Phrasing

Phrasing refers to the way in which you group and emphasize the lyrics of a song to fit your personal style and emotional expression. A song phrase can be compared to a spoken phrase. That is, they are both groups of words that form part or all of a thought. But in a song, the words are set to a melody of various note values and pitches. Don't depend on the sheet music to indicate the best phrasing.

A general guide to good phrasing is your own natural speech and use the grouping of words, word rhythms and inflections that you find when you speak the words with emotional truth. This often alters the note values and rhythm from the written music and the result is more expressive because its coming from your personal feelings.

Improvisation in phrasing includes licks, added to the original melody as well as new melodies and rhythms for variation of the original melody line. These improvisations may be similar to the original or they could be quite different. But they must always be harmonically compatible with the chord progression (chord changes) that accompanies the phrase.

In all areas of Pop music, you have great freedom to vary from the written note values and rhythms. The written notes may be used as a basic framework on which to build an interpretation.

It is usually a good practice to first establish the original phrasing, as written, then change or embellish the phrasing to suit your own taste. Be aware that, with familiar songs, the listener expects to hear at least the opening phrase in a recognizable form. Then, clever melodic variations are all the more appreciated. “Theme and variation” is a time honored technique of composers and jazz musicians.

Broadway and Classical singers don't have the same improvisational freedom. You must adhere more closely, if not exactly, to the written notes of the composer and the directions of the musical conductor.

**PHRASING GUIDELINES:**

1. The best way to find your own phrasing is to speak the words of each phrase, letting your *emotions* flow. Notice your *rhythms*, *inflections* (*pitch changes*) and *accents*. Transfer these choices to your singing and you will see how expressive, easy and natural it feels and sounds.

2. You are not obliged to adhere strictly to the written note values. You may choose to sustain a different word or syllable if it makes more sense to your artistic expression.

3. If a word occurs on a downbeat, you have a choice of *anticipating*, that is, singing the word before the downbeat, or *back phrasing*, that is, singing the word after the downbeat.

4. You may also sing a phrase in less time than indicated on the sheet music and make up for it by stretching out the following phrase, or you may take more time with a phrase and make up for it by shortening the following phrase ... and so on.

5. Always be aware of the chord changes accompanying the melody. Too much play or flexibility in the phrasing may cause you to sound off pitch or not in ‘sync’ with your accompaniment.

**PHRASING EXERCISES:**
The following examples illustrate how you can rephrase the original melodic line to enhance and heighten emotional impact.

**Country style** with the original phrasing, as written:

**Sing:** (Style CD – track 28)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{G} \\
I \text{ wish that I could be with you right now.}
\end{array}
\]

Rephrased to express more feeling:

**Sing:**

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{G} \\
I \text{ wish that I could be with you right now.}
\end{array}
\]

Now let's take the lyric from that Country phrase and reset it in an R&B phrase.

**Rhythm & Blues** style with the original phrasing and rhythm, as written:

**Sing:** (Style CD – track 29)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{CMaj7} \quad \text{EbMaj7} \quad \text{GMaj7} \\
I \text{ wish that I could be with you right now.}
\end{array}
\]

Rephrased for more expressiveness and truth.

**Sing:**

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{CMaj7} \quad \text{EbMaj7} \quad \text{GMaj7} \\
I \text{ wish that I could be with you right now.}
\end{array}
\]
REPEATED PHRASES (Style CD – track 30)

Certain phrases may repeat several times in a song. You can build emotional excitement by improvising increasingly elaborate melodies each time you sing these phrases.

Here's the same phrase as you might sing it the second time it occurs in the song.

Sing:

Here it is again as it might be sung the third time.

Sing:

Here's the same lyric using a different melody set in Rock style.

Sing: (Style CD – track 32)

Here it is again with more inventive phrasing to express more feeling.

Sing:

And the third time:

Sing:
Use this chord progression to practice your own variations. (Style CD – track 33)

Here are a couple of phrases in the Rhythm & Blues style, as written.

**Sing:** (Style CD – track 34)

Here it is again with an improvisational variation.

**Sing:**

Use this accompaniment to practice your improvisational skills. (Style CD – track 35)

Let's go Country! Here's a Country phrase, first as written, followed by improvisations on the melody.
Sing: (Style CD – track 36)

Here's a variation with improvisational licks.

Sing:

Use the same accompaniment to practice your own licks. (Style CD – track 37)

Let's Rock! Here's the original phrase as written. (Style CD – track 38)

Sing:
Try this improvisational treatment of the same phrase.

**Sing:**

Repeat the same accompaniment to develop your own improvisational skills and explore new choices that are more personal and more expressive. *(Style CD – track 39)*