


THE ULTIMATE BOOK OF SONG STARTERS

A bright red lightning bolt strikes across the center of the cover, branching out in multiple directions. The background is dark, and the lightning is a vibrant, glowing red, creating a high-contrast, energetic visual.

501 **POWERFUL**
AND CREATIVE IDEAS
FOR WRITING NEW SONGS

ED BELL

THE ULTIMATE BOOK OF SONG STARTERS

501 Powerful and Creative Ideas for
Writing New Songs

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ABOUT THE SONG FOUNDRY

At The Song Foundry it's our mission to share great songwriting ideas with the world. At thesongfoundry.com we publish articles about songwriting, host free videos on various songwriting topics, and offer Skype songwriting coaching worldwide.



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[READY]

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

‘What if?’ might just be the two most powerful words in the English language. They’re the start of something new. They’re the first spark of inspiration. They’re the catalyst that starts the chain reaction that leads to a new ‘what if?’ and a new ‘what if?’ and a new ‘what if?’ after that.

And, well, if you’re a songwriter looking for 501 powerful, interesting and creative ways to ask yourself ‘what if?’, you’ve come to the right place.

Now, truth be told, you don’t really need this book. There are thousands of great song ideas all around you just waiting for you to notice them. They’re in the songs you’re listening to already. They’re out on the street. They’re in the news. And they’re in the conversations – good, bad and ugly – you’re having with the most important people in your life.

But hold on – don’t throw this book out just yet. While you might not 100% need a book like this, you can absolutely, 100% use a book like this – and it might just help you create something you’d never have thought of on your own.

So if you’re new to songwriting and you’re looking for some inspiring but tried-and-tested song ideas to get you started, or you’re the kind of songwriter who needs an extra push taking that first bold step on a song,

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or you're just excited to push your songwriting in a completely new direction, that's exactly what this book is going to give you, 501 times over.

So here we are – welcome to the ultimate collection of 501 different ideas, concepts and starting points you could use to spark literally thousands of songs.

The 501 song prompts fit into five basic types. Some give you a song concept, situation or story to write with. Some give you a single word or phrase. Some give you a chord progression of four or sometimes eight measures. Some give you a specific rhythm. And some of the most interesting ones give you more individual and even unusual ways to approach writing new songs.

I've tried to keep the song starters as simple as possible. Some are as short as a single word, and the longest are only two or three sentences. I didn't want to include tons of instructions or even guidance with each prompt because – like I do in most of my books – I'd rather plant some powerful ideas in your mind, then let you have fun figuring out how to use that idea in your own way. (Because, honestly, that's the best way to write songs and the best way to have fun while you do.)

So instead, before we get to the song starters, I'm going to give you some general pointers on working with each of the five types, if you find that sort of thing useful. If you are looking for some specific guidance on how to create new songs out of nothing, there's plenty more of that in my book [*How to Write a Song \(Even If You've Never Written One Before and You Think You Suck\)*](#), which will be the ideal companion to this one.

If you're looking for a more structured way to try out tons of interesting songwriting techniques and ideas, you'll probably also enjoy

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my [30-Day Songwriting Challenges](#) – especially *The 30-Day Speed Songwriting Challenge*, which will guide you through finishing fifteen brand new songs in a single month. There's more information about all of these books at the back of this one or on [The Song Foundry website](#).

The starters in this book are organized pretty much at random – though a few of them with related themes or ideas are on nearby pages – so you can jump in and start working on whatever ideas inspire you most. Some of the starters were inspired by or cribbed from well-known or even crazily popular songs, but a) I'm not going to tell you which, and b) it doesn't really matter anyway, because a good idea is a good idea, wherever it comes from.

On that note, some of the starters will work great if you're interested in writing commercial pop music, and some not so much. But that's true whatever your goals are as a songwriter: some of these starters will be perfect for you, some you might want to pass on, and the rest will be somewhere in between. That's why you've got five hundred of them – and why I'm going to leave it to you to pick out the ones that inspire you most so you can make something cool with them.

It probably goes without saying that you can – actually, should – use them to write songs in any style or genre you like, with any combination of instruments, tracks and/or singers you like. All I've done with this book is put 501 simple but powerful song ideas painstakingly together in one place – ideas that are inspiring, stimulating and really well suited to writing, singing and/or making music about in virtually any genre. All so this book can become your songwriting bible any time you're feeling stuck or short of inspiration, or just feel like writing something that's an exciting new challenge for you.

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So dive in. See what sparks your imagination. Pick out a ‘what if?’ or five hundred and see where they take you.

Happy writing.

A QUICK WORD ON COPYRIGHT

(Because some of y'all often ask.)

So here's the deal with copyright: in general, **you can't copyright an idea.**

Song ideas, song titles, chord progressions, the key of G major, the idea that the word 'party' should be pronounced 'pardy' – none of those things are copyrightable on their own. Copyright applies only to a specific *expression* or *use* of an idea, not a vague or general idea in itself.

So if you use any of the song starters in this book to write a megahit that somehow ends up as a hit song, it's not yours. It's mine. Sorry.

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[SET]

HOW TO USE EACH STARTER TYPE

You know the drill: this is your book – you own it, so you can do whatever you like with it.

But in case it helps, let's spend a moment talking about the five different types of song starters you'll find in this book and what you can do to turn each of them into complete songs.

If you don't need any of this, and want to jump ahead and get writing, that's great. Go ahead. But if you're looking for some gentle pointers, there definitely are a handful of things that are worth knowing about each starter type. (And again, if you want some less gentle pointers, you'll probably find my book [*How to Write a Song \(Even If You've Never Written One Before and You Think You Suck\)*](#) perfect for that.)

Obviously, there's no single, 'correct' way to write a song – that's one of the reasons songwriting is so interesting and so rewarding. But by dividing these starters into five categories it not only made it easier for me to come up with 501 of them, it probably also makes it easier for you to get into a bit of a groove when it comes to working with them. (Pun, I guess, totally intended.)

So let's talk about the five types.

IDEA STARTERS

Idea starters are some of the most powerful and interesting starters in the book. They give you the classic song prompt-style starters like ‘Write a song that says X’ or ‘Write a song from Y person to Z person’ or ‘Write a song that tells the story of person W, Ñ or Ö’.

They look like this:

Write a song that says ‘You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.’

Use this idea, situation or concept to build a complete song.

They’re all essential song ideas, situations, stories or concepts that give you pretty much free rein to turn that initial spark into a completed song. As I said, I’m not going to give you tons of explanation on what you could do with each idea, though sometimes I’ve thrown in an extra sentence or two where I thought it would help.

Most of these starters need a bit of fleshing out to become complete song ideas. That is, you’ll want to figure out who specifically is singing, who they’re singing to, and what they’re trying to say. So it’s worth giving that some thought before you do anything else.

From there, it’s a good idea to decide on a lyrical hook or title – a word or phrase that neatly summarizes your song’s message – and then build your lyric around that. Meanwhile, you’ll want to think about

grooves, chord progressions and a vocal melody that supports and helps to communicate the song's fundamental idea or message.

You can build all those parts of the song in whatever order you like, but the key – as in all of the starter types – is to put those pieces together in a way that works as an effective whole. And by starting with an idea or concept, you get the centerpiece or cornerstone that's going to tie all the different parts of your song together – the thing that it's about – so you can build the song out from there.

WORD STARTERS

Word starters are not a world away from idea starters, but they take things a bit further back to basics: they give you a single word or short phrase you can use to build a complete song.

They look like this:

pain

*Use this word or phrase in your song's title or part of its lyric,
then build a complete song around that.*

So the word 'pain' could inspire a song titled 'Feel My Pain' or 'Addicted to Pain' or 'The Pain Train' or even – if you can think of a strong concept to go with it – just 'Pain' itself. With all of these starters you can also use a closely related word, like 'pains' or 'pained' or

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‘painful’, if that helps you incorporate the word in the song’s title or an important phrase in its lyric.

There are tons of this type of starter in this book – nearly a third of all the starters here – because they’re so simple but open up so many possibilities. And the words you get definitely aren’t random: I chose them all because they’re rich in nuance, depth or meaning, and all hint at compelling situations, concepts or stories you could build an interesting song around.

And just like with the idea starters, you’ll want to think about your song’s specific situation – who’s singing, who they’re singing to, what they’re saying – while you figure out a specific phrase that incorporates the word or words of the song starter. That means you’ll probably have to invent a handful of details to flesh out your song’s situation or story, to give you a solid foundation to write from.

Once you’ve got that, like with the idea starters, you can then turn that idea or concept into a complete song. There are no rules about how or where you should use each word, but whatever you do it’s worth thinking about using them somewhere important or prominent in the song. The song’s title is one of the most obvious and effective places, but you can do something different if that feels right for the song you have in mind.

CHORD STARTERS

Chord starters are exactly what you’d expect – 4- or 8-measure chord progressions you can use somewhere in a song.

They look like this:

C – Am – F – G

C major: **I – vi – IV – V**

Write a song that uses this chord progression.

Using them might mean just repeating the chords over and over and calling that your song's chord progression. It might mean using them in your song's verse or chorus but writing your own chords for other sections. Or it might mean using the chords as part of a larger chord

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As usual, you're trying to make sure everything works together as a unified whole – like an upbeat groove with an upbeat message, or a ballad groove with an emotional message, or whatever. None of the chord progressions comes with styles, moods or tempos, so you can play around with different choices until you end up with something that works for each particular song.

You might decide on a groove and then figure out a song idea, or figure out a song idea and then use the chord progression to build a groove that fits it – whatever you like. All that matters is that all those things fit well together in the end.

Some of the chord progressions come from well-known songs and some don't. Some are super simple and some are richer and more interesting. Most have one chord per measure, but a few mix that pattern up a bit, so it'll be up to you how to split the two chords across the bar where necessary.


If you're feeling extra adventurous, you could even tweak the harmonic rhythm – the rhythm of the chord changes – of some of the chord starters so they last a different number of measures or the chords are spread differently over the four or eight measures. (Though they work great, as is, of course.)

RHYTHM STARTERS

Rhythmic starters give you the skeleton of a musical idea – a rhythm of two or four measures you could use to build a groove, vocal melody, instrumental hook, anything, somewhere in your song.

They look like this:

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*Use this rhythm somewhere in your song's vocal melody,
instrumental groove or percussion track.*

They're basic enough they could form tons of different parts of a song. I toyed with giving you some specific melodic starters instead, but it was hard to come up with any that worked in a range of styles and feels — so with these rhythms you've got plenty of room to play around

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that feels natural and intuitive to you. (That's really important with rhythm – you want to feel that it's right, that it fits.)

For example, you could turn one rhythm into a groove pattern and spin that out over a four-chord progression. Or you could turn it into a drum track and build the rest of your groove on top of that. You could then use those parts to form part or all of your song's verse, chorus, bridge or intro – whichever part seems to make the most sense.

Once you've done that, the same applies with every other starter – you're trying to put all the other parts of your song together in a way that makes sense as a unified whole. Depending how you use it, each rhythm will suggest a particular style or mood for your song, and it's up to you to find an overall song idea that fits that well.

Most of the rhythm starters are in 4/4, because the vast majority of songs are in 4/4, but there are plenty in other meters also – including a couple of exotic ones – to keep you on your toes. If you don't read notation or just want to be sure you've interpreted each rhythm correctly, you can also get hold of recordings of each of the rhythm starters at thesongfoundry.com/rhythm-starters.

MISCELLANEOUS STARTERS

Finally, the miscellaneous starters are some of the most interesting – and potentially most stimulating – ways you can write new songs. They're basically tons of different and sometimes unusual ways of getting started that don't fit neatly into the other four categories.

They look like this:

Set a drum loop playing. Improvise a melody over the top until you find something you like. Then build a song around that.

Use this starting point or process to build a complete song.

They usually involve either starting with a more distinctive or particular catalyst for a song – or finding your own – then building the rest of the song around that.

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each starter lead to a groove or a chord melody or part of a song's lyric then let the rest of the song flow from that.

Either way, these are really fun starters for stretching yourself as a songwriter in new ways – so any time you're up for an adventure, just pick one of them and see what happens.

[WRITE]
THE 501 SONG
STARTERS

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a
single step.”

LAO TZU

“The scariest moment is always just before
you start.”

STEPHEN KING

“Ah \$&%! it, let's do it.”

ANYONE WHO EVER ACHIEVED ANYTHING,
LIKE, EVER

[1]

IDEA STARTER

Write a song that says ‘I love you.’ Think about finding a specific and fresh way of expressing that idea, as well as a specific situation to explore it through.

Use this idea, situation or concept to build a complete song.

[2]

CHORD STARTER

C – F – G – F

C major: **I – IV – V – IV**

Write a song that uses this chord progression.

[3]

WORD STARTER

inside

*Use this word or phrase in your song's title or part of its lyric, then
build a complete song around that.*

[4]

RHYTHM STARTER



*Use this rhythm somewhere in your song's vocal melody,
instrumental groove or percussion track.*

[5] IDEA STARTER

Write a song that says ‘I don’t love you anymore.’ Think about what happened that changed your singer’s attitude and make sure the song explains that.

Use this idea, situation or concept to build a complete song.

[6] WORD STARTER

found

Use this word or phrase in your song’s title or part of its lyric, then build a complete song around that.

[7]

MISCELLANEOUS STARTER

Write a song with a one-word title – like ‘Hello’, ‘Tomorrow’
or ‘Fascination’.

Use this starting point or process to build a complete song.

[8]

WORD STARTER

tease

*Use this word or phrase in your song’s title or part of its lyric, then
build a complete song around that.*

[9]

CHORD STARTER

D – G – D – A

D major: **I – IV – I – V**

Write a song that uses this chord progression.

[10]

RHYTHM STARTER



*Use this rhythm somewhere in your song's vocal melody,
instrumental groove or percussion track.*

[11]

WORD STARTER

stone

*Use this word or phrase in your song's title or part of its lyric, then
build a complete song around that.*

[12]

IDEA STARTER

Write a song that says 'I want to love you, but I can't.'

Come up with a specific and compelling situation where
someone has conflicting or mixed feelings and make sure it's
clear why.

Use this idea, situation or concept to build a complete song.

[13]

WORD STARTER

hollow

*Use this word or phrase in your song's title or part of its lyric, then
build a complete song around that.*

[14]

MISCELLANEOUS STARTER

Write a song with an abstract title – like ‘Simple Song’, ‘One-Note
Samba’ or ‘Song for Jane’.

Use this starting point or process to build a complete song.

[15]

CHORD STARTER

C – Am – F – G

C major: I – vi – IV – V

Write a song that uses this chord progression.

[16]

WORD STARTER

...that's it for this preview.

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