

(EVEN IF YOU'VE

NEVER WRITTEN ONE

BEFORE AND YOU

THINK YOU SUCK)

ED BELL

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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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OK COOL, LET'S WRITE A SONG: HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

OK COOL, LET'S WRITE A SONG

Once upon a time, there wasn't a song.

Then, sometime later, there was.

"How the \$&%! did that happen!?" you might ask.

* * *

How do you write a song? It's a great question.

Should you start with the first verse? Should you start with the chorus? Should you start with a chord progression? Should you start with a melody or a rhythm or a groove or a title or a deep psychological need to write to fix your broken heart?

And honestly, the answer is yes.

And yes.

And yes.

And yes, yes, yes, yes and definitely, if it helps.

In other words, like most great questions, 'how do you write a song?' is a great question without a single answer.

You can start writing a song pretty much anywhere you like – and as long as you keep going until the whole song is finished, it's all good. In fact, one of the reasons songwriting is so rewarding and so challenging –

and one of the reasons there are so many different songs in different styles

– is that there are hundreds or even thousands of different ways to write
them.

But wait, is that it? Did I really bring you here to tell you that you can write a song pretty much however you like?

No, it's not. And no, I didn't fill a 300-page book with the single idea 'Do what you like, champ!!'.

See, the thing with songwriting is that every song ever written is really just someone's – or a group of people's – answer to the question 'what should a song be?'. It's just their best, smartest, most personal answer – based on their tastes, their experiences, their opinion – to what a song should be.

And in the same way, this book is just my best, smartest, most personal answer to the question 'how do you write a song?'. It's just my best, smartest, most personal answer to what the most helpful but fun and down-to-earth songwriting book should be. And specifically, it's just my best, smartest, most personal answer to what a book called *How to Write a Song (Even If You've Never Written One Before and You Think You Suck)* should be.

Is it the only answer? No.

Is it a smart, logical answer? Absolutely.

Is it an interesting, inspiring, practical, engaging, versatile, powerful and – most importantly – 100% beginner-proof answer that basically anyone can follow? Well, I'll let you be the judge of that, but yes, I really think so.

In other words, yes, this book is about an inspiring process that anyone with some basic experience with a guitar, a piano or a DAW (a Digital Audio

Workstation, like Logic, Ableton or GarageBand) can use to write a song – even if you've never written one before and you think you suck.

We'll talk through a logical, step-by-step process you can use to build every part of a new song from scratch. And – as you'll find out – we'll do it in a way that'll teach you a ton about how songs work, so if you already have some songwriting experience you should find this book useful too.

But as I said, if you're completely new to songwriting we'll also do it in a way that covers everything from the ground up. So again, literally all you need to get started is to know how to play three or four chords on a guitar or piano, or be able to find your way around your DAW of choice. We'll cover everything else.

And if you don't read music, that's OK too. Honestly, learning to read music, even at a basic level, is a really good investment for any songwriter to make – even if you only want to write lyrics. But if you don't read music – and plenty of songwriters don't – as we work through we'll talk about ways to record or write down what you create without using notation.

I've also made audio recordings of all of the music examples in this book so you can hear them as well as see them on the page. The music examples start cropping up from Part 4 onwards, but if you want to download all the tracks in advance, just go to thesongfoundry.com/how-to-tracks.

So, in short, I'm going to break down one powerful and versatile songwriting process into ten different parts. I'm going to talk you through the practical nuts and bolts of how to put a song together. I'm going to try my best to demystify the songwriting process in a way that anyone can understand, and if you stick with me, I'm going to transform the way you look at songwriting for good.

And sure, there are people who think songwriting can't be taught. Who think being able to write songs is a talent you either have or you don't.

Luckily, those people are wrong. Kind of.

Because while it's true songwriting can't really be taught – at least, not in the way you can teach someone to drive a car or speak German or calculate the length of a hypotenuse – songwriting can be *learned*.

With the right tools, principles and techniques, you can get smarter and faster at putting songs together. And you can get better and bolder at using those tools, principles and techniques to answer the question 'what should a song be?'. And in short, that's exactly what this book will help you do.

But before we get started on this process for real, we should talk a bit about how this process works – what it is, what it definitely isn't, and what you can do to get the most out of working through it.

FIRST THINGS FIRST: THIS ISN'T A SONGWRITING METHOD

This book is a lot of things. And we'll talk about some of them soon enough. But first, let me set the record straight on a few things this book is not:

It's **not** a cucumber shaped like the Chrysler Building.

It's **not** an apology note to everyone I was rude to as a teenager.

It's **not** every ninth word of the Geneva Convention put together into a surreal abstract poem.

And – most importantly of all – it's **not** a songwriting formula or method.

Come to think of it, the first three were probably pretty obvious. But we should talk about the last one, because it's at the heart of how this book works, and why it's probably different from anything else you might have read about songwriting.

You might have heard of some of music's well-known methods. There's the Kodály method for learning singing and musicianship. There's the Suzuki Method for learning an instrument and ear training, while learning how to be a good person (genuinely). Then there's the rhythm method, which sounds like it's something to do with percussion but actually – no, wait, that's something else.

But seriously – music has tons of well-established methods that break down different aspects of music theory, musicianship and/or learning an instrument in an easy and ultra-accessible way. And that's great.

The trouble is, songwriting doesn't work like that.

See, when it comes to learning to sing or play an instrument, there's already a roadmap. And there's a really clear goal — to perform a piece of music as accurately as possible. So you spend hours and hours developing and refining your skills so you can recreate that piece of music as accurately and as convincingly as possible.

But in songwriting, there's no roadmap. You have to create it.

You're not reacting to or recreating something that already exists – you're creating the thing in the first place. And that changes everything.

That's why songwriting methods or formulas – even if they're helpful in the short term – can only take you so far. They give you a box to create in. They give you lines to draw between. But one day, if you decide you want to create something, you know, *outside* that box – or give yourself your own lines to draw between – what then?

In other words, sure, I could come up with The Ed Bell Method® or The Song Foundry Formula TM . And it might help you write one song.

But would it help you write ten songs?

Would it help you write a song you're really proud of?

Would it help you feel genuinely more creative?

And would it help you feel more alive?

Probably not.

That's why songwriting can't be taught – at least, in the conventional way – but it can be learned. The key to becoming a good songwriter is to

learn to think for yourself, try things your way, make mistakes, learn from those mistakes and keep going until the song you're working on is finished.

And that's why, honestly, a strict method or a formula is the last thing you want as a songwriter – and why this book is going to give you something much better.

It's why this book is going to help you think, not just copy. It's why this book is going to help you create, and not just follow. And it's why – even if you're familiar with some of the ideas in this book already – we're going to look at those ideas in a way that may well be completely new to you.

To explain, let's talk about four key ideas that make this book different.

[1] This book is a *process*, not a method or a formula.

As you know, this book is just one process – a series of logical, easy-to-follow and easy-to-rely-on steps and techniques for writing a song. It's not the only way, it's not even the 'right' way – it's just one smart, reliable way of creating a finished song time after time.

And because this book is about a process, not a method or formula, if you decide to work through it more than once, you'll get something new out of it every time. It'll challenge you in different ways every time. It'll help you learn something new every time — about songwriting, about being creative and maybe even about yourself.

And as you keep growing and learning, you'll understand more about which parts are optional or can be done in a different order. So what started as a set of strict guidelines to follow might become more of a blueprint, then a scaffold, and – if you keep writing long enough – a fond memory of a charming songwriting guide that got you writing and thinking in new ways. And that's exactly how it should be.

[2] This book is not just about 'how' - it's about 'why'.

In this book, we won't just look at how to come up with a good title. We'll also look at what makes a good title good. And we won't just talk about how to write a good bridge. We'll talk about why you would – or wouldn't – want to include a bridge in the first place.

That's because the exact songwriting process I'm about to talk you through is really only the second most important part of the book. What's most important is the way all of the different parts of the process help you understand *why* it makes sense to write a song in this way.

Because even if this process is just one process, the way all of the parts link together definitely isn't - it's based on the deep, fundamental principles of how songs work.

You can think of these principles as the 'whys' of songwriting – why a good song idea is so important, why a good title should capture your song idea, why repetition in your melody makes it catchy, why you want to start your verses with a strong or dramatic line. We'll cover all of these, and much, much more.

And honestly, that's one of the biggest advantages of approaching songwriting through a process instead of a method or a formula – you'll learn a ton of techniques and ideas that you can apply in every single song you write for years to come. (And again, that's one of the reasons you'll still get plenty out of this book, even if you aren't a beginner.)

That's also why, if you stick with it, this book will completely change the way you look at songwriting – it'll help you understand not just what to do, but why you're doing it. Then, if you build up enough experience to want to write songs in a different way, you'll be in the perfect position to

do it, because you'll have a ton of fundamental, universal songwriting principles you can rely on to create something fresh, original and polished.

And sure, doing that probably makes this book longer than it would have been if I'd set out to create The Ed Bell Method®. Explaining those fundamental principles means I'm not going to hold back on the detail, and occasionally we'll have to go fairly deep into some music and songwriting theory.

But as the saying goes, "Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day. But teach someone to write songs and they'll spend the rest of their life making a ton of really cool stuff." So all that extra detail will be worth it, I promise.

[3] This is a book about using your instincts.

One thing that doesn't get talked about enough in songwriting guides is that there's really no way to write a good song without relying on your instincts. Sure, there are tools and principles and techniques you can learn, but figuring out whether you've used them well is usually more about making an instinctive judgment than making an intellectual calculation.

Plus, if you want to write something that connects with people, you have to do that by making human judgments – you can't just calculate the perfect song by following step 7.4b or using foolproof formula #923.

That's really the biggest reason that songwriting formulas or methods aren't helpful – they usually take away the instinctive, messy, human part of songwriting and make it more like filling out a passport application.

And sure, I get it. It's scary to try riding a bike without stabilizers for the first time. It's scary to start writing a song without knowing exactly where the creative process will take you. And it's scary to trust your instincts if you're not used to trusting them.

But it's also a lot more fun. It's also a lot more rewarding. And it's also the only way to create something that's genuinely original – that captures even just a bit of who you are as an artist and a human being.

And while some people think it's better to learn the basics of songwriting and then start thinking about all of that stuff, I don't. As far as I'm concerned, it's something you might as well start doing now – as scary and as exciting as that might sound.

And if you were wondering, if you're new to songwriting, of course your creative instincts won't be as sharp as they'll be after you've got a few songs under your belt. If you're a beginner, of course you're going to find it harder to trust your intuition. But how do you think you develop those instincts in the first place? You guessed it — you practice using them. So one of the most important ways this process is different is that I'm going to give you the creative freedom to do exactly that.

And sure, giving you this much creative freedom means there might be moments in this process when you feel stuck or confused. But that's how songwriting works. That's part of the challenge of creating new things. Every new song is a leap into the unknown – so no matter how experienced you get, every songwriter feels stuck or confused sooner or later.

In other words, the difference between beginners and experienced writers isn't that experienced writers never get writer's block – it's that they've picked up tons of reliable tricks and techniques to keep themselves writing, and they've built up the determination and resilience to trust the process, trust in themselves, and keep going, confident that they'll figure everything out eventually. (Because if you keep going, you usually do.)

To help you get there, I've filled this book with tons of practical techniques and ideas to get you through the most common songwriting

pitfalls and blocks. But it's also up to you to keep persevering so you can start fine-tuning your instincts and building that creative resilience that's going to pay off for literally the rest of your life – and not just in songwriting.

[4] This book is about writing the songs you want to write.

Another reason instincts are so important in songwriting is because personal tastes play a huge part in the way you answer the question 'what should a song be?'. Ultimately, whether you feel like writing a pop song, a rock song, a rap song, a country song, or something else entirely, it's mostly your instincts that tell you what a song should sound like and say. And since exploring your own personal style is a big part of songwriting, again, you might as well start developing those instincts right now.

That's why the process in this book gives you so much freedom – so you can use it to write whatever kind of song you like, based on your musical tastes and interests, and with whatever instruments or technology you have on hand.

And if you're not completely sure what your personal 'sound' or style is yet, that's totally fine. In the same way it takes practice to hone your creative instincts, it takes practice – and a lot of songs – to figure out your personal style.

So for now, the best thing you can do is just to let your tastes and interests take you where they want to go, even if, for the moment, that sounds a lot like some other writer or artist. Because the more you explore, the more you'll uncover what your personal songwriting style is.

That said, there are two specific areas in this process where you're going to follow a specific format or way of thinking that are worth mentioning.

The first is in the song's **structure** or **form** – the way the song and its sections are put together. There are a handful of different structures songs often take, but for this process, I'm going to walk you through how to write using the most common one: a **verse-chorus structure**.

That's because to make this process make sense — without making it really, really long — it has to be based around a particular structure. Also, since verse-chorus structures are so common, learning to write them is one of the most important songwriting skills you can pick up. And while there are actually a ton of different sections you can include in a verse-chorus structure, we're going to focus on the most important ones — verses, choruses, bridges, intros and outros. (If you want a quick summary of this structure before you start, you can check out Appendix 3.)

The second area is in the specific way we're going to approach writing your song. While the process in this book is really, really versatile — as you know, you can use it to write virtually any kind of song you can imagine — it follows what's sometimes called a 'melody and lyric' approach to songwriting. So after figuring out what you want to write about, we're going to start building the song by piecing together melodies, lyrics, chord progressions and instrumental grooves in a logical and organic way.

That's opposed to what's sometimes called a 'track and hook' approach, where a producer creates a beat (or track), usually without thinking about the content of the song, before someone else adds a vocal melody (or topline, or hook) and lyric.

The 'melody and lyric' approach isn't automatically better, but it's usually a better way of exploring how the different parts of a song all work together. And since that's one of the main goals of this book, it makes sense to approach songwriting that way here.

But even if those two factors affect how this book works for you, it will still give you tons of freedom to explore this process – and do all of the trying, messing up, learning and trying again that songwriting is all about – in whatever styles or genres of music you like. So make the most of that.

So there you go. That's what makes this book work, that's what makes this book different. And that's why – and how – this book is going to let you be truly creative.

And now we're getting closer and closer to the moment you'll finally get to start creating your song's music and lyrics. But before we do, there's one other important topic we should cover.

SECOND THINGS SECOND: YOU DON'T SUCK (I PROMISE)

So, this is kind of awkward. But just in case it needs to be said... just in case you need to hear it... and just in case the 'if you think you suck' part of this book's title really resonated with you... I have good news:

No. you don't suck.

At all.

I promise.

Because if there's one thing songwriting books don't talk about enough, it's this – songwriting is *hard*.

And sure, creating anything new is hard. Creating anything out of nothing is hard. But in songwriting specifically there are tons of things — rhyme, structure, melody, chords, grooves, textures, vocal range, energy levels, phrasing, stress, repetition, motif, story, style, and plenty more — you're supposed to think about all at once. So it's no wonder that songwriting sometimes feels like playing a game of five-dimensional chess, upside down in the dark, while you simultaneously try to file your taxes. learn Polish and cure cancer.

And naturally, since songwriting is so hard, sooner or later most writers get stuck or hit a wall or think 'damn, I suck at this'.

And if that's ever happened to you, I have even more good news:

It means you're normal. It means you're human.

In fact, if you've ever told yourself you suck, I actually have great news:

It means you have standards. It means you care about what you create.

And most of all, it means you're a writer. (Congratulations.)

We've already looked at the myth that great songwriters are born and not made, and thrown it in the trash where it belongs. But there's another myth that belongs in the trash (or at least the recycling) as well – that being an experienced songwriter means you've got it all figured out, that you always know exactly what you're doing.

I'll level with you – I've been writing songs for more than twenty years, and I'm still not always sure what I'm doing. Despite everything I've written already, despite everything I know about songwriting – and despite writing a ton of books on how to write songs – every new project still feels like I'm starting from scratch, like I'm really just figuring it out as I go along.

Because the truth is, I kind of am starting from scratch on each new project – so I am figuring it out as I go along. Every new project is a project I've never made before, so I can't know exactly what I'm doing. I can only figure it out by trying a ton of stuff to see what works.

And sure, with experience that gets easier. And you do get faster. But you never quite reach the point where you've got it all figured out – at least, you don't if you're being ambitious and creative enough.

And so, if every new thing you write is a creative adventure to some place you've never been before, of course you're going to feel lost or stuck sometimes. That's just part of making new things.

But there's hope. There's always hope.

Because even if you think you suck at songwriting, there's a simple way to gain more writing experience and help convince yourself you

actually do know enough about songwriting to get started. It's a powerful and universal law of songwriting that goes a little bit like this:

To suck less, write more.

That's it. That's the secret to success, happiness and personal fulfilment in songwriting.

You don't have to be great at songwriting to get started. But you do have to get started to become great at songwriting.

You can't wait until you feel confident to get started. You have to get started to earn that confidence in the first place.

And that means the only way to be better at songwriting in the future is to be comfortable with not being so hot at it now.

You have to be comfortable separating the ideas that while you might suck at something you haven't done much — whether that's pole vaulting or cake decorating or songwriting — you yourself, as a person, don't suck. And then you can use the motivation and self-esteem that separation gives you to go practice that thing and get better at it.

Or, in the words of actress Carrie Fisher, "Stay afraid, but do it anyway. What's important is the action. Just do it and the confidence will follow."

Or, in the words of some anonymous graffiti I once saw in Brooklyn, "Be brave enough to suck at something new."

So let's not pretend – there are parts of this process that will be hard. There are parts of this process where you'll feel like you're spending more time staring out of the window and sharpening your pencil for the seventy-eighth time than writing. And there are parts of this process where you'll think 'Wow, this song sucks' and even 'Wow, I suck'.

And again – that's normal. That's called 'the creative process'.

But it's up to you to control the narrative on that. It's up to you to remind yourself that none of those things are reasons to give up. It's up to you to keep going exactly when things get hard because, as you know, that's the only way to get better – and the only way to get a song finished.

My job in this book is to give you a roadmap for writing a song from scratch. My job is to explain every part as simply and plainly as possible without dumbing anything down. And your job is to keep going. To keep trying new things. And to remember that if, sooner or later, you think you suck, that probably means you're on exactly the right track.

So here's to the art of figuring it out as you go along. Here's to the joy of never really knowing what you're doing. Here's to the thrill of thinking you suck sometimes. *C'est la vie*, my friend – or at least, *la vie créatif*.

And here's to the art of doing what you've got to do anyway.

Because, more than anything, that's what songwriting – and life in general – is all about.

THE SONGWRITING PROCESS:

A SUMMARY

Here's a fun idea. Let's try it.

Wait. This is harder than I thought.

Pamn, this new song sucks.

Pamn, I suck.

Hold on. Let's just keep going...

No - this song is PONE and it is GREAT.

Actually, this song is OK.

AND FINALLY: HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

OK, we're nearly there – you're on the brink of writing the first words and notes of your song. But before we jump in at long last, we should talk about four ultra-practical ways you can get the most out of working through this process.

If you've been writing a while, some of these ideas might not be new to you – but whatever level you're at, they're worth taking seriously, as they'll make working through this book much easier and much more worthwhile.

Work Through the Parts in Order

I know. I know. I just made a huge deal about how the process in this book isn't the only way to write a song, how one of the biggest thrills of songwriting is writing in new ways, and how you're a unique snowflake in a vast universe full of infinite creative possibilities, yada, yada, yada.

But let's forget about that for now.

Because just like if you come to my gig you'll have a much better time if you don't start yelling at me from the back to change the setlist, if you

follow the process I created you'll have a much better time working through this book.

As I said, I've crafted all ten parts carefully so they walk you through a logical, step-by-step process that builds neatly on the parts you've already completed. So while in real life, yes, the different parts of a song could come to you in any order, this book won't make much sense if you start working on Part 9 when you're not even halfway through Part 3.

That said, if you're writing your chorus lyric in Part 3 and you get a flash of inspiration for what you could write about in your bridge in Part 9, that's great. That happens – and it's often a blessing when it does. So any time that happens to you, the best thing you can do is to jot your idea down so you don't forget it, then come back to it when it's time to use it.

To help you out as you work through this book, I've split up the main text with a series of 'action boxes'. You'll spot them easily because they come with a lightning bolt symbol – to represent the god- or goddess-like way you're going to put this book aside and go create something amazing. I've put these boxes at the ideal points to stop reading and get creating, using the ideas we'll have just talked about. Each action box also comes with a few bullet points that summarize the main ideas worth thinking about while you write that part of your song.

So yes, if you're really keen, there's no harm in reading ahead a bit to understand what's coming next. But don't *create* ahead — do the action boxes in the exact order they appear. Even if it takes a while to work through one particular action box. Even if finishing one particular action box is hard work.

Most of the later action boxes rely on what you create in the earlier action boxes. So just stick with the program. At least for now.

Oh, and finally – as well as the action boxes I've included a few bonus 'toolboxes' in a handful of places in the book. These come with a hammer and spanner symbol to represent, I guess, the god- or goddess-like way you can learn more about a handful of advanced songwriting topics if you want to. They're completely optional, and this process will still make sense without them, but if you decide you want to go beyond the essentials and understand topics like rhyme, chord progressions and copyright in more detail, that's what the toolboxes are there for. (This book also has an index right at the back if you want to look up any of its concepts later.)

Work Through at Your Own Pace

While all of the action boxes look similar on the page, working through them will be different every time. You might finish some quickly. You might finish some more slowly.

That's completely normal. You might have had more practice at some areas of songwriting than others. Some action boxes are more complicated than others. Some days you'll be feeling more creative than others.

And again, that's just how it works.

So don't rush the process. Take it at your own pace. Give yourself the time and space you need to work through it on your own terms. Always.

Exactly how and when you decide to work through this process is completely up to you, and chances are it's going to take you weeks, not days. And if you're new to this – or you're just interested in improving your creative process – I have three suggestions for how to carve out <u>some</u> <u>quality time to write</u>:

 Make a plan and commit – Decide what days or what exact times of day you're going to write, then stick to it.

- Cut out all the distractions Turn off your phone, unplug the internet, tell everyone you live with to leave you alone.
- Try to enjoy the ride Some days it comes more easily than others, but sometimes a slow writing session is just preparation for a really productive one next time. Embrace that.

And for those days when you really, really don't want to write – or the days it's coming slowly – literally the best thing you can do is make yourself a really simple promise: you'll try for at least 20 minutes.

That's it. 20 minutes. After that, you can take a break and go do something else. But from the moment you sit down to write, you'll do nothing other than try for 20 minutes – even if it comes super slowly, even if it doesn't come at all.

Because I promise, nine times out of ten, you'll find your flow within 20 minutes and want to keep going even longer. Sometimes it just takes that long to warm up. Just like sometimes you have to run a tap for a second to get past the stale, stagnant water, sometimes you have to get past some bad writing to get to the good stuff later.

So any time you don't feel like writing, just promise yourself you'll try for at least 20 minutes. More often than not, you'll be glad you did.

Write Solo or Co-Write if You Prefer

I designed this process so you could use it to write on your own — but if you want to co-write, or collaborate, with someone else, it absolutely works for that too.

Co-writing is a great way to learn from other songwriters, master the art of collaboration and help each other stay inspired and on track. But

equally, writing solo is a great way of exploring your personal tastes and interests, taking everything at your own pace and discovering what you're capable of creating on your own.

So it's up to you whether you want to work through this book solo or with someone else – or even work through it a few times in different ways.

If you do co-write, you'll have to be extra organized about how you're going to get through the process. Will one of you focus mostly on music and one of you on lyrics? Will you collaborate in real-time together on each section? Will you split the song into sections and focus on one each? Because this process is split into parts that focus on specific song sections – and usually writing either the music or lyrics to those sections – it's completely possible to split this book up in any of these ways.

On the other hand, if you're used to co-writing and have decided to try this process completely on your own, don't worry. Because I've made this book as beginner-proof as possible, it doesn't matter if you're new to writing music or lyrics (or both). As I've said, we'll cover everything you need to know. And even if you work through this process alone but plan to keep co-writing on everything else in the future, that's great – you'll learn a lot about how entire songs work by working through this process solo at least once or twice.

Still, if you decide to co-write your way through this process, what's most important is that you agree on a definitive plan for who will create which parts of your song – and when – so you can keep moving forward.

Save All of Your Drafts

As you'll find out, one of the big ideas of this book is that it's good to try out tons of different ideas – to brainstorm, to make sketches, to think up

more ideas than you can ever really use so you can pick out the best ones to put in your song.

Because that's usually the biggest difference between OK writers and great writers – it's not that great writers always have better ideas, they're just better at trying out more ideas so they can get to, and keep, only the best ones.

And the truth is, sometimes an idea that didn't seem promising at first turns out to be a great idea later — when you've thought about it, or found some other way to use it, or found out it fits perfectly in some other part of your song.

That's why one of the most important habits you can get into as a songwriter is to record as many of your ideas as you can.

Maybe that means setting your phone to record while you play around on your guitar. Maybe it means covering pages and pages with potential lyric ideas, notes and sketches. Maybe it means creating a project full of rough ideas or versions — or ending with a final project file called 'V9.2 Final Final ACTUAL FINAL (Revised)'.

I know, they make reality shows about people who can't throw anything away. They stage interventions for them. They call them hoarders. But this is different – as a songwriter you're supposed to hoard ideas. And unless you have a superhuman memory, if you don't write down your ideas, you'll probably forget them.

So if you finish this process with a three-minute song plus a pile of unused sketches, notes and ideas, that means you're doing it exactly right. (The document where I keep all the old and cut versions of chapters of this book – just in case – just hit 100,000 words. And that's a sign I'm doing something right.)

That iceberg meme everyone shares online is clichéd but it's true: your finished song is only the tip of the iceberg, and it'll sit on tons of ideas that weren't good enough, or didn't fit right, or were the OK version you had to write before you could write the great version. But it's always worth keeping track of those ideas, because you never know what you'll want to use later.

And there you go – those are the four important ways you can get the most out of this book.

All that's left to say – and I guess the fifth way to make the most of this process – is to go and have some fun. Because not only is creativity supposed to be fun, but the more fun you have while you work through this process, the more exciting things you'll create with it.

So if you're ready – at long last – to get writing, to make some creative magic, to leave your own creative dent in the universe, you know everything you need to before we jump in.

So let's do it.

(EVEN IF YOU'VE NEVER

WRITTEN ONE BEFORE AND

YOU THINK YOU SUCK)

[PART 1] FIND A GREAT SONG IDEA

[PART 1]

FIND A GREAT SONG IDEA

In this part... How to choose a strong song idea – and why it's so important.

Alrighty. We made it. It's finally time to start creating.

If you're like most songwriters, you're probably eager to dive in and start writing the words and notes that will become your song. But before you do that, you've got a really fundamental decision to make – what your song is going to be about.

One of the ideas we'll come back to again and again in this book is that, however you write a song, pretty much no songwriter starts their song at measure 1 or line 1 and just writes from there. Songs are built part by part, often by starting with the bigger picture and zooming in from there. And that's exactly why your first important step is to start thinking about your song's big idea, situation or message — what you might call the creative vision for the song.

So let's talk about how this works.

WHY A GREAT SONG IDEA MATTERS

One of the defining features in any great work of art is a sense of unity. It's the feeling that everything in a painting belongs there. It's the feeling that every part of a building serves a bigger function or purpose. It's the feeling that every scene and image in a movie adds up to tell one single, powerful story.

And as a songwriter, there are lots of things you can do to make a song feel unified. You can give it a chorus that keeps coming back. You can keep it in the same key throughout. You can make sure you don't switch the lead singer for their estranged half-sister two-thirds of the way through.

But the most important way to give a song a sense of unity is to base
it on a single big idea or vision. It's starting a song by saying 'I want to
write a song that says', or 'I want to write a song that's about
', or 'I want to write a song that does and'.
In fact, that pretty neatly encapsulates the fundamental idea of
songwriting that this part of the process is all about: a great song is based

You might call this your song's idea, or vision, or elevator pitch. But again, it's the concept that everything in your song is centered around one thing.

And it's a really powerful concept for at least two reasons.

on a single idea you can summarize in a single sentence.

One, it makes your song much easier for your audience to understand. It gives them a single focus to understand your song through. It makes sure it doesn't feel like your song's verse is about one thing, its chorus is about something else, and its bridge is about something else again. And it helps make sure that your song feels familiar quickly, because you're not asking

your audience to get their heads round seven different song ideas within a single three-minute song.

And two, it makes your song much easier to write. That's because, as you'll see, once you've figured out your song's big idea, everything else in this process – your song's title, your song's chorus lyric, even the way your song sounds – is going to come from it somehow. (That's the 'why' part of this book we talked about in the introduction.)

And that's not only going to make this writing process more streamlined, it'll also take out a lot of the guesswork around what to write next or what might or might not work. Because instead of just guessing, having a big vision or idea helps you figure out what's going to fit with what you've written already so your song sounds unified and not like a patchwork of cool but unrelated ideas.

And sure, some other time you write you might start out with a cool guitar riff, or a line of a lyric, or a title, or something else. And that's fine. But even if you do, until you've found a single focus or vision for your song, it's usually hard to make any firm decisions on what your song should be.

That's why when people say 'idea is everything' in songwriting, they mean it literally. Everything in your song is going to come from the big idea or vision you come up with in this part.

So let's start figuring out what that could be.

HOW TO PICK A GREAT SONG IDEA

So, as we talked about, your goal here is to decide on a single-sentence 'elevator pitch' for your song. It's to find that single idea or spark that's going to help you create every single word and note in the rest of it.

And honestly, there are a few different ways of doing that, but in songwriting it usually comes down to another really fundamental idea: that songs tell stories.

Yes, I know – songs aren't *War and Peace*. They're not *Avatar*. They're not the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Most songs are based on simple, direct stories like 'I love you' or 'we're breaking up' or 'you did WHAT with my sister last summer!?'.

These are all stories because there are people involved, there are emotions involved, there's a backstory or a history or at least a situation. And even if most songs are based on simple stories, thinking about song ideas like this is a powerful way to give you tons of rich material to build a finished song out of.

That's why, for example, you don't find many songs based on the big idea 'A song about gravel'. There's nowhere to take that idea. It's not a story. There's no situation there.

But make it 'a song about a girl who's creeping down a gravel driveway at 2am to see her boyfriend while he's asleep in the house' and already there's tons to write about. Why is she creeping? How did she end up in this situation? Is her boyfriend expecting her or is he about to get a big surprise?

So what that means for you is that, as much as possible, you want to be thinking up song ideas that create a miniature world. You want to aim for song situations that are interesting and exciting to you – situations that exist in more than one dimension.

And here's the trick with this: spend some time brainstorming a few different ideas. That's right – even if you want to base your song on one

single idea, the way you get there isn't just to think up one idea, declare yourself an unmatched genius and move on.

You want to come up with a few song ideas – maybe related, maybe completely different – to give yourself way more options than you need so you can pick out the one you're most excited about. (You'll want to get used to this, by the way, because you'll be doing it again and again in this book.)

So let's get brainstorming.

To keep things simple – especially if this is your first song – I recommend you stick with three common and tried-and-tested song formats:

- A 'direct address' song where one person sings something to one specific other person. Like a love song, or a breakup song.
- A 'to the world' song where your singer has a message to share with anyone who'll listen. Like a song that says 'l'm back', or 'Nobody's gonna stop me', or 'Racism is wrong'.
- A third-person 'story' song where your singer is basically a narrator who tells the story of a specific person or group of people.

So have a think. See what song ideas come to you. Anything goes – whether it's based on these three formats or not. Try to come up with at least five but up to ten different ideas, and try to write them down in a single 'A song about ______' or 'A song that says ______' sentence. And try to keep things as simple as you can – the best song ideas are usually astoundingly, even painfully, simple.

As I said in the Introduction, take as much time as you need. Think about the three different formats above if you need to and see what comes to mind. (And if you're really, really stuck, skip ahead to Appendix 1 where there's a quick list of 21 song ideas you can use or be inspired by.)

But however you do it, go where your interest and your curiosity lead you. Focus on what's important or what matters to you right now – because if it's a song idea that you're excited about, chances are other people will be excited about it too.



BRAINSTORM SOME SONG IDEAS

- Come up with at least five and up to ten potential song ideas.
- These can be rough at this stage, but try to focus on stories and situations that seem interesting to you.
- Try to condense each idea as a specific, single 'elevator pitch' sentence.

OK. Nice work.

Now you've got a few different ideas, all that's left is to pick out your best one and flesh it out a bit before you move onto the next part.

First, you'll need to settle on a single idea.

So take a look at your list of song ideas and see what really jumps out at you. Which ideas inspire you the most? Which ideas seem most exciting to you? Which ideas make you think 'oh, a song about that sounds really cool'?

Again, the only rule is to go with the idea you're most excited about. And again, there's no need to rush. Take as much time as you need to settle on a song idea you're inspired by.

And if there are two or more ideas you feel equally inspired by, that's great. Just pick one – and maybe save the others for later. There's no right and wrong when it comes to picking a good song idea – it's only what sounds interesting to you.

And if you're not sure whether it's the 'perfect' song idea, that's fine too – because nobody ever is.

Say it with me: taking a chance on a new song idea is always a leap of faith. And honestly, half the trick in writing a good song is taking an idea and doing something bold with it.

So in short – now is a great time to trust your instincts, jump and see where they take you. Chances are, you'll pick out a great idea. But even if you don't, you'll probably end up with an OK song and even sharper instincts for next time – which is a pretty great outcome too.

Once you've settled on a single song idea, you're going to need to flesh it out a bit before you can use it. And that means figuring out answers to three important questions:

- Who is singing?
- Who are they singing to?

What are they trying to say?

So under your single-sentence song idea, try to answer each of these questions. Maybe like this:

A song where the singer breaks up with his girlfriend.

Who is singing: A mid-20s guy
Who are they singing to: His girlfriend of two years
What are they trying to say: I love you but it's not working
for me anymore and we have to break up.

Or like this:

A song that's an uplifting message to the world saying "chin up, things will get better".

Who is singing: Me, the singer Who are they singing to: Anyone feeling down What are they trying to say: Stay positive. Things will get better.

Maybe the singer's just been through a tough time and wants to pick everyone up a bit? She could use parts of her story to encourage other people.

As you can see in the second example, I also included a few extra notes and ideas. Doing this is totally optional, but if anything comes to you while you're clarifying your song's big idea, it's worth getting those ideas down, especially if they help answer why your singer has to say what they

have to say. Any extra ideas or background will help you when it comes to writing your lyric later.

And that's it. That's the first part done. And that's all there is to finding the great song idea that's going to see you through the rest of the process.

So spend some time picking out the song idea you want to move forward with, and make sure it's fleshed out enough to be useful in the next part. Then I'll see you there as soon as you're ready.



CHOOSE A SONG IDEA

- Pick out the 'elevator pitch' song idea you're most excited about working with.
- Underneath, write down your answers to these three key questions: 1) Who is singing? 2) Who are they singing to? and 3) What are they trying to say?
- If any other background details or information related to your song idea come to mind, you can jot those down too.

[PART 2] CHOOSE A LYRICAL HOOK (OR TITLE)

[PART 2]

CHOOSE A LYRICAL HOOK (OR TITLE)

In this part... How to use your song idea to pick a strong lyrical hook, or title.

OK. Next up in this journey through time, space and songwriting, it's time to think about writing your song's **lyrical hook**, or title.

If you've been writing songs for a while, you'll probably have heard the word 'hook' already. One of your goals in writing a song is to make it as memorable or catchy as you can, and one way songwriters do that is by including plenty of 'hooks' – musical and lyrical ideas that are repetitive and distinctive enough that they hook onto your listener so they won't forget your song any time soon.

And that means pretty much anything can be a hook – a catchy vocal melody, a neat guitar riff, even a specific drum rhythm or instrumental solo.

But a song's lyrical hook – a word or phrase that's repeated a lot within the song's lyric, and is usually also the song's title – goes deeper than that.

Lyrical hooks aren't just about using repetition to make your song memorable or catchy – if you choose a good one, they also help your listener understand what your song is about.

And just to clarify: yes, most songs' lyrical hooks are also their titles. So 'Yesterday' or 'I Want to Break Free' or 'Single Ladies' are all lyrical hooks that are also titles. So a lot of songwriters just call them titles. But I don't, because sometimes – for reasons I talk about in more detail in my book *The Art of Songwriting* – a song has a title that's different from its lyrical hook. So just to be clear, in this book we're going to use the term 'lyrical hook'.

In a verse-chorus song, the lyrical hook almost always goes in the chorus. We'll talk about exactly how that works in Part 3, but for now, your job is to come up with the word or phrase you're going to use as your song's lyrical hook.

And in short, that comes down to one important principle: a good lyrical hook is a word or phrase that neatly encapsulates what the song is about. (Remember when I said every other part of your song is going to come from your big song idea somehow?)

So 'Yesterday' is a song about wanting to go back to a happier time that existed until, well, yesterday. 'I Want to Break Free' is a song about someone who's trapped in a relationship they want, uh, to break free from. And 'Single Ladies' is a song with a message about loyalty and self-respect directed specifically to, you guessed it, all the single ladies.

And to do this yourself – to take your song's big idea and use it to pick a lyrical hook – here are a few important guidelines:

- Sometimes a lyrical hook is a snappy summary of the song's message – like 'I wish you'd told me' – and sometimes it's related to that message more loosely – like 'Little white lies'.
- If you're feeling adventurous, a lyrical hook can be more ambiguous or cryptic – like 'Don't hide away' – or even metaphorical – like 'Out in the cold'. (You've probably spotted how all of these different hooks are based on the same song idea, only some express it more directly than others.)
- But whatever you pick, a good lyrical hook like any good lyric
 sounds natural and conversational, like a person speaking.
 So 'Little white lies' is a good lyrical hook, but 'The problem of dishonesty' isn't, because nobody really speaks like that.
- Plus, a good lyrical hook is usually fairly specific. 'Don't' and 'Going on' wouldn't usually make strong lyrical hooks, because on their own they don't mean much. Your lyrical hook won't give away everything that your song is about, but it helps if you choose a word or phrase that gives us a clue. So something like 'Don't lie' or 'What's going on?' would be much better.
- Speaking of how much your lyrical hook should give away, there are no rules about how long or short it should be. But as a general rule, good lyrical hooks can be anything from a single, impactful word – like 'Lies' – to a phrase or complete sentence of maybe seven or eight words – like 'If I find out what you're hiding' or 'Tell me the truth'.

And that's basically all there is to making this short but important part of this process work.

So like in Part 1, take some time to do a new brainstorm of anything that could be a good lyrical hook for your song. And like in Part 1, anything goes – just try to think up a ton of specific words or phrases that relate to your song's big idea, or express your song's big idea, or just feel connected with your song's big idea somehow.

Try not to edit or filter yourself just yet – sometimes the best idea sounds like the craziest idea at first. And just focus on writing down at least ten different ideas – but aim for fifteen or twenty if you can – that could be a great lyrical hook for your song.

DECEPTION SONG LYRICAL HOOK IDEAS

I wish you'd told me Lies

Pon't hide away Lies hurt

Tell me the truth Little white lies

Pon't lie to me Too many lies

Hidden secrets Let me in

I can't do this All I wanted was honesty

If I find out what you're hiding Say it

Out in the cold Stop hiding from me

Outside alone Honesty is free

What's going on? I can't with you

And once you've done that, like in Part 1, it's time to pick one to move forward with.

And like in Part 1, a lot of this comes down to instinct. All of the lyrical hooks I came up with in the bullet points would work for a song based on the idea of someone saying 'Tell me the truth', only in different ways. But depending on the kind of song you want to write – and the kind of writer you are – some of them will sound more interesting and fun to write with to you.

So take your list of lyrical hooks, and see which of them really stick out to you. Figure out which ones seem extra interesting or captivating to you. Maybe they express your song's big idea directly, maybe they're interesting because they're a more original or unusual way of expressing your song's big idea. For now, let's assume your song's title is going to be its lyrical hook — so if one of your options just sounds like a cool title word or phrase, that's great too.

Or – as sometimes happens – if looking over your list of potential lyrical hooks gives you a new great idea, go with that. Sometimes the ideal lyrical hook comes to you by combining or mixing up a couple of the ideas you already had.

But however you do it, settle on one single word or phrase that you feel encapsulates your song's idea, subject or message in a way that sounds good to you. Then write it down somewhere – on a new sheet of paper, on a post-it note, wherever you like.

Because next, it's time to start working on your song's lyric by turning your lyrical hook into a complete chorus.



CHOOSE A LYRICAL HOOK

- Take your song's central idea or message and try to think up at least ten potential lyrical hooks that encapsulate that idea or message well.
- Then pick out the lyrical hook you're most excited about from that list. Try to pick a word or phrase that's interesting and that expresses your song's idea in a conversational way.

[PART 3] WRITE THE CHORUS LYRIC

[PART 3] WRITE THE CHORUS LYRIC

In this part... How to use your song's lyrical hook to build a complete – and catchy – chorus lyric.

OK. Now it's time to get started writing your song's actual lyric. And to do that, we'll start with the chorus.

And if you were wondering why we're going to start writing in the middle, it's because in a verse-chorus song, your chorus is usually the section that really gets to the heart of what your song is about. It often makes sense to start writing there, because once you've cracked the heart and soul of what your chorus is going to be, it usually makes it easier to build the other sections of your song around it.

That said, there's no reason we have to start writing your song lyric first. While it might make sense to start writing your song's chorus before anything else, the real answer to the age-old question 'Should you write music or lyrics first?' is 'It doesn't matter'. Plenty of great songs are written music first and plenty of others are written lyric first. And actually, plenty are written in tandem – a bit of music, a bit of lyrics, some other bit of

music, some other bit of lyrics – and honestly, as long as the music and lyrics fit together in the end, what you wrote first doesn't matter.

But to keep things simple, we're going to focus on one part at a time, starting with your chorus's words. And to do that, we'll use the lyrical hook you chose in Part 2 to build a complete chorus lyric – and save writing your chorus's music for Part 4.

So, to do that I'm going to recommend you write an 8-line chorus lyric. There's no rule that says chorus lyrics have to be 8 lines. And plenty of chorus lyrics aren't 8 lines. But 8-line choruses are pretty much the standard in songwriting, and they're usually not too tricky to make work, so that's what I recommend you aim for.

There are basically two things you're trying to achieve when you write the lyrics for your chorus.

First, you want to incorporate your song's lyrical hook prominently within your chorus. That's because if your chorus is the section where you really get to the heart of what your song is about, and your lyrical hook is a word or phrase that helps make that clear, you want to make sure your lyrical hook is featured prominently.

In practice, that often means putting it in a prominent position – like the first or last line – and/or repeating it a few times to make sure your audience really gets that it's your lyrical hook. (Honestly, a big part of making a hook sound 'hooky' is just repeating it a lot.) So as a general rule, it's good to aim for at least two or three repetitions of your lyrical hook in an 8-line chorus.

Second, for the parts that aren't your song's lyrical hook, you want to come up with words, phrases and ideas that explore or expand on what your lyrical hook is saying. In other words, you want to blend your lyrical

hook into your entire chorus lyric seamlessly, so it doesn't sound forced or shoehorned in.

We'll talk specifically about what this means for writing choruses in a second, but for now it really comes down to one important general rule: you want every line in your song's lyric to relate back to your song's big idea somehow.

Wow. I know. That's sounds like a wild theory. But it's true – in a good lyric, pretty much every single phrase, idea and image is related somehow to the song's overall message or idea. Nothing in the lyric is random or an accident – it all works together to explore that one big idea.

And yes, it's another example of why having a single, clear idea for your song is so important – because, like we talked about in Part 1, it gives you a focus that everything else in your song can stem from.

Let's talk about exactly how this applies to writing your chorus lyric.

PLACE YOUR LYRICAL HOOK

So if your two main goals for your chorus lyric are to feature your lyrical hook prominently, then surround that lyrical hook with words and phrases that support it somehow, there's a pretty much unlimited number of ways you can make that happen.

But in this process, let's start by thinking about where you're going to put, or place, your song's lyrical hook in your chorus, then focus on building the rest of the lyric around that.

If you're new to songwriting, I strongly recommend you place your lyrical hook in lines 1, 3 and 7 – because that's a format that works well

for most lyrical hooks and isn't too tricky to work with. (And because that's the format I'm going to talk through in much more detail later.)

But if that seems over-repetitive for the lyrical hook you chose, or this isn't your first time at the rodeo and you want to mix things up a bit, you could try placing your lyrical hook just twice in lines 1 and 5, or 4 and 8 instead. (Again, there are no rules about how and where to repeat your song's lyrical hook — these are just a handful of simple but effective formats. I talk more about all of this — plus other common formats for placing your lyrical hook — in *The Art of Songwriting*.)

THREE SIMPLE HOOK PLACEMENTS IN AN 8-LINE CHORUS

1 H00K	1 H00K	1
2	2	2
3 H00K	3	3
4	4	4 H00K
5	5 H00K	5
6	6	6
7 H00K	7	7
8	8	8 H00K

So to get started, I recommend you take out a pad of lined paper or open a blank document and just write or type this:

1

2

3

1

5

6

7

8

I know. It's a pre-lyrical masterpiece. And you'll probably never guess how I came up with it. But seriously – you'll get rid of these numbers later. They're just there to help you construct your lyric in the meantime.

Next, place your lyrical hook according to the format or scheme you want to try.

If your lyrical hook is a complete phrase or sentence, that's going to be pretty straightforward because your lyrical hook will fill the line. So if, say, your lyrical hook is 'I wanna dance with somebody', your chorus lyric will look something like this:

1 I wanna dance with somebody

2

3 I wanna dance with somebody

4

5

6

7 I wanna dance with somebody

8

If your lyrical hook is a single word or just a couple of words, you could use it on its own and end up with some very short lines – and occasionally that works well. But more likely you'll want to incorporate that hook word or words within a longer line that makes sense as a complete phrase.

So for a lyrical hook like 'Over You', you might come up with something like this:

```
1 I'm so over you
2
3 I'm so over you
4
5
6
7 Oh, I'm so over you
```

Or, if you want to push yourself a bit more, you could pencil in a few different ways of leading into your lyrical hook:

```
1 I'm so over you
2
3 I'm finally over you
4
5
6
7 You bet I'm over you
8
```

And if you go with this more ambitious plan, just one extra tip: while it's fine to vary how you incorporate your shorter hook however you want, you want to make sure the phrases you come up with stay equally strong – or get stronger – as your chorus progresses. (That's actually another good principle of songwriting in general: make sure what you repeat stays as strong or gets stronger as your song goes on.)

What you want to be careful of is to make sure the way you incorporate your lyrical hook doesn't make its meaning weaker each time – like 'l'm so over you', then 'I think I'm over you' then 'Maybe I'm over you'. That's

because if it's definitely a song about being over someone, you don't want to drain the lyrical hook of its impact by using it in a more doubtful way as the song goes on.

Whatever format you choose, get your hook in as many times as your plan or format demands it. (And if you stuck with the plan of using lines 1, 3 and 7 to plant your hook, congratulations – that's more than a third of your chorus lyric written.)

Then, once you've done that, we can start building the other lyric lines around the hook lines you've just added.

WRITE THE REST OF YOUR CHORUS LYRIC

Now comes the slightly trickier but more interesting and creative part – building the rest of your chorus lyric around the repetitions of your lyrical hook.

Again, your most important goal here is to come up with words, phrases and ideas that support or expand on your song's lyrical hook. And as much as possible, you want to incorporate your lyrical hook as if it just happened to be there naturally, not like you crowbarred it in because a book about songwriting told you to.

And yes, I know – we just planted your lyrical hook in your chorus lyric a few times. But that's the deception or the artifice of the art – making all of those repetitions of your lyrical hook fit in so naturally that they don't sound like you put them there on purpose. Even if you did.

So how do you do that?

To demonstrate, let's imagine you're going to use the first lyrical hook scheme I recommended before – with your lyrical hook in lines 1, 3 and 7.

And then let's imagine you're going to continue creating this knock-off version of 'I wanna dance with somebody'. (Seriously though, for now it's fine to use any lyrical hook or title you like. But in real life it's usually best to avoid copying a well-known title for your song — unless it's a short or more generic title, like 'Hello' or 'With You', and you've found a fresh angle or idea to use it with.)

Anyway, in this short Whitney Houston homage I'm using to show you how this part works, here's what we've already got for lines 1 to 4:

1 I wanna dance with somebody

2

3 I wanna dance with somebody

4

•••

And so, to fill in lines 2 and 4, you want to write something that extends, continues or just relates somehow to the central idea 'I wanna dance with somebody'. (Quick side note: if you placed your lyrical hook later in your chorus, like in lines 4 and/or 8, you'll have to do the reverse – instead of making the rest of the lyric spring from your hook, you'll have to write something that leads into, or aims for, your lyrical hook.)

So 'I wanna dance with somebody, because I love to dance!' is great – it gives us a bit more background and expands on the basic idea. Or 'I wanna dance with somebody, especially the cha-cha' is also a good start – because it's another expansion, and it stays on the topic of dancing.

Something like 'I wanna dance with somebody, and what the heck is for breakfast??' isn't a good choice, though. It goes completely off-topic and feels weird, even just reading it on the page.

So with that in mind, try to come up with a line 2 that feels like an extension or continuation of your lyrical hook. Here's what I came up with:

- 1 I wanna dance with somebody
- 2 'Cos dancing's what I love to do.
- 3 I wanna dance with somebody

4

•••

I'll be honest — it's not the most profound lyric line I've ever written. But it works — it extends and expands on the lyrical hook. It stays on topic and it gives us a bit more information around the song's central idea. And the lyrical hook isn't shoehorned in — it sits naturally among the other lines.

Line 2 is also the same length of line 1, give or take – which will make things a lot easier later, when it comes to giving your lyric a melody. And I specifically picked a line 2 that ends with a word like 'do' so I'm not going to have a hard time trying to rhyme with it.

Speaking of rhyme, if you're new to this process – and even if you're not – I strongly recommend you use a **rhyme scheme** where you try to rhyme the last word of line 2 with the last word of line 4, and ditto with line 6 and line 8. (That's often summarized as XAXAXBXB, where the lines marked 'A' and 'B' rhyme with each other, while the lines marked 'X' don't rhyme with any of the others.)

If you've been writing for a while, you might know there are a few different types of rhyme, like **perfect rhyme** ('high' and 'lie') and **near rhyme** ('high' and 'like'). You can use either type of rhyme – or a mix of both – in this process, but if you want to know more about how rhyme works, you can check out the toolbox below. (And, as usual, there's even more about rhyme schemes and types of rhyme in *The Art of Songwriting*.)



RHYME AND RHYME SCHEMES

In short, two words rhyme when they end with the same sound but start with a different sound.

Perfect rhymes are exact matches – like 'cat' and 'mat' – while **near rhymes**, or **slant rhymes**, are near matches – like 'cat' and 'mad', or even 'met' or 'map'.

When you say words with more than one syllable, some syllables get a bit of an extra stress – like in the words 'ta-B00' or 'MORning' – and that affects the way they rhyme too.

Specifically, the stress pattern at the end of the words has to match – so you could rhyme 'ta-BOO' with 'BLUE' or 'a-DIEU' or 'mis-con-STRUE'.

But it sounds weird if you try to rhyme 'MOR-ning' with 'WING' or 'ker-CHING' because the stresses don't match. So you'd have to try something like 'AWN-ing' or 'fore-WARN-ing' instead.

Some songwriters swear by perfect rhymes and some think near rhymes are more than good enough — so it's up to you which type you use. But whatever rhymes you use, it's worth looking out for **identities**, which are pairs of words that might look and sound like they rhyme, but they don't.

Two words are identities when their final syllables sound exactly the same, like 'SEEN' and 'ob-SCENE', or 'BOUT', 'a-BOUT' and 'round-a-BOUT'. So while they seem like rhymes, if you compare a pair of true rhymes – like 'bout' and 'doubt' – with a pair of identities – like 'bout' and 'about' – you'll hear that the identities

don't sound as good when you say them out loud. Identities are worth watching out for – they sneak past even really experienced songwriters – and replacing with proper rhymes if you can.

The **rhyme scheme** in a song – or song section – is the plan for how its rhymes are organized. This usually uses a notation where 'X' shows you lines that don't rhyme, while any lines that rhyme with each other are given letters alphabetically to show they match.

So for example, XAXAXBXB means rhyming alternating lines in pairs – lines 2 and 4 rhyme, then lines 6 and 8 rhyme with different words.

XAXAXBXB is probably the most common rhyme scheme in songwriting, and that's why I recommend it for this process, but there are a few other popular alternatives:

THREE EFFECTIVE RHYME SCHEMES FOR AN 8-LINE CHORUS

XAXAXBXB XXXXXXXA AABBCCDD

Finally, the most common way rhyme gets used in songwriting is **end rhyme** – where the final word of each line rhymes. But sometimes you can create **internal rhymes** as well – where there are two or more rhymes within a line.

If you decided to use an XAXAXBXB rhyme scheme, that means the first piece of the puzzle is to find a pair of rhymes to end lines 2 and 4. So if you came up with a great line 2 that ends in the word 'pencil' or 'Sagittarius', now might be a good time to rethink.

But if you didn't – if you wrote a line 2 that makes sense as a continuation or expansion of line 1 *and* finishes with a word that's not going to be a nightmare to rhyme, that's great.

Then, to find a matching rhyming line for line 4 you're going to do exactly what you did for line 2, except now you have the slightly harder goal of continuing or extending your lyrical hook with a line that also happens to rhyme with what you wrote in line 2.

Sometimes – and especially if you've been writing a while – you might come up with something pretty quickly. Otherwise, a great tactic is to start by finding some appropriate rhyming words or phrases that could end your line 4. So if your line 2 ends with the word 'do', that means making a quick list of words that rhyme with 'do' that also belong in the world that the song is about.

So in this case, words like 'you' or 'too' or 'through' or 'true' are great rhymes for your shortlist. But words like 'cockatoo', 'Timbuktu' or '*merci beaucoup*' aren't so great because it'll probably be hard to use them without saying something weird or convoluted, or that isn't really related to your song's main idea. And by the way, you can always use a rhyming dictionary or a site like rhymezone.com to find rhymes — but it's still important to pick words that mean something related to your song's big idea, and not just words that happen to rhyme.

Then once you've got your shortlist, you can start playing around to find some lines that rhyme and also fit with your song idea. So with my

example, they could be something like 'And I really wanna dance with you', or 'Dancing is my life, it's true' or 'I wanna dance the whole night through.'

You'll probably want to try out a few different lines – at least half a dozen, but maybe more. Then, once you've got something you like – something that both makes sense within the context of your song and rhymes – you can slot it in:

- 1 I wanna dance with somebody
- 2 'Cos dancing's what I love to do.
- 3 I wanna dance with somebody,
- 4 I wanna dance the whole night through.

5

6

7 I wanna dance with somebody

8

And voilà – that's more than half of your chorus lyric finished.

And if you were thinking 'Wait, but doesn't line 4 basically just say what line 3 does, only in a different way?', then yes, yes it does. This is the idea that every line in your lyric should relate back to your song's main message — and as far as chorus lyrics go, that means they usually just repeat that main message over and over again, in slightly different ways, with slightly different details or wording. And while that might feel like too much repetition while you're writing, it's exactly what makes your chorus feel like one strong, joined-up thought when people hear it.

Now let's turn to the second half of the chorus.

With the second half of your chorus lyric, I'm actually going to suggest you start with line 8. That's because, as the final line in your chorus lyric,

you want to go out with a bang – or at least finish with a strong final line – so that's often a good line to write first.

Again, you'll want to brainstorm a few different lines that feel like they extend, continue or complement your lyrical hook line. Except this time, if you come up with something that feels an extra bit final, or puts a slightly different slant on your lyrical hook, that's a bonus.

After I had a play around, this is what I ended up with:

- 1 I wanna dance with somebody
- 2 'Cos dancing's what I love to do.
- 3 I wanna dance with somebody,
- 4 I wanna dance the whole night through.

5

6

- 7 I wanna dance with somebody
- 8 'Cos it's my time to shine.

And I know – that final line doesn't throw the entire lyric on its head. It won't make anyone scratch their chin and reconsider the entire meaning of the lyric that came before it. And it doesn't need to.

But it does add something extra to the idea – that dancing is about showing off or letting loose. And so if you can save something for your final line that gives us that extra something, that's a really nice touch.

Now all that's left to write are lines 5 and 6. When you place your lyrical hook in lines 1, 3 and 7, lines 5 and 6 – the only place in the lyric without the lyrical hook – is a nice opportunity to go off on a mini-tangent that's still related to your song's main message, but adds a little bit of contrast.

And like before, if you've no idea where to start, a good first step is brainstorm possible rhymes to end line 6. So in my example, because line 8 ends in shine, a good rhyme shortlist probably includes words like 'mine' or 'fine' or 'nine' or even 'divine' (but not 'bovine' or 'oil pipeline').

Oh, and watch out for **identities** – words like 'shine' and 'moonshine', that aren't really rhymes because they both end with the same '-shine' syllable. (If you skipped it, there's more about identities in the toolbox on page 34.)

And then, once again, you can take your shortlist and see where it leads you to for lines 5 and 6. You're looking for a pair of lines that are still related to your chorus's main message, but maybe deviate from it just a little bit, and definitely end with one of the rhymes you jotted down.

As usual, this is a great opportunity to try a few different ideas out – because, as usual, you won't always come up with your best idea right away. It sometimes takes three, four or even twenty different tries before you find something great. So after I did that for this song, here's what I came up with for lines 5 and 6 added into the entire lyric:

- 1 I wanna dance with somebody
- 2 'Cos dancing's what I love to do.
- 3 I wanna dance with somebody,
- 4 I wanna dance the whole night through.
- 5 This week had me feeling down
- 6 But now I'm feeling fine.
- 7 Yeah, I wanna dance with somebody
- 8 'Cos it's my time to shine.

I like this version because it gives a bit of contrast in the chorus lyric by talking about the week before and helping us understand why the person singing feels the way they do.

And that's it. That's really all there is to writing a chorus lyric that incorporates your lyrical hook in a major way, while making sure the rest of the lyric expands on and supports that hook.

Again, if it takes you a few goes to come up with some lyric lines you like, that's normal. And if it takes you a decent amount of time even to come up with options for some of the lines – especially when you're trying to write lines that do three things at once – that's normal too.

As I said in the introduction, there aren't really any foolproof methods for writing good songs. All you can do is understand what you're aiming for overall, then try different things out until you come up with a solution that works.

To keep this chapter short, I saved typing out all the different lines I tried out to put this chorus lyric together – but I'll level with you, it took me way longer to write this part than it'll have taken you to read it. So don't be discouraged if it takes you plenty of time to write your own chorus lyric.

Finally, if you decide to use a different lyrical hook scheme than the one I demonstrated – that puts the lyrical hook somewhere other than in lines 1, 3 and 7 – obviously all of the principles we talked about here still apply. You still want to make sure your lyrical hook feels blended into your lyric, and it's still a good idea to aim to create a chorus lyric that says your song's core message over and over, in slightly different ways. Though of course, the exact way you make that happen will be different.

But whatever lyrical hook format you choose, it's a good idea to choose something simple and match it with a simple rhyme scheme too. And from

there all you've got to do is to keep playing round with words and phrases that are related to your song's main message until you come up with something that sounds good to you.



WRITE THE CHORUS LYRIC

- Make space for eight lyric lines and put the lyrical hook you chose in Part 2 in at least two of those lines.
- Now write the rest of the chorus around your lyrical hook, trying to make sure your lyric feels like it includes your hook word or phrase naturally.
- Stick to a simple rhyme scheme like XAXAXBXB, and try to keep each lyric line fairly short and to the point.

So by now you should have a complete chorus lyric for your song. And if so, bravo – that's a great start.

If you want to take a moment to make any tweaks or changes to your song, that's fine. If your lyrical hook was only a word or two, you might want to tweak the lines that include it if that makes your lyric clearer or helps it flow. Or you might have other tiny changes you want to make now you've got the entire lyric in front of you. (You might have spotted I added a cheeky 'yeah' at the beginning of line 7 in my example.)

But like before, don't agonize over this forever. What's most important is that you have a working lyric so you can move forward with this process.

And don't worry if your lyric looks very simple or plain on the page – that's normal. Singing a lyric always makes it richer, so it's often better to underwrite a lyric and leave it looking even too basic on the page, because once you've added music to it, that simplicity is usually really effective.

And speaking of adding music to your lyric, that's what we're going to focus on next.

[PART 4] WRITE THE CHORUS CHORDS, MELODY AND GROOVE

[PART 4]

WRITE THE CHORUS CHORDS, MELODY AND GROOVE

In this part... How to write the music – the chords, melody and groove – to go with your chorus lyric.

Bravo – you're making great progress. And to keep that up, now you'll start writing your song's music, beginning with the music that goes with the chorus lyric you just wrote.

As we talked about in Part 3, your chorus is the section that really gets to the heart of what your song is about, so it tends to be the ideal place to start creating your song's music. More often than not, once you've figured out what your chorus is going to sound like, it's much easier to build the other sections around it.

So in this part we're going to dive headfirst into a ton of powerful songwriting and composition techniques – for crafting chord progressions, writing catchy vocal melodies, and coming up with great instrumental grooves – all through the lens of how to write a great chorus.

To do this, we're going to get pretty technical in the way we look at chords, melodies and grooves — so buckle up, because this is the most epic part of the whole process. But the good news is that all of the techniques we talk about are going to be invaluable for everything you create in the future — and not just for writing choruses.

Plus, to make this mega-part easier to work through, I've split it into four sections with their own big subheadings.

In the first, you'll make a few big-picture decisions about your song – its key, time signature and tempo. From there you'll tackle writing a chord progression, vocal melody and instrumental groove, one by one.

As always, the key to this process is to work through at your own pace, and in this part especially, it's worth going slow enough to make sure you've really understood how everything works. And while the first section of this part isn't too complicated, the other three are more substantial. So even if you managed to fly through Parts 1, 2 and 3 fairly quickly, if you want to take a break between most of the sub-sections in this part, that's definitely not a bad idea.

There are also plenty of toolbox sections in this part – and like always, they're useful but completely optional. So depending on whether you want the full-fat or diet version of this part, you can either read them or not.

But either way – and without further ado – let's get started.

...that's it for this preview.

To pickup the complete book, head to

 $\underline{the song foundry.com/how-to-write-a-song-ebook}$