

5 STEPS FOR WRITING A GREAT SONG



SAVVY
MUSICIAN
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Hey, it's Leah here. I'm glad we connected. If you're like me, you are interested in writing really good songs and want to improve your existing skills.

A great song means more listeners, and more potential to stand out among the sea of music floating all over the Internet! And when you have more exposure, you have much greater potential to build a fan base and even turn that into income.

Yes, it all starts with a good song.

As a full-time stay-at-home-mom and "artistpreneur" I've managed to have some success, including an international audience that I built online (because I don't tour), and even raised over \$27,000 in a crowdfunding campaign last year! All that happened because my fans believed in my music. Music is where it's at!

I get asked about songwriting so frequently I thought I'd put together my top 5 Tips for Writing a Song. By the end of these short tips, you will feel like you've got a good framework to go off of and hopefully give you the boundaries you need to create your best work yet.





STEP 1 SONG STRUCTURE

Generally speaking, there are song “rules” about structure. Now, take this with a grain of salt, because these kinds of rules are meant to be broken. However, it’s a good idea when you’re first starting out to follow a skeleton song structure.

Feel free to mix it up and change it a bit later on. Do experiment and see what happens. These are suggestions and they’ve worked more me time and time again.

HERE ARE A COUPLE STRUCTURES TO TRY

INTRO

The first few riffs of the song. Needs to be ear catching.

VERSE

Usually 4-8 lines and is the foundation of the song.

CHORUS

The climax of the song and is approx. the same length as the verse.

INTRO

Go back to the beginning intro. This is the “hook” no matter what genre.

VERSE 2

Very similar to verse 1, but more intense and more depth.

CHORUS 2

Repeating Chorus 1. You can also double the length if it’s really good.

BRIDGE

A refreshing change of pace that leads down a different path and then back to the chorus again.

CHORUS 3

If the song is not too long yet, add a 3rd chorus and really make it the strongest one yet. If you already doubled the length in chorus 2 you should do the same here.

OUTRO

End with the intro hook but perhaps fading out, or a slightly different feel.

FOR SOMETHING SIMPLER, TRY THIS:

VERSE

CHORUS

VERSE

CHORUS

CHORUS

If you add an intro and an outro on that, it's a pretty complete song. There's nothing wrong with a very simple structure as long as it leaves you feeling very satisfied.

I always go by my gut instinct on that one. If something feels incomplete, you may need to shift the structure around or add a pre-chorus to build a climax.

**YOUR SONG NEEDS TO HAVE PEAKS AND VALLEYS.
IT NEEDS DYNAMICS – PARTS THAT ARE SOFT, AND PARTS THAT ARE
MORE INTENSE. THEY CAN BE SUBTLE, BUT THEY NEED TO BE PRESENT.**





STEP MUSIC

This is a tricky topic because when it comes to writing the actual music, I always say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder (or beer-holder?).

If you've never written any music before, all you need to do is start playing around on your instrument.

Literally, just noodle around.

That might not sound like a professional musician thing to say, but it's true.

When I'm trying to write something and I don't know what it's going to be yet, all I do is play around like I'm a little kid, and usually I stumble onto something by accident.

Sometimes I play a wrong note... and it sounds great! That one wrong note is the inspiration that leads me to the next chord and the next one after that.

- Do you have a riff already? All you need is a few chords to start with. Write them down!
- Jam it out. Does it feel right to you? What do your ears want to hear next?
- What happens if you change the last chord or riff to something else – does it feel better or worse?

WHENEVER I COME ACROSS A CHORD PROGRESSION I LIKE, I QUICKLY WRITE THEM DOWN BEFORE I FORGET, SO THAT IF I EXPERIMENT WITH CHANGING THE CHORDS AND I DON'T LIKE THE DIRECTION IT'S GOING IN, I CAN ALWAYS GO BACK TO MY ORIGINAL IDEA.

- If you have a little chord progression, see if there's a melody that fits. Just hum it out. Don't judge yourself, just see if there's an obvious melody to you.
- Decide if it sounds like a verse or a chorus. What happens if you add another chord or two?
- If you found a fitting melody, record it on a little hand recorder or your smartphone voice memo app.
- Vary your keys song to song. You don't want them all to sound exactly alike.

STEP 3 LYRICS

For your lyrics, you can also follow guidelines or break all the rules. Totally your choice. I'll share here the commonly accepted theory for lyrics. Feel free to experiment.

INTRO/OUTRO

Some people use this space to add some oohs, ahhs, or sing one catchy word that will be repeated later.

VERSE 1

The content should introduce the listener to the topic, leading into the idea of the point/question/topic in the chorus.

CHORUS

The big point/idea of the song.

VERSE 2

Elaborating on verse one, but going more in depth, and more specific. By now the listener should know exactly what the song is all about.

CHORUS 2

Same as Chorus 1.

BRIDGE

Deviation from the verse topic, adding a new idea or added perspective, maybe asking a question --- leading smoothly into the chorus --- making sense.

**WHEN IT COMES TO RHYMING, I DON'T LOVE RHYMEY-RHYMES.
I LIKE SIMILAR SOUNDING WORDS AND VOWELS. IT KEEPS THE FLOW
OF THE SONG WITHOUT SOUNDING CHEESY AND PREDICTABLE.**

Sometimes I really get in a rhyming rut. When that happens I just don't rhyme. You do not have to rhyme. But... if it doesn't rhyme, the words need to be more memorable, either by the content or the phrasing/syllables since there isn't a rhyme "hook" to remember it by.

MUST-HAVE TOOLS FOR WRITING LYRICS:

- Rhyming dictionary app/website
- Wikipedia – for researching a topic
- Thesaurus – my favorite!
- Recording device or software

If you're stuck for topics, sometimes it's fun to browse Wikipedia and pick out random words that sound really cool. Just make a big list. They don't need to make sense at first. Then later on, see if you can connect the dots and make some of them work. It's a great brain exercise, and is wonderful for writer's block!





STEP MELODY

In my opinion, melody is what makes a song. You can have the most amazing chord progression, but if the melody is boring or predictable, it's a major letdown and the song quickly loses momentum. You want a melody that is both refreshing and also satisfying to the listener's anticipation. It's a hard balance to strike.

Once you have a groove or a riff to jam on, try to hear what first comes to mind. If you like it, record it to a hand-held device (or smartphone voice note app).

If you have the next section of chords, see if you can connect the dots in the melody... try humming something over the next section. You can figure out later what part of the song that will be.

Below is a general description of how I compose my melodies. I usually don't put too much thought into it until I have some material to work with and then I go back and look to see if it all fits.

INTRO

Some people use this space to add some oohs, ahhs, or sing one catchy word that will be repeated later.

VERSES

The content should introduce the listener to the topic, leading into the idea of the point/question/topic in the chorus.

CHORUS

The big point/idea of the song.

BRIDGE

Elaborating on verse one, but going more in depth, and more specific. By now the listener should know exactly what the song is all about.

ABOUT HOOKS: A HOOK IS SOMETHING THAT LITERALLY GRABS YOU. EVEN IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, IT WILL STILL GRAB YOU. HAPPENS TO ME ALL THE TIME WITH POP SONGS I DON'T PREFER. BUT DANG IT – THEY GET STUCK IN MY HEAD!

Even if you're playing black metal, there are still hooks. It will be a haunting growl, or a super memorable pipe organ riff... something will grab you and then it will be repeated at some point later in the song. This is a good song.

Vocal hooks are ALL about the melody and sometimes the rhythm/syllables. Think of any popular top 40 song and you'll see what I mean about repeated syllables the producers turned into hooks.

But I don't want you to be too overly concerned about that. Work with the main meat of the melody of the song, and then work on hooks as the icing on the cake afterwards.





STEP

WHEN YOU'RE STUCK

**IT HAPPENS TO EVERYONE. NEVER FEAR!
THERE'S ALWAYS A WAY TO GET YOUR CREATIVE JUICES FLOWING AGAIN.**

HERE ARE SOME TIPS I USE WHEN I'M IN A WRITING RUT:

I TRY SOMETHING DIFFERENT!

If you've been playing piano only, switch to organ, or a synthesizer, or string sound on a keyboard. If you play more than one instrument, like guitar, then switch it up!

If you have any digital instruments in your DAW (digital audio workstation – your recording software), try an instrument you've never touched before. Even if you have no idea how it should be played, it's going to get you into a completely different headspace.

Research a random topic and make a huge list of words that you like. See if you can make them into coherent sentences later. Then see if you can change any wording and syllables to sound more rhythmic and possibly even rhyme.

Try a new key. Play or hum a melody in an unusual key you're not used to.

Try a different time signature. One song of mine called "This Present Darkness" was pretty boring to me in standard 4/4 until I tried playing it in a 7/8 time signature. Suddenly the song came to life! I used my metronome in my recording software to help me "get it".

When an idea comes to me, I use my voice note app on my iPhone to record my melodies and any piano/chord ideas. Many of my favorite songs have come to me when I'm almost falling asleep or in the shower... I have to quickly record it before it's gone!

If I'm in a writing rut where all my songs are starting to sound the same, I try to see what the pattern is.

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN YOUR SONGS START SOUNDING THE SAME:

- Are they all in the same key?
- Are they all the same typical song structure?
- Similar melodies?
- Same instrumentation?
- Are you in a 4-chord progression rut? Try 6 or 3 instead.
- Playing only major chords? Switch to minor or something with more of a blues scale.

Try to figure out what you're doing in every song, and then do the exact opposite.

Try to look at your songs objectively to discover what you're constantly doing. It's just a matter of getting out of your own box. That's when you hit the jack pot!

Above all: My biggest tip is to have a **no-pressure** rule for yourself!

When it comes to writing, you need to be a kid again. Just play around like you don't care, and forget about the rest of your life, and push aside any noise in your head. Just play.

The best songs happen by accident or I make a "mistake" and stumble across a "spark" of a song. It soon turns into a flame and then a raging fire! That's all it takes.

I know it might seem like there is a lot to consider, but after you get going, songwriting will start to come more and more naturally to you. **Just starting playing!**

XOX, Leah McHenry
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