

NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT for the ARTS

And the National Alliance for Musical Theatre



MUSICAL THEATER  
SONGWRITING  
CHALLENGE

In collaboration with Concord Theatricals, Disney Theatrical Productions,  
and NMPA S.O.N.G.S. Foundation

# MODULE 6: SCENE TO SONG

Why does a character sing? Why must a character sing? By exploring the dramatic context of the scene where your song takes place, you will clarify your character's circumstances and pinpoint the exact moment where music begins.

# WHY DO CHARACTERS SING?

A character sings when they experience a **heightened emotion** and words are no longer enough to express what they are feeling.

As a writer, you need to know **why** your character is singing at this exact moment.

# WHAT IS DRAMATIC CONTEXT?

Dramatic context refers to a character's **circumstances** in a story, which justify why and when a character sings.

## ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC CONTEXT INCLUDE:

- **SETTING:** where and when does the moment take place?
- **CONFLICT:** what challenge or obstacle does your character face?
- **STAKES:** what does your character have to gain or lose?
- **EMOTIONAL STATE:** what is your character feeling and why?
- **RELATIONSHIPS:** who else is involved and how do they affect the moment?

## HOW DOES DRAMATIC CONTEXT LEAD TO SONG?

The elements of the dramatic context affect how a character acts and feels. When there is a **shift** in one of these elements, that is usually when a character's **emotions become heightened**, and words are no longer enough to express what the character is going through: **music is required** for the moment to take flight.



So how do you effectively transition from Scene to Song?  
**LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT AN EXAMPLE FROM THE MUSICAL WICKED:**

## THE SCENE BEFORE “DEFYING GRAVITY”

**ACT ONE, Scene 14:** THE UPPERMOST TURRET OF THE WIZARD'S PALACE.  
It is a tiny barren room, a kind of supply closet containing a few old rags and an old broom in a corner. There is one large window, overlooking the rooftops of the Emerald City.

ELPHABA

There are no more stairs...  
(looking around desperately)  
This must be the attic—

GLINDA

Elphaba, listen to me --

ELPHABA

The guards are coming up. We'll have to barricade the door!

GLINDA

What!?

Elphaba looks around desperately for something to barricade the door with; she spots a broom, grabs it--

ELPHABA

I'll use this—

Elphaba descends a couple of steps and wedges the door shut with the broom. As she comes back up ...

GLINDA

Why couldn't you have stayed calm, for once! Instead of flying off the handle -- !

(sings)

I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY  
I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY NOW  
I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY HOW YOU  
HURT YOUR CAUSE FOREVER  
I HOPE YOU THINK YOU'RE CLEVER

ELPHABA

I HOPE *YOU'RE* HAPPY  
I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY TOO  
I HOPE YOU'RE PROUD HOW YOU  
WOULD GROVEL IN SUBMISSION  
TO FEED YOUR OWN AMBITION

Let's explore the scene's  
**DRAMATIC CONTEXT**

**DRAMATIC CONTEXT OF THE SCENE BEFORE "DEFYING GRAVITY"**

- **SETTING:** The top of the Wizard's Palace, right after Elphaba has found out the Wizard is a fraud and wants to use her powers for his own evil agenda.
- **CONFLICT:** Elphaba runs away from the Wizard and reaches the top of the Wizard's Palace, with nowhere else to run. Glinda needs Elphaba to stop running and listen to her.
- **STAKES:** Elphaba has to find a place to hide or escape from the Wizard. Glinda needs to convince Elphaba to not throw away her chance at greatness.
- **EMOTIONAL STATE:** Elphaba feels betrayed and misled; she is desperate to find safety. Glinda is frustrated at Elphaba for her outburst in front of the Wizard and Madame Morrible.
- **RELATIONSHIPS:** Elphaba's role models and mentors, the Wizard and Madame Morrible, have now become her enemies. Glinda is angry at Elphaba, her best friend.

**ACT ONE, Scene 14: THE UPPERMOST TURRET OF THE WIZARD'S PALACE.**  
It is a tiny barren room, a kind of supply closet containing a few old rags and an old broom in a corner. There is one large window, overlooking the rooftops of the Emerald City.

**ELPHABA**

There are no more stairs...  
(looking around desperately)  
This must be the attic—

**GLINDA**

Elphaba, listen to me --

**ELPHABA**

The guards are coming up. We'll have to barricade the door!

**GLINDA**

What!?

Elphaba looks around desperately for something to barricade the door with; she spots a broom, grabs it--

**ELPHABA**

I'll use this—

**LET'S USE SCENE NOTATION TO SEE WHAT'S GOING ON!**



# NOTATING THE SCENE BEFORE "DEFYING GRAVITY"

We know the stakes are high at the top of this scene: Elphaba is running away, with nowhere else to go right now, and Glinda is finally able to catch up to Elphaba to get her to listen. We are already starting this scene from a place of high tension and drama.

**ACT ONE, Scene 14: THE UPPERMOST TURRET OF THE WIZARD'S PALACE.**  
It is a tiny barren room, a kind of supply closet containing a few old rags and an old broom in a corner. There is one large window, overlooking the rooftops of the Emerald City.

ELPHABA  
There are no more stairs...  
(looking around desperately)  
This must be the attic—

Elphaba's dialogue & this stage direction tell us how she feels while she focuses only on her imminent safety and observes her surroundings  
**THE SETTING IS DANGEROUS.**

The first time Glinda tries to get Elphaba to listen.  
**HER CONFLICT IS NOT BEING HEARD.**

GLINDA  
Elphaba, listen to me --

ELPHABA  
The guards are coming up. We'll have to barricade the door!  
Elphaba ignores her!

Glinda tries again.  
No response from Elphaba.  
**THEIR RELATIONSHIP IS STRAINED.**

GLINDA  
What!?

We get the stage direction "desperate" again.  
**THE STAKES ARE HIGH.**

Elphaba looks around desperately for something to barricade the door with; she spots a broom, grabs it--

ELPHABA  
I'll use this—

Elphaba ignores her AGAIN.  
**STRAINED RELATIONSHIP CONFIRMED.**

Elphaba descends a couple of steps and wedges the door shut with the broom. As she comes back up ...

Glinda demands Elphaba listen to her.  
**HER EMOTIONAL STATE IS HEIGHTENED.**  
If speaking won't get Elphaba to listen, then she has to sing.

GLINDA  
Why couldn't you have stayed calm, for once! Instead of flying off the handle -- !

**SONG BEGINS.**

(sings)  
I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY  
I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY NOW  
I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY HOW YOU  
HURT YOUR CAUSE FOREVER  
I HOPE YOU THINK YOU'RE CLEVER

ELPHABA  
I HOPE *YOU'RE* HAPPY  
I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY TOO

## JUSTIFYING THE SONG

The dialogue and stage directions build upon one another to raise the stakes, increase tension, and heighten emotion to the point where Glinda must burst out in song.

### BUT WHAT IF...

Imagine if Glinda had started singing the first time she tried to get Elphaba's attention. Would the song have felt justified? Think about if the scene had gone like this:

ELPHABA  
 There are no more stairs...  
 (looking around desperately)  
 This must be the attic—

GLINDA  
 Elphaba, listen to me --  
 (sings)  
 I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY  
 I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY NOW  
 I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY HOW YOU  
 HURT YOUR CAUSE FOREVER  
 I HOPE YOU THINK YOU'RE CLEVER

Would Elphaba have listened to this? Would she have been confused by Glinda's sudden outburst?  
 The song isn't justified yet in this scenario.

If the song had started at this moment, Glinda's frustration would have felt like it came out of nowhere. It would not be justified for her to start singing. Her frustration needed to build, which is why Elphaba ignores Glinda three times, pushing Glinda a little further each time, to the point where she can't take it anymore and has to sing.

**BY LOOKING AT EACH ELEMENT OF THE DRAMATIC CONTEXT: THE SETTING, CONFLICT, STAKES, EMOTIONAL STATE AND RELATIONSHIPS, WE CAN UNDERSTAND HOW EACH OF THESE PIECES CONTRIBUTES TO THE OVERALL TENSION AND DRAMA.**

**THEY WORK TOGETHER AND BUILD UPON ONE ANOTHER TO LEAD INTO SONG.**



# NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!

*Let's explore the dramatic context for your song.  
Then, write a draft of the scene before your song, and see how you can heighten  
emotion to justify the start of music.*

## DRAMATIC CONTEXT OF THE SCENE BEFORE YOUR SONG

### SETTING:

*Where and when does the moment take place?*

### CONFLICT:

*What challenge or obstacle does your character face?*

### STAKES:

*What does your character have to gain or lose?*

### EMOTIONAL STATE:

*What is your character feeling and why?*

### RELATIONSHIPS:

*Who else is involved and how do they affect the moment?*

## DRAFT THE SCENE BEFORE YOUR SONG

*Keeping in mind the dramatic context, write the dialogue and stage directions that lead into your song.  
Think about how each line can build off one another to heighten emotion. Why is your character singing right now?*

*Read over your scene. Does the moment your character starts singing feel justified?  
If not, see where you can add another line or stage direction to keep increasing tension and raising the stakes.*