

Using popular music to improve your English

It might be difficult to know how to make good choices of songs to use for English study. Some students don't have much knowledge of popular music, and others might randomly choose songs that are not easy to understand, or not interesting enough from the viewpoint of language study.

To choose a good song for English study, consider these things:

1. Voice quality – Do the vocals stand out against the instruments, or does the arrangement make the vocals difficult to hear?
2. Pronunciation – Does the singer sing loudly, clearly and slowly?
3. Male or female vocalist? Female vocalists tend to be easier to hear because their voices are higher. Most announcements in public places use female voices for this reason.
4. Vocabulary – Simple vocabulary is of course easier to understand
5. Repetition – some songs repeat lines and themes, and these are better sources of English study
6. Word count – Obviously, a lower word count makes a song easier to understand
7. Subject matter, themes – If you choose songs that are easy according to the terms above, you may have a song that is easily understood, but which is uninteresting. You have to find the balance between songs that are easy to understand but interesting enough to be worth the effort of studying them.

Don't choose a song just because you love it. The song you love may not be a good song for English study.

When you study a song, be sure to do it first as a challenge to your listening skills. Before you read the lyrics, try to transcribe as much of the song as possible by listening to it repeatedly. After this step you can check your understanding by reading the lyrics. If you search for "lyrics" on the Internet, you'll find many websites that have databases of thousands of song lyrics. After you have read all the words and checked the new vocabulary with a dictionary, you can reflect on the meaning of the song, and listen to it again. In your report, comment on how it was a challenge to your listening skills, on which words were difficult, and on the impression the song made on you.

If you need some suggestions, try one of the songs on the next page. I chose these because many of them are easy to understand but also interesting in terms of their content. Many of these songs can be found on Youtube as music videos.

When you write your report about the song, do these things:

1. Summarize it in your own words.
2. Explain what is interesting about the song's message, content, or the way it tells a story.
3. Write some background information on the artist, or why the song is famous.
4. Explain why it was interesting, challenging, or worthwhile for you to listen closely to this song.

	Song	Artist
1	Why?	Avril Lavigne
2	Lucille	B.B. King
3	I'm a loser	Beck
4	Nice work if you can get it	Billie Holiday
5	Sara	Bob Dylan
6	Is this love?	Bob Marley
7	Blue velvet	Bobbie Vinton
8	Soul of a man	Bruce Cockburn
9	Born to run	Bruce Springsteen
10	These foolish things	Bryan Ferry
11	You've got a friend	Carol King
12	Space Oddity	David Bowie
13	Love is blindness	U2
14	My favorite mistake	Cheryl Crow
15	You never can tell	Chuck Berry
16	Sugar Blues	Dianne Reeves
17	Goodbye yellow brick road	Elton John
18	Allison	Elvis Costello
19	Please be with me	Eric Clapton
20	Who's that girl?	Eurythmics
21	Jealous guy	John Lennon
22	True love is not nice	Jonathan Richman
23	I'm your man	Leonard Cohen
24	Dixie chicken	Little Feat
25	I am a child	Neil Young
26	1941	Nilsson
27	Don't know why	Norah Jones
28	Single pigeon	Paul McCartney
29	Fifty ways to leave your lover	Paul Simon
30	Elderly woman behind the counter in a small town	Pearl Jam
31	Magic moments	Perry Como
32	Don't give up	Peter Gabriel
33	Money	Pink Floyd
34	You're my best friend	Queen
35	Angie	Rolling Stones
36	Pearls	Sade
37	I won't say I will, but I won't say I won't	Sarah Vaughn
38	Scarborough Fair/Canticle	Simon & Garfunkel
39	If you don't know me by now	Simply Red
40	You cause as much sorrow	Sinaed O'Connor
41	They dance alone	Sting
42	Tom's Diner	Suzanne Vega
43	Long black veil	The Band
44	People are strange	The Doors
45	Desperado	The Eagles
46	These eyes	The Guess Who
47	Middle of the road	The Pretenders
48	Heaven knows I'm miserable now	The Smiths
49	Won't get fooled again	The Who
50	She's a lady	Tom Jones
51	Martha	Tom Waits
52	So cruel	U2
53	Brown eyed girl	Van Morrison