

Hyphens in Lyrics

When you're hyphenating lyrics, you can't always use the syllabification in a dictionary, because dictionaries often divide a word by underlying units of grammar, whereas lyrics call for divisions based on sound.

For instance, look at the word "legend." A dictionary would divide it after the G, resulting in a lyric which would be pronounced LEG end. A lyricist, hyphenating for sound, would hyphenate after the first E -- le-gend.

Dictionary: LEG end

Lyricist: le-gend

There are a few basic guidelines which a lyricist can use for the majority of situations:

Hyphenate between double-consonants. (fun-ny, not fu-nny)

Try to split a syllable so as to elongate the vowel (wa-ter, not wat-er)

Between differing consonant sounds (vec-tor, not ve-ctor)

Make exceptions for reasons of clarity (book-ing, not boo-king)

These guidelines won't cover every situation. Look, for instance, at the woman's name CALLIE. The guidelines would lead you to hyphenate that as either Cal-LIE (which second syllable rhymes with BYE), or CALL-ie (which first syllable rhymes with SMALL). And Ca-llie isn't right either. Cal-lie is probably your best choice, but it isn't clear.

Some examples:

HYPHENATE BETWEEN DOUBLE CONSONANTS

Correct	Incorrect
real-ly	rea-lly
run-ning	ru-nning
rub-ber	ru-bber
mom-my	mo-mmy
lamp-post	lam-ppost

SPLIT A SYLLABLE SO AS TO ELONGATE THE VOWEL

Correct	Incorrect
che-mi-stry	chem-i-stry
fa-ther	fath-er
wa-ter	wat-er
hea-then	heath-en
Pe-ter	Pet-er
Mo-narch	Mon-arch

HYPHENATE BETWEEN DIFFERING CONSONANT SOUNDS

(note how these words violate the previous guideline of elongating the vowel)

Correct	Incorrect
at-ten-tive	at-te-ntive
bron-chi-al	bro-nchi-al; bronch-i-al
cen-tral	ce-ntral
mar-ker	ma-rker
At-lan-tic	A-tla-ntic

Some words to practice/stew over:

badger
ranger
usually
consonant
following
syllable
figure
vowel
singly
Halley
Jimmy Fallon
kissing
telling
fire (a single syllable; doesn't get a hyphen)
liar (two syllables)
looking
bartering
battering
barbering
altering
agonize

To summarize: Four general principles of hyphenating lyrics: HYPHENATE: 1) Between double-letters (fun-ny). 2) Between differing consonant sounds (cen-tral, not ce-ntral). 3) Elongate vowels (che-mi-stry); 4) Make exceptions, however, for clarity (book-ing, not boo-king). Dictionaries aren't the authority here; your ears are.