity pack is focused on the power of lyrics. Lyrics that change the world, lyrics that share heartbreak, love, or remind people of home, family and place.

Let's start with your favourites - if you were stranded on a desert island with no hope of rescue, what songs would you want to bring with you?

- **Songs that remind you of home**
- **Songs that make you feel joyful or inspired**
- **Songs that remind you of friends or family**
- **A cheesy song you can't resist**
- **A powerful song that reflects a moment in time or history**
- **A song that your parent or grandparent played**
- **A song that you loved when you were younger**
- **The first gig you ever went to or the best one**



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Story writing can be hard, and sometimes staring at a blank page can be the biggest killer of inspiration. Use this page to make something exciting and visual that you can refer back to, throughout the writing process. A guide below to help you make your storyboard - use a blank piece of paper to create yours, one is supplied on the next page.

Start with a word in the middle of the page that is important to you, it could be your name, surname or your favourite word, it could be an emotion or a place.

From here, fill the page how you like. You could try to curate colours, words, emotions and doodles on some of the following topics:

The word in the middle

You - who are you?

What do you care about?

What challenges you?

What do you see ahead?

What are your favourite songs/lyrics?

What colours are important to you?

A selection of favourite words or phrases

For each of the words and phrases you've added to your page, try to find a rhyming word or phrase for each.

Fill the page with as much colour, shape and style as possible; it is as much about looking visually appealing as it is about answering all the questions.

It might not seem it but this is a kind of story, a place to return to when you need inspiration. It is a story of a moment, a story of now, but a story nonetheless, a cheat sheet for all future stories you might write.

A story doesn't have to be a fictional telling of events. A story is making sense of experience, whether imagined, lived or observed.

Musical Truth

Hello

Let me introduce myself. My name is Jeffrey. I'm a teacher and a writer, and I was born in 1982, which might sound like a long time ago, even though it really isn't. It won't come as a surprise to you to hear that I haven't always been a teacher, or a writer. For much of my life, before I was an adult, I have been a kid growing up, exploring the world around me and trying to figure out what's going on.

Music has been a big part of this.

Music opened my ears to a whole world beyond where I grew up, in a place called Brixton, in London. I've travelled the world through speakers and headphones, listening to sounds and stories from far and wide. I've always loved music and the way it can make your heart jump, or slow down, or skip a beat with excitement. I also love the way that you can be transported into the past, just by hearing songs that were made years before you were born.

I'm black. My parents were born in Ghana, west Africa, but they came over to the UK to have me after moving away from their home country. For me, being black means being Ghanaian and African, but it also means being part of a global family of other black people. Again, music is a key part of my identity as a black person. A lot of the music I listen to can be classified as 'black music' – made by black people and part of different black cultures.

I wrote this book because I feel deeply connected to black culture and black history, not just in Britain and Ghana, but all over the world and throughout history. Music has been my gateway to stories I have never lived through and people I have never met. I hope that this book will introduce songs that do the same thing for you.

The playlist

Jeffrey says:

"When writing non-fiction I start with making lists. Lists of songs, list of moments, lists of events. Whatever you are into, whatever you are interested in – make a list. This is like the spine of your non-fiction writing, and it could even be the contents page."

You will need: *Paper, pens and songs you like. You could listen to National Prison Radio for inspiration.*

Step one: Read part 1 of Jeffrey's book

Step two: Choose a topic for your playlist, it could be your heritage or an issue that is important to you.

Step three: Create a list of 5 statements about your topic.

Step four: Think of a song for each statement

In his book *'Musical Truth'*, Jeffrey chose 28 songs to tell the story about what it means to be Black and British, but also what it means to be him.

Choose a topic you want to create your own playlist on. You may be inspired by Jeffrey focus on your own story or heritage, or you might prefer to create a playlist inspired by a particular issue that is important to you, like climate change or inequality.

For example: **My topic is climate change**

- 1. We are responsible for the Earth's well-being**
- 2. Why do some people still not believe climate change is real?**
- 3. We need to act now if we want a world for the future**
- 4. There was flooding in my town and people lost their homes**
- 5. I want more people to do their bit**

For each point on the list, identify the feeling or mood. You might want to ask yourself:

How does the statement make me feel? What action or energy does it suggest? What images or symbols come to mind?

Now try to think of a song for each point on the list that best reflects the feeling or mood you identified.

You have now created a story, told through this combination of songs.

Topic: Climate change		
Statement	Feeling or mood	Song
We are responsible for the Earth's well-being	Motivated but unsure of how to make it happen	John Mayer – Waiting For the World to Change
Why do some people still not believe climate change is real?	Frustration at the destruction and people still not realising	Billie Eilish – All the Good Girls Go to Hell
We need to act now if we want a world for the future	Purposeful with a need for change, wanting to share the message with others	Joni Mitchell – Big Yellow Taxi
There was flooding in my town and people lost their homes	Sad, urgent, full of despair	
I want more people to do their bit		

My topic is:

5 statements about my topic (*these can be facts, thoughts or moments*):

1.

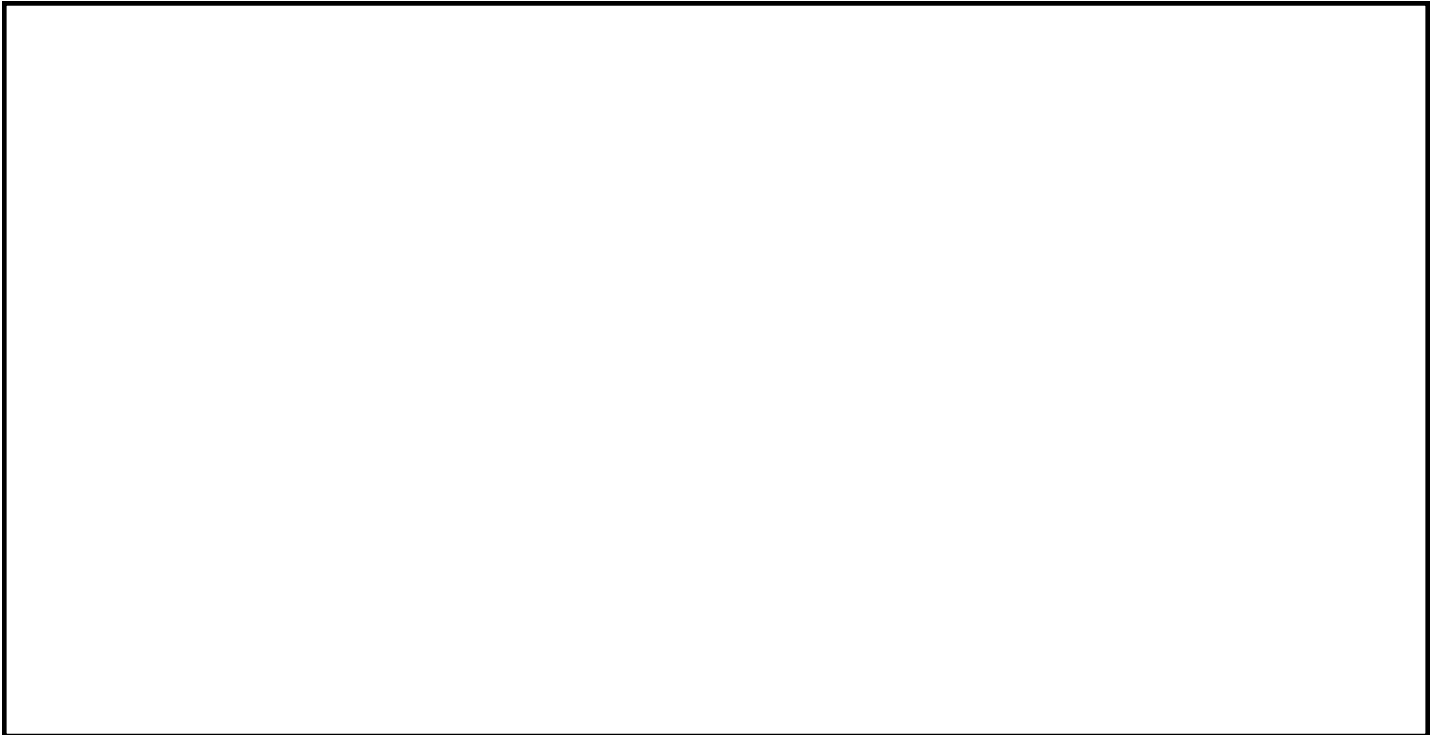
2.

3.

4.

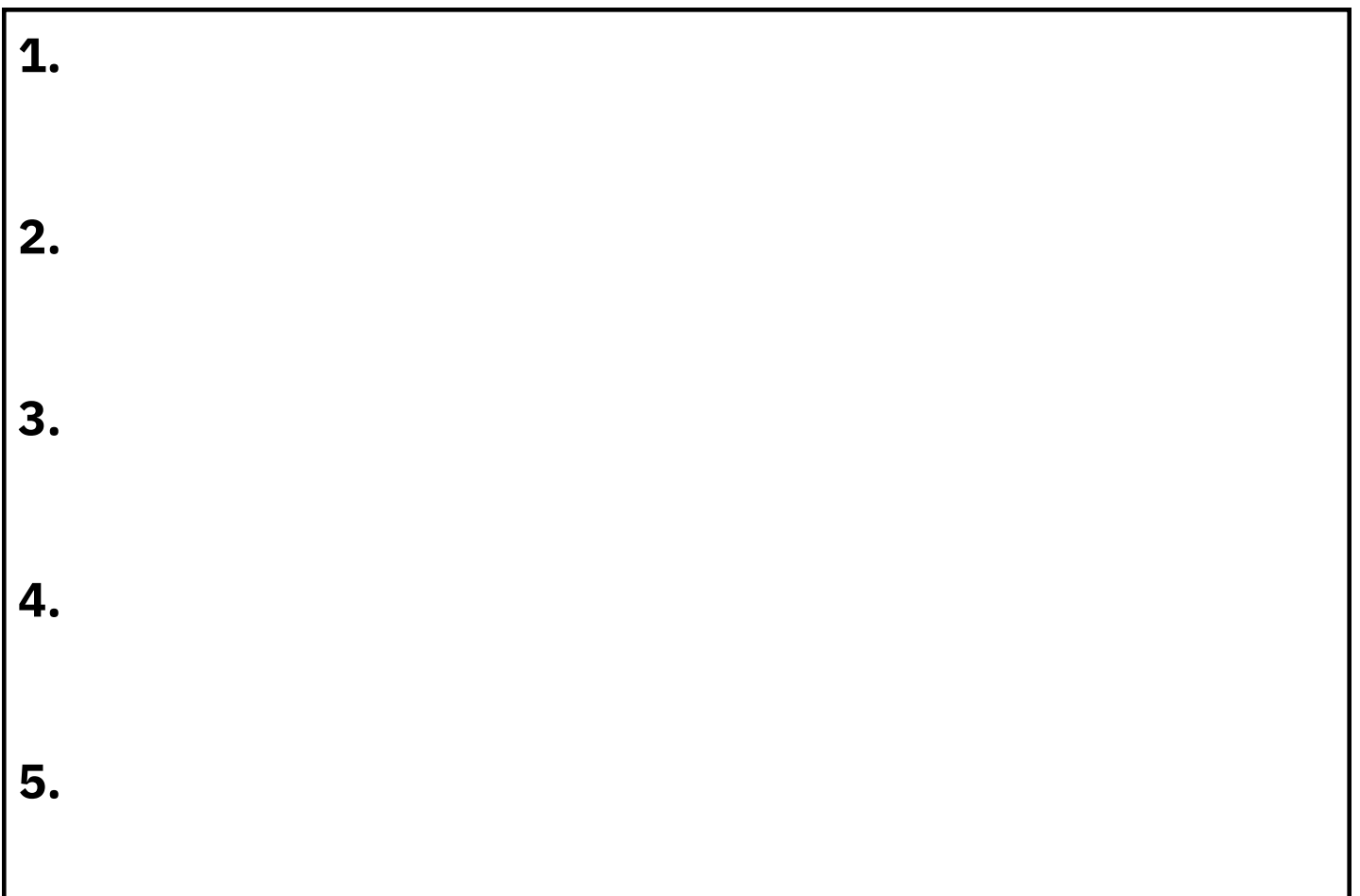
5.

How does the statement make me feel? What action or energy does it suggest? What images or symbols come to mind?



My songs are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



Choose one of your songs and answer the following questions

What song did you choose and what mood does it create?

Does the mood build or change during the song? Or does it stay consistent?

How does it achieve that?

Identify one line of lyrics from the song and explain why it is important.

Explain what thought it inspires (i.e., the original point from the list you made)

'PASS THE DUTCHIE'

Musical Youth (1982)

Read the following pages and try to notice how how Jeffrey explains the impact of this song, at this moment in the story of Black Britain.

Birmingham is a large city in the West Midlands of England that is usually cold and wet. Jamaica is the largest Caribbean island, the home of reggae music, and is usually sunny and warm. If these two places were people, they would probably not follow each other on Instagram. But in 1982, they crossed paths in a major way.

Finally, we've reached the year I was born. (Happy birthday to me.) 1982 was a big year, and not just because I came screaming into this world. It was the year that the Voice newspaper was launched, Britain's first and only black newspaper, which is still in circulation today. It was also the year that 'Pass the Dutchie' was released by Musical Youth.

But my musical history doesn't start with this song. I grew up hearing the songs we've already discussed, as well as highlife, Afrobeats, reggae, pop – all sorts. My sister was even named Marcia after one of the members of a disco pop group called Boney M. Music was always a huge part of my life and my family's life overall. To be honest, I think that music is influential in all of our lives, full stop.

Just think about the year you were born, then google some of the songs you remember from when you were younger. I bet many of them are older than you. Our musical history pre-dates us. A big way that any culture gets passed on from one generation to the next is through music. We can learn a lot about the world our parents grew up in from the music they listened to when they were young. Because of this, young people are incredibly important when it comes to any culture's survival over time.

If you don't teach children about culture, that culture will die, like a plant that isn't given water and sunlight. 'Pass the Dutchie' by Musical Youth is a great example of how culture can be led by young people. There's a big clue in the name: Musical Youth. Yep, a group of musicians who were young. Very young.

'PASS THE DUTCHIE'

Musical Youth (1982)

Children, to be specific. In 1982, the oldest member of the group was fifteen, while the youngest was only eleven. In fact, all five of them were still at school in Birmingham when the group was first put together by one of their dads, a reggae musician.

The song itself is a seriously upbeat and cheerful reggae classic. It sounds like sunshine and fresh coconut water on the beach. It sounds like that feeling you get when you step off the plane in a warm country. It sounds like Jamaica because it is very Jamaican. It's part of a tradition of West Indian music being popular in the UK. It also sounds joyful and innocent, with those happy, young voices tinkling over those deep reggae grooves.

But back in 1982, no one really expected children to be recording proper reggae songs, which makes 'Pass the Dutchie' special. When the song starts, telling us that 'this generation rules the nation', it's an announcement that the kids are in charge. And in lots of ways, they're right. Throughout history, black British culture has often been led by young black people (something that we shall see much more of as this book develops).

But not only that, in Britain, black culture is a big part of youth culture in general. This means that black culture (including music, style and fashion) has always been popular among young people who aren't black. Remember – and I'll keep on saying this – black people represent only a tiny percentage of the UK population, at last count not much more than three per cent. So this level of creative influence is surprising and incredible.

'Pass the Dutchie' was a hit. It was so popular that it reached number one in the UK pop music charts. Then it became number one in six other countries in Europe, number two in two others. Two things happened next:

1. The song reached number ten in the USA.
2. Musical Youth had a great time travelling around America meeting lots of famous people.

'PASS THE DUTCHIE'

Musical Youth (1982)

'Pass the Dutchie' was the fastest-selling British single of 1982, selling over a hundred thousand copies in one day. And this was before downloading and streaming, meaning that people had to get up, put on their coats and go out to a record shop to buy the song on vinyl. That's how popular it was. Now, this would have been a big deal for any recording artist or group, but it was an even bigger deal for five black kids from Birmingham, at a time when kids from Birmingham, let alone black kids, didn't usually become international superstars.

Birmingham is often referred to as the UK's 'second city', after the capital city, London. Birmingham is the UK's second largest city by population and has been home to black communities for many decades. Some of the most successful black British celebrities in British history have come from Birmingham. These include the comedian Lenny Henry, whose work as a humanitarian has helped raise many millions of pounds for good causes all over the world. Another famous 'Brummie' is the writer Benjamin Zephaniah, a Rastafarian poet and novelist who once called the part of Birmingham he grew up in 'the Jamaican capital of Europe'. (Rastafarianism is a Jamaican religious movement that started in the 1930s.)

In the world of music, Birmingham didn't only give us Musical Youth. It's a city with a long musical history, having produced an impressive list of famous musicians across a whole range of genres. Highlights include:

- The Singing Stewarts – a family of brothers and sisters who made some of the first gospel music Britain ever heard, back in the 1960s.
- Joan Armatrading – a hugely influential musician renowned for her unique lyrics and skillful guitar playing.
- Jaki Graham – an R&B recording artist from the 1980s.
- Ruby Turner – a soul singer who racked up eight hit UK singles throughout the 1980s.
- Jamelia – a pop and soul singer whose first album was released in 2000 (when she was still only a teenager).
- Laura Mvula – a gospel-influenced soul singer who rose to prominence in the 2010s.

'PASS THE DUTCHIE'

Musical Youth (1982)

You might have noticed how many women are featured in the list above. This, I feel, is a very good thing for this book and our musical journey so far. Birmingham has given us the power of black British youth and it has also given us the power of black female voices. When talking about an industry that is dominated by men (like so many other sections of society), it is important to highlight women and how much they have contributed to black British history.

'Pass the Dutchie' showed everyone that black British music played by black British kids could be popular enough to cause major waves all across the globe. In this way, it stands proud as a celebration of reggae, a celebration of youth and a celebration of black Britain, all at the same time.

And this is still happening. Right now, almost forty years since the song was released, we are seeing a whole generation of young black musicians becoming popular not only in Britain, but all over the world, with music that has roots in the Caribbean and Africa.

*

'PASS THE DUTCHIE'

Musical Youth (1982)

Birmingham is a large city in the West Midlands of England that is usually cold and wet. Jamaica is the largest Caribbean island, the home of reggae music, and is usually sunny and warm. If these two places were people, they would probably not follow each other on Instagram. But in 1982, they crossed paths in a major way.

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A story through song

You will need: paper and pens.

Part 1

Identify five words to describe who you are, try to stay positive, reflective and honest. You can choose to focus on someone else - a friend, family member or famous person.

Each of these five words will be the basis of each stanza/verse in your new song. This song can be telling the story of yourself, or it can be of something you have imagined, still using these words as inspiration.

Arrange your words or 'verses' into a logical order. Stories usually start by contextualising, then building, have a climax and resolve.

Consider what order these words would go in if they were to follow that structure.

For each of those five words, identify another five that rhyme with them. You could use a dictionary to help.

These will help to form the words included in each verse, and will be a starting point for storytelling through lyrics.

Example:

Bold
Creative
Loyal
Empathetic
Joyful



Creative
Empathetic
Joyful
Bold
Loyal



Creative
Narrative
Innovative
Relative
Appreciative
Alternative

A story through song

My five words are...

Rearranged into a 'logical' order for my verses - my five words now are...

5 words that rhyme with each of my chosen 5 words...

A Story through Song part 2

You will need: A sheet of plain paper per person, colouring pencils or pens or you can use the following blank page.

Before you start writing your own lyrics using your five words try to answer Jeffrey's questions about a song that you like. This can help you consider what you want your song to do.

Jeffrey uses his hand to help analyse a song. When thinking about a song's importance, he thinks about:

1. **The thumb – a thumbs up** – what is the best thing about that song? What is the thing you want to shout to the world about that song?
2. **The index finger** – the one that points – what is the point of that song?
3. **The middle finger – the biggest finger** – what is the biggest thing about this song? What is the thing that is going to stand the test of time?
4. **The ring finger** – if you could give the artist a ring on the phone, what questions would you ask of them?
5. **The baby finger** – a pinkie promise – what do you promise to do going forward, because of that song?

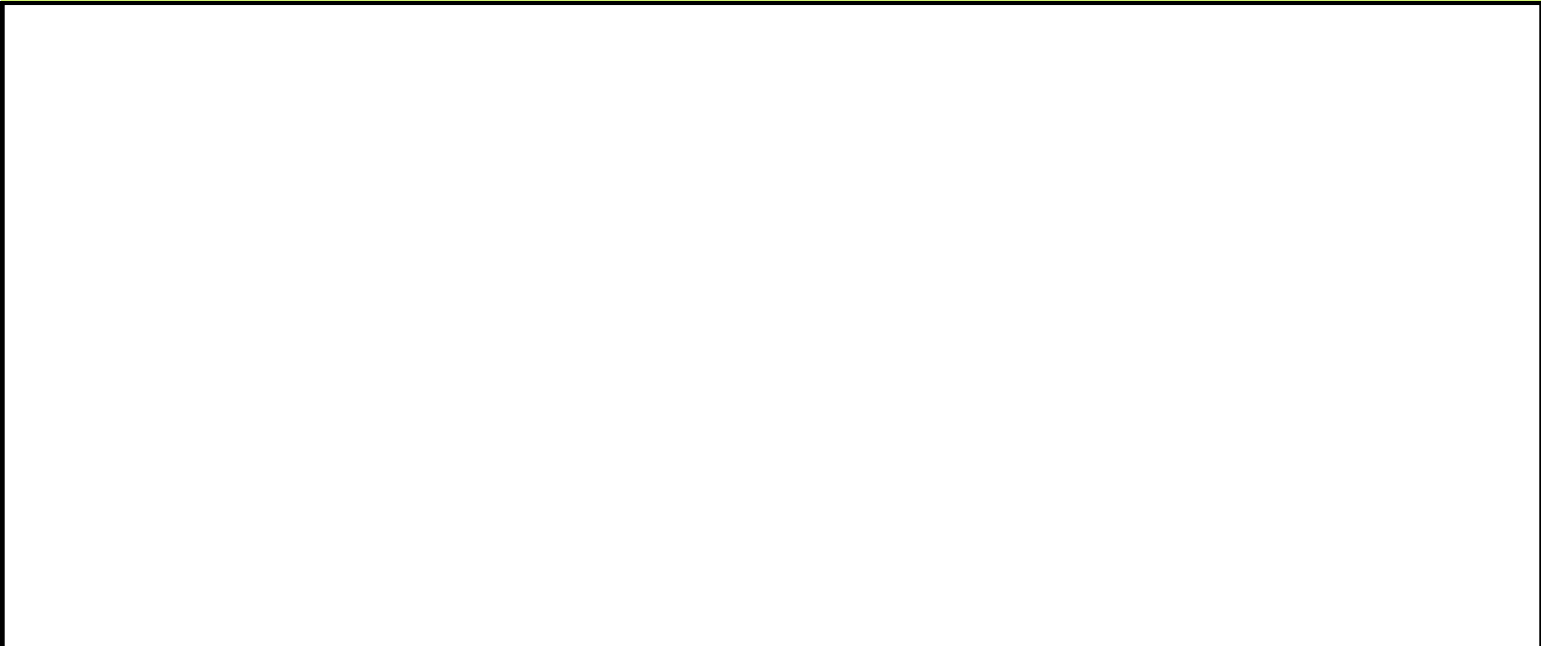
You now have...

- A light structure to your story (this is your 5 words in your chosen order)
- 30 words with groups of rhymes (5 rhyming words for each of your 5 words)
- Five answers to the above help them identify the purpose and intention of their song.

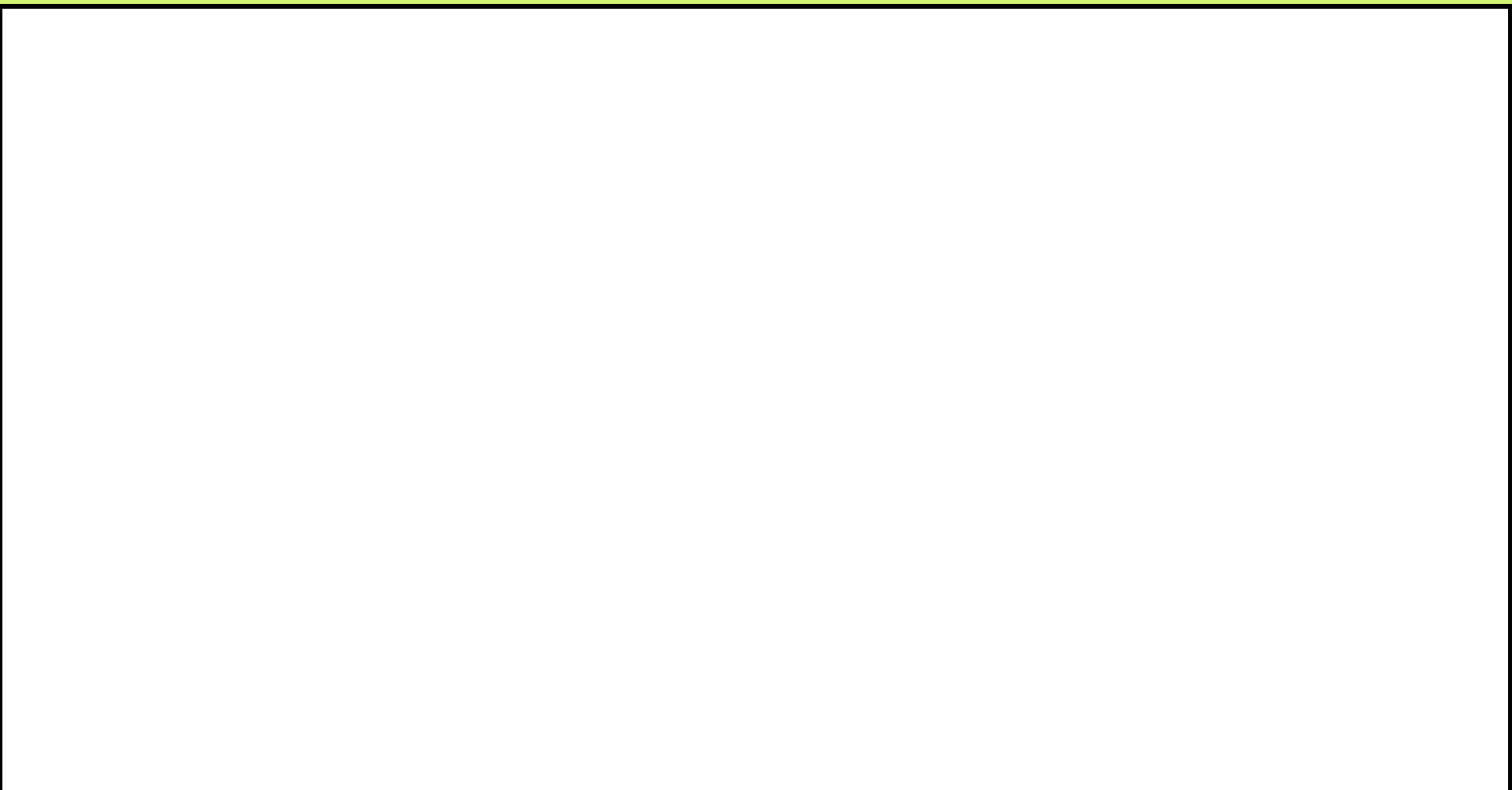
Hint: writing doesn't have to be perfect the first time around. It is the edits where things come alive. Get lines down on paper but give yourself at least the same amount of time or even more time to play around with the story you are telling and the phrases you are using to tell it.

Choose one of the 30 words that stand out to you and use this to start crafting your first verse. Build a phrase with a rhythm to lead to that word.

You could listen to National Prison Radio's Freeflow show to help you write to a beat.



From here, you can build the verse around this phrase. You can decide to add lines before or after the original line, and experiment with the construction of each phrase, based on which words you are drawn to. Try not to limit yourself to the original 30 words they have available to them; you can always swap things out when they have a clearer picture of their story. Repeat this process with each set of words.




Inspired by the music

You will need: A chosen instrumental track, paper and pens.

Choose a track to listen to, ideally one you haven't heard before.

Music can tell a story even without words. Often, the writer has hidden the story deep within the melodies and rhythm for the listener to discover for themselves.

1. Listen to the track with no  interruptions.

2. Listen to the track again and try to answer the following questions to consider what story your song might be trying to tell.

What emotion starts this piece? Where does it start? (location/mood) At what point does it change? How does it change? What happens? What is the mood after the change? Where does it end? (figuratively or literally)

Play the piece again and doodle along as you listen, being inspired by the music. Note keywords that spring to mind as the music continues. At the end of playing the song again, focus again on the last three questions:

Whose song is it? (*Who is the main character?*)
 What do they want?
 (*What is their motivation?*)
 What challenge are they facing in the song?
 (*what is stopping them from getting what they want?*)

Jeffrey says:

"When I write fiction, I always start with the question 'what does the protagonist want?' It's important to know the one big thing that they want more than anything else. And then I put them in scenarios that challenge them and get in the way of the thing that they want. It can feel quite cruel, but this is the basis for a great story."

A 5/3 plan is a way of condensing a story to its simplest form. The entire story is encapsulated in:

5 bullet points, where each bullet point can only be 3 words.

Listening to a song of your choice, write a 5/3 story inspired by what you can hear or the rhythm and feeling of the song.

5/3 plan example

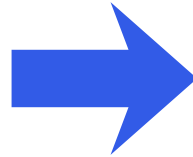
Silence anticipates action.

She stands alone.

Bright lights blind.

Nothing. Alone again.

She breathes fast.



Five lines

Three words

on each line

Supporting book recommendations

Books written by Jeffrey Boakye

Musical Truth

Musical World

Books exploring music

Rise Up: The #Merky Story

Stormzy and Yude Yawson

Rhythm and Poetry

Karl Nova

Open Water

Caleb Azumah Nelson

Utopia Avenue

David Mitchell

The Mess We're In

Annie MacManus

Non-fiction

You Are a Story: A Creative Writing Guide to Find Your Voice

Laura Dockrill

Rebel Sounds: Music as Resistance

Joe Mulhall

Where We Come From: Rap, Home & Hope in Modern Britain

Aniefiok Ekpoudom

40 Inspiring Icons: Black Music Greats

Olivier Cachin

A Quick Ting on... Grime

Franklyn Addo

Wrote For Luck: Selected Lyrics

Shaun Ryder

Uncommon People: The Rise and Fall of Rock Stars 1955-1995

David Hepworth