



HOW TO WRITE A SONG

*(EVEN IF YOU'VE NEVER WRITTEN ONE
BEFORE AND YOU THINK YOU SUCK)*

A 10-STEP SONGWRITING PROCESS

ED BELL

For more songwriting tools, ideas and inspiration, visit
thesongfoundry.com

Copyright © 2020 The Song Foundry, Inc.

You're welcome to use this guide for personal use or in your own educational work,
but please credit Ed Bell and The Song Foundry if you share it anywhere.

HOW TO WRITE A SONG

(EVEN IF YOU'VE NEVER WRITTEN ONE BEFORE AND YOU THINK YOU SUCK)

1. FIND A GREAT SONG IDEA

- Start by brainstorming a few different song ideas – song situations, song stories, song ‘messages’ – that seem interesting to you.
- Songs are most effective when they’re about one thing – so try to summarize each song idea as a single sentence ‘elevator pitch’.
- In each song idea, make sure you answer these three key questions: 1) Who is singing, 2) Who they’re singing to, and 3) What they’re trying to say.

2. CHOOSE A LYRICAL HOOK (TITLE)

- A lyrical hook is a word or phrase that neatly encapsulates your song’s main idea, that you feature prominently in your song’s chorus.
- Whichever song idea you decided to roll with, try brainstorming a few – at least ten – different lyrical hooks that could express that song’s idea or message.
- Try to pick a word or phrase that’s interesting but conversational. Simple lyrical hooks work great.

3. WRITE THE CHORUS LYRIC

- Come up with a plan for repeating your lyrical hook in your song’s chorus. If in doubt, write an 8-line chorus. If in doubt, place your lyrical hook in lines 1, 3 and 7 or 1, 3 and 8.

- Then try and build the rest of the lyric around those repetitions. Focus on expanding around your lyrical hook word or phrase in the chorus lyric – you want to feel like the lyrical hook is used organically, not shoehorned in. A good chorus often just says the song's big idea over and over, through different details and specifics.
- Try to keep each lyric line fairly short and to the point. If you use a rhyme scheme, keep it simple, like XAXAXBXB.

4. WRITE THE CHORUS CHORDS, MELODY AND GROOVE

- Choose a key (major or minor) that suits your song's overall mood. Then come up with a chorus chord progression that's also appropriate for that mood. Simple four-chord progressions work great. Aim for a 16-measure chorus.
- Now add a melody to your lyric that fits those chords. This is mostly a trial and error process – so play around, see what sounds good to you. Try to think in musical phrases, and don't be afraid of including lots of melodic repetition.
- Your song's grooves are its instrumental figurations or textures that sit under the vocal. Use whatever instruments and expertise you have to come up with a 1- or 2-measure chorus groove that captures your song's overall mood or vibe, then expand that out over your chord progression through the changing chords.

5. WRITE THE VERSE CHORDS AND GROOVE

- Come up with a verse chord progression. This could be the same or similar to the chorus chord progression, or could be different. Aim for a 16-measure verse.
- Create a groove for your song's verses. This is usually different from your chorus's groove, but it should feel like it belongs in the same musical world. Keep your verse groove simple and at a low intensity to begin with – give it somewhere to grow.
- Like before, aim for a 1- or 2-measure groove 'unit', then expand that out over your verse's chord progression.

6. CREATE A VERSE MASTERPLAN AND WRITE THE FIRST VERSE LYRIC

- **Come up with a verse masterplan – a plan to give each verse a specific focus or theme. It could be something to do with time (a logical sequence of events), perspective (you, me), or just a specific subtopic to focus each verse on.**
- **Now start work on your first verse lyric. A good first step is to try a ‘free write’ – write out what your first verse could say in free prose, no rhyming, no worrying about syllables or rhythms, no editing or filtering. Brainstorming some individual ideas – phrases, images, rhymes – you could use in the lyric is also a good idea.**
- **Then try to craft the raw material of those phrases and ideas into a final lyric. Again, this is a trial and error process (mostly error). If in doubt, write an 8-line first verse. If in doubt, use a simple rhyme scheme like XAXAXBXB.**

7. WRITE THE VERSE MELODY AND CREATE A VERSE BUILD

- **Now create a vocal melody that fits your first verse lyric. Verse melodies are often more conversational in style, so focus on creating good prosody – making sure the melody and the rhythm support (not distort) the lyric.**
- **Next, think about how your verse flows into your chorus in terms of intensity or energy levels. Make sure your chorus is more intense and energetic than your verses – which might happen suddenly or with a longer verse build.**

8. WRITE THE SECOND VERSE LYRIC

- **Take the second part of your verse masterplan and start building a second verse lyric around that.**
- **Like before, a good way to generate lyric material is with a free write or just to brainstorm some important phrases, images and rhymes you could use that are related to your second verse’s theme or focus.**
- **Then start crafting those ideas into a complete second verse lyric. In general, you want to make the syllable and rhyme pattern match between both verses – though it’s OK to make some minor changes. This sometimes takes time to pull off.**

9. WRITE A BRIDGE

- Writing a bridge in a song is optional, but it's a great way of providing some contrast, a different perspective or escape in your song. If in doubt, aim for an 8- or 16-measure bridge.
- If you write a 'vocal' bridge, find a different perspective – maybe something more philosophical, some kind of contrasting or contrary viewpoint – to focus your bridge lyric around. You'll usually want to write a new bridge melody, groove and chords.
- If you write an 'instrumental' bridge, give us something fresh also – maybe a instrumental solo, a 'breakdown' bridge, something that's a diversion from business as usual.

10. ADD AN INTRO AND OUTRO

- Adding a full intro and outro (or ending) is also optional, but at the very least you'll want to make sure you're happy with how you get into and out of your song.
- One simple and common way to add an intro is just to take your first verse's groove and cycle through it for 4 or 8 measures, maybe with some vocal riffing but no proper vocal yet. Or you could write an original 'composed' intro.
- To end your song, you could give us the chorus an extra time with a 'repeat and fade', or just have your song come to rest at the end of the third chorus. If you're feeling adventurous, you could write an original 'composed' outro instead.

Explore this process in tons more detail in my new book, ***How to Write a Song (Even If You've Never Written One Before and You Think You Suck)***, coming later in 2020.

SONG STRUCTURE SUMMARY

	If in doubt, make the music this long...	If in doubt, make the lyric this long...
Intro <i>(optional)</i>	2 / 4 / 8 measures	
Verse 1	16 measures	8 lines
Chorus 1	16 measures	8 lines
Verse 2	16 measures	8 lines
Chorus 2	16 measures	8 lines
Bridge <i>(optional)</i>	8 / 16 measures	2 / 4 / 8 lines
Chorus 3	16 measures	8 lines
Chorus 4 <i>(optional)</i>	16 measures	8 lines
Outro <i>(optional)</i>	2 / 4 measures	

COMMON OPTIONS FOR PLACING A LYRICAL HOOK IN AN 8-LINE CHORUS

1 HOOK	1 HOOK	1 HOOK	1 HOOK
2	2	2	2
3 HOOK	3	3 HOOK	3 HOOK
4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5
6	6	6	6
7	7	7 HOOK	7
8	8 HOOK	8	8 HOOK

1	1 HOOK	1	1
2	2	2 HOOK	2
3	3 HOOK	3	3
4 HOOK	4	4 HOOK	4
5	5 HOOK	5	5
6	6	6	6
7	7	7	7 HOOK
8 HOOK	8	8 HOOK	8 HOOK