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HOW TO WRITE A SONG

Writing a song can be a daunting and frustrating prospect for the less experienced. Luckily, there are plenty of methods for creating the next chart-topper. This article will walk you through the basics of how to write a song and jumpstart your creative process.

There is no magic formula for writing a song. The process is different for everyone, and there is no right or wrong way to do it. A good song doesn't have to sound a certain way or fit into a certain mold. It doesn't have to be complex to be effective; even a simple song that is honest and authentic can connect with an audience.

Some days it feels like the music flows from you effortlessly. But if you find yourself stuck—or you don't know where to begin—this guide can help.

Step 1: Getting Started

Songwriting does not need to happen in any particular order. Some people prefer to write lyrics before music, others compose the music first, and still others write them both at the same time. We will talk about the music-first method, but give them all a try. As you practice writing songs you will learn what works best for you. Switching up your techniques once in a while can help break you out of writer's block.

Before you begin:

- When writing a chord progression, it is useful to know basic chord theory, which helps you understand the functions of various chords in a given key. But while knowing some music theory is certainly a useful tool, it's not a requirement for writing a song.
- It absolutely helps to play a chordal instrument such as guitar or piano. If you don't know how, get help from someone who does.

There are many approaches to composing a chord progression or melody. Try some of these.

1. Pick a chord (any chord) and start playing it. Sing or play a melody over it and see if that leads you to the next chord naturally.
2. If you don't like the next chord you play, start over and try something different. Repeat until you find the "right" one. You might even play a chord that leads your melody in an unexpected direction.
3. Experiment with chord progressions and riffs by playing them without thinking about a melody at all. When you stumble upon something you like, write a melody that complements it.
4. Start with a melody that's already in your head. Sing it, or transpose it onto your instrument, then figure out the appropriate chords.
5. Think of a song you love. Try writing in a similar style or invent a new variation. Use the same chords but write a different melody. Switch some chords up as you go, substituting a new one here and there. Play the original progression backwards. As you gradually transform it into your own song, see what new melodies naturally arise. (Warning: The challenge with this method is to use another song as inspiration without copying it. Once you start playing a familiar song, it can be very difficult to get the original tune out of your head!)
6. Be cautious when drawing inspiration from existing songs. Western music only has 12 notes to choose from, and plagiarism is a serious issue if you're not writing songs strictly for your own enjoyment. Keep in mind that you cannot copyright a chord progression, but melodies are protected.
7. If you're not sure how to make the melody sound right, start by sticking to notes that appear in the chord you're singing over (or at least notes within the key of the song).
8. Chromatic notes (notes that are not in the key of the song) are best kept in short durations instead of long, sustained notes. This is because they sound dissonant and are typically used as passing tones.

If you're still having trouble, switch up an element of your song.

1. **Harmonic rhythm.** This essentially refers to how long you play each chord. Try playing some of the chords for half a bar instead of a full bar, or two bars instead of one.
2. **Tempo.** Change how fast or slow your song is. If you're getting stuck on a slow song, speed it up. If your breakneck pace isn't clicking, turn it into a ballad or mid-tempo piece.

3. **Groove.** You may be getting held up by the *feel* of what you're writing. Make it “swing” rather than playing strictly on the beat. Switch the time signature to 6/8 instead of 4/4.
4. **Words.** Sometimes it is hard to write a melody without singing actual words. As you write, sing words or syllables that pop into your head rather than humming. Don't worry about what you're singing—you'll write the real lyrics later. Paul McCartney famously wrote the original lyrics to “Yesterday” as “Scrambled Eggs.”

Step 2: Song Sections

As you've probably noticed, songs are typically split into different sections—usually a verse, a chorus, and sometimes a bridge. We will talk more about song structure later when we discuss lyrics and arrangement, but as you write, be aware of the basic song elements at your disposal.

Intro

- At the beginning of a song is the introduction. In popular music, intros typically last between four and eight bars. A shorter introduction is often beneficial for songs played on the radio, since they tend to be 3-4 minutes long and it's important to waste as little time as possible getting to the melody. But even songs made for the popular market are not confined to this runtime, such as Queen's six-minute-long “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

Verse

- Also known as the “A section,” verses are often the first thing you hear after the introduction. They can be used for lyrical exposition, setting up the song's themes and imagery. The dynamics of the verses are generally more subdued compared to more exciting chorus.

Chorus

- The chorus or refrain is usually the signature of a song. It is repeated several times, normally after each verse, and tends to be higher in energy and lyrically simpler. One goal of the chorus is to be catchy enough to get stuck in the

listener's head. It's also sometimes called the "hook." Some examples of songs with distinctive choruses include "Like a Rolling Stone" by Bob Dylan and "Champagne Supernova" by Oasis.

- A chorus can be as simple as writing a new melody over the verse's chord progression, like in "Run-Around" by Blues Traveler.
- Many songs don't have a traditional chorus, but rather a simple, repeated refrain. The hook in "Every Breath You Take" by The Police is when Sting repeats the phrase "I'll be watching you" at the end of each verse. When the chord progression changes and he sings "Oh can't you see," it functions more like a bridge (more on that next).
- Another example is "Something" by The Beatles, where the refrain begins when George Harrison sings "I don't wanna leave her now." This structure of songwriting is often referred to as "AABA."

Bridge

- The bridge is a third section used as a transition or climactic moment. A bridge is a good way to add a fresh new sound to break the monotony of a verse-chorus-verse structure.
- Bridges can take the form of a transition between the verse and chorus (sometimes referred to as a "pre-chorus"), a new chord progression or melody that hasn't been heard in the song before, a guitar solo, etc.
- A great bridge example is "Summer of 69" by Bryan Adams. When he sings "Man we were killing time, we were young and restless," there is a key change, a new chord progression and a new melody. It's unexpected, high energy and exciting.

Outro

- Songs end by fading out or building to a grand finale. It can be an entirely distinct section in its own right.

It's important to note that not every song has to have every one of these elements. You can use as many or as few as you please.

Step 3: Lyrical Theme

Lyrics often become the identity of a song. You don't *have* to write lyrics at all—there are plenty of tunes that simply have a melody with no words. However, many listeners identify with lyrics, so should you choose to include words, they should be carefully considered.

Strive for authenticity with your lyrics. Songs that sound phony or cliché can be a big turn off to audiences.

First things first: you'll need a lyrical theme.

1. Music can be great therapy; write about something you need to get off your chest. What is frustrating, angering or confusing you? What makes you sad?
2. Keep a diary and write in it daily, or carry a notebook with you wherever you go. Your life is full of moments that make for great song themes, and inspiration may strike at any time.
3. Write about something that makes you happy. What are the good things in your life? What makes you feel empowered? What inspires you?
4. Write about your hopes and dreams. What do you want to get out of life? What are some of your ambitions and anxieties about the future?
5. Love songs are the most popular songs in the world. Everyone is inspired by being in love, having a crush, unrequited love or hoping to find love.
6. You don't have to write about your own experiences. Think of a situation in a friend's life, then write from their perspective.
7. Make up a story. Many fictional stories resonate with audiences and can be just as authentic as nonfiction. Take an idea you had for a short story and turn it into a song.
8. Tackle an issue that's important to you. Political topics fire people up and make for memorable and impactful song lyrics.
9. Write about a movie or TV show you recently watched. Base the lyrics on the plight of one of the characters. Imagine you were hired to write a theme song for a particular film. What would it be about?
10. Be funny. You could be the next "Weird Al" Yankovic.

Step 4: Writing Lyrics

Once you have established your theme, you can commence writing lyrics. Try one of the following approaches.

1. You already have a melody, now it's time to fit in the words.
 - Keeping the same number of syllables and phrases in each verse gives your song consistency.
 - Avoid accenting words on the wrong syllable and awkward sentence structures. This can be a challenge when working within the constraints of the melody.
 - Use a thesaurus to find word alternates that fit better rhythmically.
 - Record a loop of the song's chords. Start singing, stream-of-consciousness style, using trial-and-error to come up with lyrics.
2. Stay flexible. While writing lyrics, you may stumble upon an even better melody than your original idea.
3. Rhyming is everything. Well, maybe not *everything*... Some songs don't rhyme at all. But most do. Practice your rhyming skills!
 - It's just like writing a poem. Pick a rhyme scheme (AABB, ABAB, ABCB, etc.) and keep it consistent throughout the verses and/or choruses.
 - Half-rhymes often work just as well. For example, try rhyming "me" with "need" or "change" with "same."
 - Use a rhyming dictionary like RhymeZone.com when you get stuck.
4. A conversational tone is fine, but don't strictly write how you talk.
 - Punch up lyrics with colorful words outside your usual vocabulary.
 - Speak symbolically using metaphors.
 - Avoid cliches. They only result in the same old hackneyed lines you've heard a million times before.
 - Sometimes the "texture" of words matters more than the meaning. Some phrases just *sound* good. Think "I Am The Walrus" by The Beatles or "Paranoid Android" by Radiohead.
5. The chorus should be the most memorable part of the song.
 - Choruses work best when they are easy to sing along with, so use fewer words than the verses. R.E.M.'s "It's The End of the World As We Know It" is an extreme example of this.
 - Most choruses are the same every time, repeated with little variation. This way, the listener knows what's coming and starts connecting with the song right away. A great chorus can be remembered by a first-time listener before the song is even over.
 - The chorus lyrics should encapsulate the theme of the song as much as possible. In "Layla," Clapton's chorus sums up the unrequited love theme.
6. Take the listener on a journey.

- The lyrics in your song should evolve and tell a story even if it isn't a “storytelling” song. Try ending it with a revelation; ask questions in the first verse that are answered later in the bridge; illustrate a change in the main character’s arc.
 - Get clever. Irony, wordplay and any unique twist gives lyrics novelty.
7. Leave some mystery. Leave something to the imagination and interpretation of the listener. Give them the gist, then keep it open-ended. Let them fill in the blanks with their own story.

Step 5: Arrangement

With the lyrics and music complete, it’s all about the details of your song from here on out. It’s time for fine-tuning.

Song Structure

Now is when the song sections come together to create the structure. You get to decide the order and how many times sections repeat. An example would be:

INTRO - VERSE 1 - CHORUS - VERSE 2 - CHORUS - BRIDGE - SOLO - CHORUS - CHORUS

1. When assembling the order, work out transitions between sections.
 - Will the verse lead into the chorus with a drum fill? Will the music drop out for a beat leading into the climactic bridge?
2. Dynamics (louder and softer sections) make a song more interesting.
 - Will the first verse consist of the vocalist and a guitar, and the bridge will be higher energy with the drummer bashing the crash cymbal?
 - Dynamics create moments of tension and release that keep the listener wondering what is coming next. Take the audience on a sonic journey, much like the lyrical journey.

Instrumentation

Typical instrumentation for a popular song can include any combination of the following:

1. Acoustic guitar
2. Electric guitar
3. Electric bass
4. Acoustic upright bass
5. Piano/organ/keyboard
6. Horn section
7. Drums/percussion
8. Drum loops
9. Samples
10. Strings
11. Synthesizers

Of course, the sky's the limit when it comes to instrumentation. How about a mandolin, dulcimer or ukulele? Why not a pedal steel guitar, flute or clarinet? Go crazy and play non-traditional instruments like a saw or a theremin.

It all comes down to how you want the final product to sound.

1. Do you want a stripped-down, bare-bones acoustic sound?
2. Do you want a more modern, electronic feel?
3. Would you prefer a rootsy bluegrass or country record?
4. Do you want a rock trio sound like Green Day or a more orchestrated sound like ELO?

Instrumental Parts

It's not enough to have music and lyrics; for a song to come together, you need notable instrumental (and vocal) parts, such as:

1. A guitar or bass riff. (Example: No Doubt's "Just a Girl" or Muse's "Hysteria.")
2. A drum hook. (Example: Nirvana's "In Bloom.")
3. A signature piano part. (Example: Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody.")
4. An iconic introduction. (Example: Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run.")

5. Background vocals, including harmonies. (Example: Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes.")

Pay attention to things like rhythm, timbre (how the part sounds) and melody when writing instrumental and vocal parts. They often become a signature hook in the song.

Songwriters don't have to flesh out their song arrangements themselves. Parts are often created by the performing musicians or a producer.

If a song doesn't seem to be "working," it may be an issue with the arrangement rather than the song itself. Switch it up! Try a different genre, reorder sections, change the instrumentation, rewrite parts entirely.

Conclusion

Congrats! You wrote a song. Your first song may not sound like a work of genius, but there is nothing wrong with that. Writing songs is just like playing an instrument—you get better with practice. Write a little bit every day. You won't always be inspired, and you won't always write a catchy tune. But even great songwriters don't write instant classics every try. Everyone has to create a pile of mediocre songs before they get to a great one.

Keep listening to new music for inspiration, keep writing, and good luck!