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## Songwriting:

### Lyrics



**I** would like to share with you a few of the basics of writing song lyrics with those members who might be wanting to write a song but are at odds with how to get started. Hopefully, the following tutorial will help simplify the process for you and encourage you to become confident in writing your first song, while having a lot of fun doing it.

**B**efore we begin, you will need to know that there are many ways to write the lyrics for a song; and each composer / lyricist has a different approach to the process. What I am setting out in the following pages are some of the things for you to consider as you go about creating your own song. As the creative artist, you are free to do what you want with your song. However, I would encourage you to use some of the rules and conventions mentioned in this tutorial if you are just starting out as a songwriter. If you ignore these tried-and-true rules and conventions and you go too far afield, then your song might end up sounding a little *too* different than what people are used to hearing,

and it might not feel audibly comfortable for them to listen to.

**T**here is no need for me to go into length explaining certain elements that may muddy the waters and leave you feeling confused. So for now, I will try to simplify the process and focus on lyric writing solely as a recreational and creative outlet for you; with little, if any, focus on songwriting for professional purposes. Hopefully, what I share with you here should be just enough to inspire you to start writing your own songs. And before I continue, let me tell you that anyone, yes, anyone, can write a song. If you can write a letter; if you can feel emotion and express it and share it with others, then you can write a song.

## Formal music training?



**W**hile some formal musical education would come in handy for creating the melody, arrangement and other parts of your song, it is not a prerequisite. There have been many fabulous songs throughout the years, written by people with no formal musical education. It would, however, be to your advantage at some point in your songwriting journey to at least try to do a little study in the art of creating melodies and arrangements. Also, at a deeper level and very worthwhile, would be learning the rudiments of music.

## The idea for your song



**B**egin by having a clear idea of what you want your song to be about. There are a number of ways to get your ideas for your song down on paper. One of those ways is to write down a very brief outline of your story in sentence form using just one short paragraph. Then, on a separate piece of paper, write down the most important facts that you feel are vital to the telling of your story and highlight them with a highlighter pen. Excess information can be culled later. Then, once highlighted, cut the highlighted sentences into strips and arrange the strips in a linear sequence of events that tells your story from beginning to end. You can also write each important fact on a small piece of paper or cardboard and arrange them the same way. For example:

-- I met Lucille. We fell in love.

-- We shared all our dreams and talked about spending the rest of our lives together.

-- Then, on our wedding night, I discovered that Lucille used to be Larry.

-- She...er.. he, broke my heart.

-- I cried every night.

-- I don't know how I can ever love again.

-- Yada, yada, yada.

**O**f course, *you* didn't marry Lucille ...er.. Larry; I did! That's *my* story. You have to tell your *own!* But you can see from the example above that it follows a fluid and linear sequence of events.

**W**hen writing song lyrics, you need to guide your listener through the story. Don't start from the end of your story and work backwards; nor from the middle. You are writing a song, not a film or a story for Mills and Boone. For songwriting, always start from the beginning and work towards the conclusion, recanting only the points that you feel are vitally necessary to the telling of your story and the parts you think the listener will be interested in hearing. You can still make reference to past events.





## The song title



Choose a title that is relevant to your song --

one that you feel best sums up in four or five words the theme of your song. The title is like a mini-description -- a sneak peak into what your song is about. For example: Your story could be about how you fell in love with a girl while picking apples in her father's orchard. It would be a little daft if you were to give your song the title "*I Fell in Love With a Girl While I Was Picking Apples in Her Father's Orchard*". For one, it sounds a little too self-explanatory. It is also too long. More so, is way too boring. Choose a shorter title and one that offers a little mystery to it but still gives a hint of what your song is about. By doing this, curiosity will peak in the potential listener and get them to want to listen to your song to hear what it's about. A title for the above song would sound better as "*An Apple Kind of Love*", or "*Love In The Time Of Apples*", although, there are many more titles you could give to this same song.

**W**hatever title you decide to give your song, try to make it have some semblance to what your song is about. Build your song around your title. Should you begin to lose focus or go off in a different direction while writing your song, referencing the title frequently will bring you back around to what you intended your song to be about from the start. Keep asking yourself "*What is my song really about? What is it I need to tell? How do I convey this?*" "

**I**t is suggested that your song title be no more than five words. Studies have shown that the average song title consists of between four and five words. There are songs whose titles are much longer but the majority of contemporary song titles are around four or five words. The shorter the song title, the easier it is for people to remember.

**U**sually, with most songs, the title of the song forms part of the lyrics. It is unusual for the title of a song to not be mentioned somewhere in the lyrics. It sometimes happens, but not all the time. Think of most song titles and you are likely to hear the title used somewhere in the song -- usually within the chorus, and often a number of times. The same applies to a catchy song title. Plus, if people hear the title of your song repeated a number of times throughout your song, it will be imprinted on their memory, and it will make it more difficult for them to forget it.



## Write from your own experience



The best ideas for stories come from real life. The old saying "*Truth is stranger than fiction*" is very true for both literature and films. The same is also true for songs. After all, a song is nothing more than a short poem set to music. Sure, you can write about fantasy, Jedi knights, space ships or goblins in your song, but the best ideas for your song are the ones that come from your own personal experience. Writing this way makes it so much easier to form an emotional connection with your listener; because chances are that if you've gone through a difficult heart-breaking experience, for example, and you're writing about it in your song, then the listener can easily identify with your pain because they have probably experienced the same kind of pain, or, they are going through that very same hurt as they are listening to your song. Misery loves company. Why do you think so many people who have just broken up with their boyfriend/girlfriend sit in front of the radio painfully wailing away like a bunch of Sicilian widows as they listen to someone else singing about their own broken heart in the "he/she done me wrong" or the "he/she doesn't love me anymore"--type songs. Its like all the mourners need to rally and drown themselves in a torrent of tears. Conversely, the person who is feeling extraordinarily happy about something likes to listen to a happy up-beat song. And the

songwriter who writes a song from the heart is going to make that emotional connection with both the broken -- hearted and the happy people listening to their song. They should be able to share their pain or their happiness and have the listener identify with it and connect with it.

Regarding a topic to write about: Did you know that around ninety percent of songs ever written have been about human relationships? And ninety-five percent of those are love songs. So, why not try writing a love song? The choice is yours! Write whatever it is that you want to write about. But try to be original. I know it is difficult to be original when it comes to writing song lyrics because there really is nothing new to write about: it has all been written about before. But if you have a story about love gone wrong, or any other story, try to make *your* story stand out from the rest by telling it a different way. Try using some metaphors to make the way you tell your story a little different to how other songwriters have told the same story, but don't overuse them, otherwise your listener could become a little confused by trying to decipher too many metaphors and end up losing interest in your song. If you are new to songwriting, then it is suggested that you keep your first few songs fairly straightforward and simple until you get the hang of it, but you can still tell your story in an interesting and original way. After all: It's not **what** you write; it's how **well** you write it and how **well** you **tell** it by conveying your experience and your emotions through your words.





## Inspirations for your song



I said earlier that the best stories come from reality -- from your own experience. You can, if you wish, also draw inspiration for your song from the stories of others, and tell those stories through your own words, perspective, and emotions. It does help though if you have an immediate connection to the other person by way of being their close friend or relative -- that way, you have been directly affected by their happiness or their suffering, and you can easily connect with them and then convey those emotions to your listeners. You can even draw inspiration for your song from a conversation you overheard in a bar or a restaurant or even from a newspaper article and then make it *your* story. But again, you must focus on writing in such a way that it still creates an emotional connection with your listener, even if you are telling another person's story. However, if you write from your own personal experience, then it is the personal connection that you have to your story that will find a direct connection to your listener. Anything and everything can be an inspiration for your song.

## Create an emotional connection



As mentioned previously, the main objective of any song is to connect emotionally with the listener. The song is the medium that conveys your thoughts and emotions directly to the listener via its lyrics, its melody, its tempo, its arrangement. Your song can elicit emotions of joy or sadness or grief in the listener *only* if you were genuinely feeling the same emotions when you composed it. Otherwise, if you just half-heartedly slapped down some lyrics on paper for the sake of writing a song without feeling the emotion behind those lyrics or other aspects of the song as you wrote it, then your very astute listener is going to pick up on that and not take your song to heart. Making an emotional connection with the listener is THE most important aspect of songwriting. And if you are not sincere in the feeling and the sharing of your own emotions as you write your song, then how can you expect your listener to feel your emotion when they hear it? The best way you can create that emotional connection with your listener is to create themes that resonate. Themes that tell a story regarding the human condition and human relationships will always resonate with your listener.

## Create Imagery



**W**hen writing for film, the Number - One rule is to show it, don't tell it. This is extremely important because a film's story is made up of images, as well as a script to complete the telling of the story. When you read prose or a great story, the pages are full of descriptions that you as the reader can conjure up as images in your imagination. However, the onus is on the author of that prose or story to create those images as vividly as possible through just the use of descriptions. You, as a songwriter have around three minutes to tell your whole story. You don't have the luxury of a 90 minute film nor 350 pages of printed text to do it in; therefore, you need to plant in your listeners mind everything you want to convey to them through your "story". You do this by painting a vibrant lyrical landscape of images.

**E**arlier, I mentioned that it is important for the songwriter to create an emotional connection with their listeners. You also need to create a '*visual*' connection with them through the use of imagery. Your task as a songsmith is to project into the mind of the listener, as images, your total experience: What you see; what you hear; what you feel; what you smell; what you taste. As is the case with good literature, through the use of good song lyrics, the listener should be able to experience everything you as the story teller were experiencing when you wrote your song. Paint your lyrical landscape and

allow the listener to explore it. Be descriptive but avoid being overly descriptive. Too many descriptions will be too much for the listener to take in in just three minutes or so of your song, and it could appear as being very crammed and just too busy. Strive for a balance.

**Y**ou are wise to also incorporate adjectives in your descriptions. However, using too many adjectives will most certainly bloat your lyrics and perhaps bore the listener. Sometimes less is more. Finding the right balance comes with experience, but there's nothing to say you can't achieve this balance in your first song.

**T**hink of all the songs you have liked from all the different genres; from classical to country to pop to reggae. Chances are that the songs you liked the best and remembered the most were the ones that not only created an emotional connection with you, but were also the ones that created a visual landscape in your mind and allowed you to explore the imaginary world built around the descriptive lyrics of the song. That is why it is so important that you describe not only the events surrounding your story, but also many of the things your senses experienced. For example: The smell of her perfume. How the hot sun made you feel. The slamming of the door as she said goodbye. What the rain on your face felt like.

**I**f you listen to the Eagle's classic "*Hotel California*", you are immediately drawn into the song in the first four lines as the songwriter begins painting his lyrically visual landscape:

*"On a dark desert highway*

*Cool wind in my hair*

*Warm smell of Colitas*

*Rising up through the air"*

And then he draws you into his story a little more..

*"Up ahead in the distance*

*I saw a shimmering light*

*My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim*



*I had to stop for the night."*

In less than thirty seconds, the songwriter has described to you what would otherwise take several minutes to show / tell you if it were a film. He has described the darkness of the highway; what he could smell; feeling the cool wind in his hair; him seeing a shimmering light ahead in the distance; his heavy head and dimming sight which were the reason for him deciding to stop for the night. It wasn't just the melody that made this song a huge hit; it was the combination of all the parts -- the melody, the singer, the instruments, the arrangement. However, it was the telling of the story through the carefully crafted lyrics that gave this song its crown: not to mention the use of lyrics that have a double meaning. And this song isn't alone. There are many great songs whose imagery that was created through the use of well-crafted lyrics has made them memorable and well-loved songs through generations of music lovers. Sometimes, in songwriting, you don't always have to explain everything in the finest of details in your lyrics. You can often convey information to your listener without actually spelling it out for them, and sometimes you can use lyrics that have a double meaning to give your song a sense of ambiguity -- saying one thing while meaning another.

So, don't be afraid to describe what your senses are feeling. And don't be afraid to use a descriptive narrative to convey your situation and the world around you to your listener. These are the things that your listeners want to hear. They want to be part of the world you create through your lyrics. And don't feel that what you have written has to remain. If you feel you have more than enough descriptions or adjectives or metaphors, you can always cull a lot of the ones you feel are spoiling your song by making it sound too busy or overly-descriptive. Your senses, along with your emotions are the finest of tools. Use them!



## Tell your story in sections



Just as a story in film or literature needs a beginning, a middle, and an end, so too does the story you intend to use for your song.

**Verses 1 and 2** introduce the characters and situation. Verse 2 builds on top of Verse 1.

**The pre-chorus (if used)** introduces a little more relevant information and builds up tension that is released in the chorus.

**The chorus** is the climax as a result of the facts that have gone before it, and it gives the listener more insight into your situation. The chorus is the guts of your song. This is where you can really lay it all on the line. Some choruses can sometimes provide the resolution to the character's situation or just scream at you telling you "*This is what this situation is doing to me!*" without actually having a resolution. More on this later. The chorus is also the part of your song that people will remember the most.

**Verse 3** (or 4 if included) can also be used as a channel for resolution i.e; resolving the situation for the protagonist in your story.

Using the chorus as a means of resolving the protagonist's situation or dilemma would

go something like the example below. And remember: this is just one of a number of ways you can approach it:

**Verse 1, or 1 and 2:** Here's the situation and characters. Verse 2 adds a little more information.

**Pre-chorus:** Here's how it's affecting me / Here's what I'm thinking of doing, etc.

OR (if no pre-chorus is used)

**Chorus:** The guts of it all. Here's how the situation is affecting me; here's what I'm doing or feeling right now / or here's what I'm going to do, etc. You can, if you like, resolve your situation in the chorus.

**Verse 3 (or 4 if included):** Can also be the resolution, i.e; how you have resolved your situation, OR, you can use Verse 3 (or 4 if included) to tell the listener where you go from here if you have decided it would be better to seek resolution via your chorus.

The above is just one example of the many ways you can have your song / story find resolution. Some songs that comprise of verses only with no pre-chorus or chorus will usually have their resolution in the last verse. Narrative - type songs will usually have their resolution in the final verse. These songs are filled with the facts and often use a balance of light and shade to dramatize and highlight certain key portions of the song in the absence of a chorus as their story is told in a fluid and linear progression.

Keep in mind though, that not all songs require resolution. In the song "*The Tennessee Waltz*" for example, the writer / protagonist tells us in the first verse that while he was dancing with his sweetheart, he saw an old friend whom he then introduced to his sweetheart. And, while the "*friend*" and his sweetheart were dancing together, the friend stole his sweetheart from him. In the chorus, the writer / protagonist tells us how well he remembers that particular night and how he lost his sweetheart while the waltz was playing. Now, with this particular song, some might argue that the songwriter / protagonist is achieving resolution to his dilemma through the chorus by acknowledging his loss. However, in this instance, I see no resolution at all, and feel that although he remains broken-hearted, the song has no resolution. Finding true resolution would be having the protagonist (in the last verse) tell us how he stole his sweetheart back from his friend or how he moved on to a new love. However, some may argue this point and say that resolution was achieved the moment the protagonist acknowledged his loss. Acknowledgment and /or acceptance of a situation could be

possibly be viewed as a form of resolution.



**I**n some songs, you will hear the setting up of the story in the first few verses. In some of these songs, there is no pre-chorus. The chorus goes straight for the jugular immediately after either the first or second verse (if the writer has chosen to include two versus before the chorus) and emphasizes the protagonist's dilemma even further. And then the dilemma or situation is usually resolved either in the chorus or in the last verse. However, if you listen to Harry Nilsson's song "*Can't live*",

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMzf7zpPuVI>

...you will hear that there are really just two verses and one chorus that is repeated. There is no real resolution per se: he just keeps singing about his dilemma.

### **"Can't Live" -- Harry Nilsson**

Verse 1. Description of the situation.

Verse 2. More situation. Expressions of regret

(No pre-chorus)

Chorus: Emotionally telling you he can't live without you.

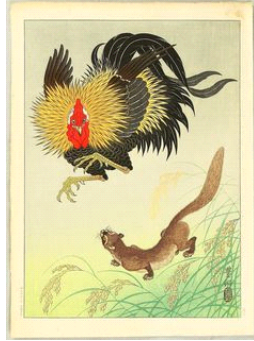
Verse "3": Repeat of Verse 1

Chorus: Repeated

Outro: Instrumental



This particular song broke a few of the usual songwriting conventions, but it was simple, emotional, effective, and a huge hit. Through the lyrics, you know exactly what the writer is trying to tell you. You can feel his torment and loss.



Breaking your song into sections also helps you to tell your story in a linear sequential manner. For example:

**First verse** --- Is the introduction to your story. This is where you create the context of the story you want to tell and begin its unfolding --- setting the scene, so to speak; Introducing the characters and introducing your situation.

**Second verse** --- This a continuation of the beginning of your story with a little more information.

**Pre-chorus** --- This is your chance to build tension, energy, drama and emotion and prepare your listener for the climax that is about to hit them --- the chorus. In verses one and two, you have set the scene, introduced the characters and / or situation and introduced some of the facts. The pre-chorus is where you can add a little more information that is much more vital for the listener to know: information that builds the tension. The chorus will be the release of that tension.

You might like to think of the pre-chorus like the starting of a fire. You have gathered your kindling in verses 1 and 2. The pre-chorus is where you are rubbing the sticks together to create a spark that will ignite the kindling. Suddenly, smoke appears and you set your embers into the kindling. The smoke (the pre-chorus) is the precursor to the actual fire (the chorus) that will result. You can also think of your pre-chorus as a bit of a tune-changer -- something that puts your song into a higher gear before taking off into the chorus -- something that breaks the monotony or builds on the mood of your song by building tension and creating a smoother transition into the chorus, rather than jumping straight from the verse into the chorus.

Think of the pre-chorus as being the build up of tension, and the chorus as being the release of that tension.

**Chorus** --- Consider the phrase "*cause and effect*". Every story ever told is the result of cause and effect, which is the principle that drives a story forward. An event has happened (cause), and it creates a reaction (effect). One is the result of the other. That said, however, the chorus -- although being the climax of your song -- usually has less information than your verses and is a little more simplified, but what that information tells you, is what gives your chorus its impact.

Continuing with the fire - starting analogy: the chorus is the full-on raging inferno. The chorus is the part of your story that you've been building up to. It is the climax of your story. Your listener has been following your story and now they want to hear all the gory details and knock-out facts, and where you are at this point in time. It's like telling a friend:

**Verse 1:** (Setting the scene with a little information regarding characters and situation)

*"I saw a girl in a cafe a few days ago. She seemed nice, and she kept looking my way."*

**Verse 2:** (Some more relevant information added to the timeline)

*"So I went back to the cafe today hoping she'd be there. And there she was."*

**Pre-Chorus:** (The build up with somewhat more intense information)

*"I felt like a dork. What would I do? What would I say? How would I ask her to have coffee with me? I just didn't know what to do. And then. And THEN!!!!..."*

**Chorus:** (The climax to the culmination of events that have lead up to this moment. This is where you let it all out! All of your happiness, all of your sorrow, all of your emotions, and tell the listener "This is where I am now at this point in time and this is how I really feel / this is how this situation is affecting me, and/or this is what I am doing / going to do about it.")

*"She saw me and walked over to me and said "Hello". I was numb with excitement. And then she came straight out and asked me if I wanted join her for coffee. I was ecstatic! I couldn't stop smiling!"*

**Verse 3:** *"I can't believe how foolish I was to think she might not like me. But she really does. We've been seeing each other ever since!"*



**W**hen writing song lyrics, use a degree of continuity through the lines to tell your story in a linear way ( a progression of facts) rather than making each line a separate sentence about unrelated facts or facts that don't follow the same timeline. Instead, make your first verse, for example, one long sentence where the lines flow into each other by using joining words like "and", "until" "then", "or", "but", or any other joining word that brings the lines of your sentence together. You can also phrase your lyrics in point form where you would have the first two lines of your verse (or chorus) as one full sentence and then the next two lines as two separate sentences. However, if you choose to work this way, make sure that your first sentence (the first two lines) are not conflicting with the second sentence (the third and fourth line). Be certain that there is continuity and a smooth transition from one line or one sentence to the next that tells your story in a succinct uninterrupted way that makes sense and doesn't confuse the listener. However, as I said earlier, you are the creative genius behind your own songs and as such, you are free to write your songs whichever way you choose.

**B**y this point, I hope you can understand the function of all the parts, i.e; the verses, the pre-chorus (if used), and the chorus ... and how each of these and the information you include in each is vital to telling your story in a linear and transitional manner without causing confusion to the listener.

## Number of lines for verse, chorus, bridge



Generally speaking, in most contemporary music, each verse can contain six or eight or twelve or more lines, but usually it is eight lines, i.e; two sets of four lines. The same applies to the chorus. The bridge usually consists of four lines of lyrics or, for an instrumental bridge, it can be four bars. I mention this as a generality that applies to most songs, but this is not always the case. You may often hear a song whose verse consists of just six lines (two sets of three lines), and the chorus of also six lines, or even just two lines. And perhaps the bridge is just two lines or even just one. You will also hear songs that have eight lines for the first verse (two sets of four lines) and just two lines for the "chorus", which, in that case, is usually considered to be 'Part B' rather than what we would normally call an actual 'chorus'. As mentioned earlier, each person is different in the way they compose their songs and the way they approach the songwriting process.





## Song structure



There are a few conventions that need to be followed when it comes to songwriting : two of them being: 1) Your song must have a clear structure, and 2) It must have a clear and uninterrupted progression. Except for 1 and 2 mentioned above, which are vital to good songcraft, ignoring a few of the other conventions can sometimes make your song stand out from the rest by providing something different and maybe exciting for people to listen to. However, if you are new to songwriting, I would suggest you at least begin by following most of the accepted conventions: structure, acceptable duration, verse / chorus format, to name a few. That said, most contemporary songs are usually made up of the following structure:

Touted as being THE most popular structure by some songwriters (which is always highly contested) is:

Intro ---Verse --- Chorus --- Verse --- Chorus --- Bridge --- Verse --- Chorus --- outro (coda).

Some songs use the structure of:

Intro --- Verse --- Verse --- Chorus --- Bridge --- Verse --- Chorus --- Outro

Others use:

Intro --- Verse --- Verse --- Chorus --- Verse --- Verse --- Chorus --- Outro

And then there is the:

Intro --- Verse --- Verse --- instrumental break --- Verse --- Verse --- outro.

And:

Intro --- Verse --- Verse --- Pre-Chorus --- Chorus --- Instrumental break or Bridge --- Chorus --- Outro.

As well as a few other variations.

The following is not widely used but it is particularly effective if the song has an especially catchy / interesting chorus or melody. If used as the intro to your song, it will catch the listener off guard because of its unusualness and get them to listen for what is coming next.

Chorus --- Verse --- Verse --- Chorus --- Bridge --- Chorus --- repeat Chorus as Outro.

You, however, can choose whichever structure you think best suits your song or your writing style.

There are also some songs (as noted previously) that don't really have a chorus, per se. These particular songs comprise simply of the verses and what is referred to as Part B. The verse often consists of eight lines (two sets of four lines). Part B (too short to call a chorus) can sometimes consist of just two lines, which is followed by one or more verses. The song "***You Belong To Me***" is a classic example of this type of structure.



## The facts



Unlike a film where you have on average 90 minutes to tell your story, you, as a songwriter, have around three minutes to tell yours. Therefore, you need to provide only the facts that you feel are vital for the listener to know in order for them to get important details and then make a connection. However, supplying too many facts will make your song appear bloated. Streamline it by getting rid of excess information or anything that does not benefit your story.



## Duration



**A**verage acceptable duration for most songs is around three minutes. Of course, your song can be two minutes and thirty seconds or two minutes and forty five seconds or even four minutes duration or longer, but it is suggested that you aim for around the accepted average three minute mark. Slightly longer is also acceptable.

**I**f you are writing your lyrics and have no melody for your song as yet and you want to figure out how long your song is going to be when completed with a melody, you can try putting a tempo to your song by tapping your foot or using a metronome and then, using a clock or timer with seconds, read your lyrics out loud at a slightly slower pace than how you normally speak. Then, once you have timed the duration of what you have just read aloud, write the time down. Then make allowances for the duration of your intro and your bridge (or guitar, sax or violin riff if you are including one) and your outro. Considering all these parts, i.e; intro, verses, choruses, (bridge or riff or instrumental break) and outro, estimate the duration of these and add that time to the time it took you to read your lyrics out loud, keeping in mind the following:

**Intro and outro** --- generally around ten to fifteen seconds long --- sometimes longer, sometimes shorter. Most songs have an intro but not all songs have an outro.



**Bridge** --- (lyrical) somewhere around ten or twelve to fifteen seconds long.

(orchestral) can be somewhat longer than lyrical)

**Riff** --- around five, twelve or fifteen seconds long.

All these are average times and you will hear many variations in recordings. Things that will affect the duration of your own song will be: 1) Tempo. 2) Duration of intro.

3) Number of verses, 4) Duration of the bridge. 5) Duration of outro.





## Get to the chorus quickly



**I**t is said that you must bring your listener to the chorus in around thirty seconds from the start of your song. I'm talking about the whole song here; -- from the moment the music starts. Remember: you have an average of approximately three minutes to tell your story. People are so impatient these days that they expect to be entertained by certain things at certain times; unlike in days of yore. In a way, the urgency of the listener wanting to get to the chorus is understandable. It is absolute murder listening to a song for the first time for one or two minutes and still be waiting to hear the chorus: and then becoming almost suicidal if it doesn't eventuate --- having just wasted three valuable minutes of your life for nothing. So, when writing your song, try to time it so that the the chorus arrives within around thirty seconds from the start --- a little less if you like. Keep your listener interested for the entire duration of your song. Don't allow them to become bored.



## The Hook



Every good song worth remembering or worth listening to has a 'hook' of some fashion. The hook of a song is the catchy bit that hooks you in and keeps you interested in the song. It can be anything from a guitar riff, an instrumental line, a particular line in the lyrics, the melody, the tempo, the chorus, or the pre-chorus, the bridge or a huge contrast between the light and shade of the instrumentation or the voices. It can even be the title of the song itself. Johnny Cash's "*A Boy Named Sue*", is one example. However, the hook in contemporary songs is generally regarded by many as being the chorus. Don't get overly stressed by trying to purposely create a hook for your song. For the moment or for a few days, leave the creation of a hook for your song alone and concentrate on writing or polishing the other parts of your song. Then come back to creating the hook with a fresh mind. Some hooks will seem to almost create themselves with little or no input from the songwriter. When you feel you have a hook for your song and are pleased with it, let someone else read your lyrics and see if they also like it -- bearing in mind that the hook can be any of the things mentioned above, but in contemporary music, it is often regarded as being the chorus --- generally speaking.

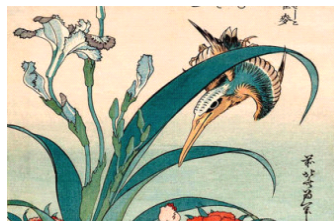


## The pre-Chorus



The pre-chorus is like an appetizer that teases your ears and gets them ready for the main meal --- the chorus. Not every song has a pre-chorus, nor do they require one. Some songs sound quite good without a pre-chorus. Some songs sound better with a pre-chorus. It is sometimes difficult to plan out before-hand if you should include a pre-chorus or not. Sometimes, you just have to 'feel' your way through your song in order to know if it would sound better with one. However, some songs seem to almost demand a pre-chorus. As mentioned previously, the pre-chorus is 'the smoke before the fire': the buildup of tension that introduces the chorus where that tension will be released. Adding a pre-chorus will help break the monotony of a slow-moving song and add a different dynamic to what could otherwise be a fairly ordinary song. Many fast-paced contemporary songs also employ the use of a pre-chorus in order to add another dimension before jumping into the chorus.

**TIP:** When you have completed writing the lyrics to your song and you feel it might be lacking something, or you feel it just doesn't sound right, try adding a pre-chorus and then listen to how it sounds.



## The Bridge



**J**ust like a pre-chorus, not every song has a bridge. However, the use of a bridge can offer some respite for the ear by adding something different to the song and helps prevent the monotony of the verses and chorus. This is especially true if the song is a very slow song or one that comprises of just versus and no chorus. If it is a fast-paced song, you might like to consider adding a bridge that retards the momentum by slowing down the tempo or even changing the time signature, i.e; going from 4/4 time to 3/4 time for the bridge and then returning to the original time signature for the rest of your song. This works especially well in classical music and even some contemporary pieces. The addition of a bridge can help add some light and shade or a different texture to your song. For slow -- paced songs, this could be a change of tempo or a change in key or more intense lyrics, or anything else you wish to incorporate. The bridge can even be just an instrumental break, be it fiddle, guitar, mandolin, piano solo, orchestral passage or a lyrical passage.

**M**ake your bridge around four lines if using lyrics to create it. You can even make it just two lines, but the most common number of lines used in contemporary music lyrical bridges is four lines: although, a bridge of just two lines can be very effective in some songs. You can always experiment a little by adding or subtracting the number of lines, but I suggest that your lyrical bridge be four lines maximum. Orchestral bridges or bridges that use solo instruments for riffs can be very effective as an alternative to a lyrical bridge. Experimentation is the key.



## Avoid using cliches



**I**f you've ever heard a song filled with cliché after cliché, you will obviously not want to listen to that particular song ever again. Those type of cliché - filled songs are what children write. Lyrics like tears falling like rain or her cheek was as soft as a rose, have all been done to death. Sometimes though, you may find yourself automatically wanting to use a much over-used cliché that you simply can't avoid using because it just seems to fit your song. If this ever happens, then use it, but try surrounding your cliché with some interesting or provocative lyrics: that way, your over-used cliché will be disguised and may very well go un-noticed. Another way would be to use a metaphor instead of the cliché. A metaphor in this instance would give your song more impact and sophistication, making it sound more professionally written, and help with the imagery.



## Rhyme



**A**round ninety-five percent of modern songs use some type of rhyming in their lyrics even though there is no hard and fast rule that says all song lyrics must rhyme. It is entirely up to you as the composer if you want to use a rhyming pattern or not. However, if you intend using a rhyming pattern for your lyrics, then you might consider a few different ways of doing this. For verses, you could make the last word of each line rhyme or you could make the last word of every second line rhyme. The same applies to the chorus.

**O**r, you could write your song so that there is no rhyming in the verse but there is rhyming in the chorus. You could also write your song without the use of any rhyme whatsoever. However, the lyrics, the images created via the lyrics and the catchy or memorable melody should all be combined in such a way that the song comes across as being interesting and well-crafted, and says everything you want it to say in a succinct and fluid manner. There have been a number of songs written without a rhyming pattern that would sound rather strange in themselves if a rhyming pattern were to have been used. It is sometimes difficult to know if you should use a rhyming pattern or not when composing a song. Often, a song will appear to almost dictate to the composer whether or not it wants to rhyme or not; as well as which rhyming pattern to use.

**A** word of caution on rhyming: Allow the rhyming to occur naturally without forcing it to happen. As you are writing the lyrics to your song, some words will find a natural affinity with each other and fall comfortably into a rhyming pattern by themselves. Other words will take a little longer to find the perfect rhyme for, but if this happens, just leave the word or words alone for a while and carry on working on the rest of your lyrics. Try to avoid the obvious and the overused rhyming words like fire/ desire; hill/chill; eye/sky etc. Even if you have to use the word "fire" for example, try as hard as you can to come up with a rhyming word that isn't commonly used, but one that doesn't sound totally out of place. When your listener hears the word "Fire", for example, chances are they are expecting to hear the same old word(s) that rhyme with it. Give them something refreshing and different by using two--syllable or even three--syllable rhyming words. You can create rhyme for the last word of every line in your verse or have the last word of line one rhyme with the last word of line three and the last word of line two rhyme with the last word of line four.



**B**e aware that there are two types of rhyme -- perfect rhyme and imperfect rhyme.

Perfect rhyme would be something like cat / hat / mat. Ball / tall / small / fall.

Imperfect rhyme would be something like fall / unusual, car/spa; ribbon/forgiven.

**A**side from using either perfect or imperfect rhyme, you can also incorporate what is called "in-line rhyming". This is where rhyme happens *within* the line; whether intentional or not. An example of this would be:

***"Smoke Gets In Your Eyes"*** composed by Jerome Kern.

*They asked me how I knew  
my new love was true  
I of course replied  
Something here inside can not be denied*

*They said someday you'll find  
 All who love are blind  
 When your heart's on fire,  
 You must realize smoke gets in your eyes*

*So I chaffed them and I gaily laughed  
 to think they could doubt my love  
 Yet today my love has flown away  
 I am without my love.*

*Now laughing friends deride  
 Tears I can not hide  
 So I smile and say  
 When a lovely flame dies, smoke gets in your eyes*

Looking at the underlined words, you will see how this type of in-line rhyming has worked most effectively. Did the composer purposely intend this to happen? I guess only he knows the answer to that. But, whether intentional or not, it is an excellent example of songwriting at it's best. Simple, elegant, memorable.

Whatever rhyming pattern you choose, or if you choose not to use one, stick with it through your verses and / or chorus. It would be very off-putting and distracting to hear a rhyming pattern in the first verse and never hear it again through the rest of the verses. Keep in mind that rhyming is one of the best ways of remembering words and lyrics. This applies to your choruses as well. Your listeners will remember your rhymes, but they will never forgive you if your rhyming pattern is all over the place.

There are a few good on-line rhyming dictionaries at your disposal. The links below are for two of the better ones. Check them out if ever you are stuck for a rhyme for some of your words:

<http://www.rhymezone.com/>

<http://www.rhymer.com/>

## Avoiding using "That" word



While the word 'that' is grossly overused in the modern vernacular, it is sometimes necessary to use it as a filler word in song lyrics, especially when keeping a particular sentence in time with the beat of your song. Example: "*The flowers you bought me died.*" is the correct way of saying it in regular English. But in order to make the line or sentence in your song coincide with the beat without having an empty space, it is permissible to say "*The flowers **that** you bought me died.*" The way around using the word "that" in the example above would be to fill that space on the beat by extending the word "flowers" -- making it sound like 'flow---ers'. You can fill the otherwise empty spaces on the beat by extending / lengthening other words as well, even when NOT trying to avoid using the word 'that'.

## Tense



As with any written genre, the use of tense in your song is extremely important, especially if you are telling your story sequentially. If your song is about past events, use past tense. If your song is about a current situation, use present tense. Don't combine past and present tense in the same verse because this will confuse the listener and your song won't have continuity if it is jumping between tenses. For example: If your song is about how a girl is currently breaking your heart by what she is doing, then you use present tense. If your song is about a girl who broke your heart a year, a week, a day ago or a minute ago, use past tense. Examples:

*"I loved her but she kept breaking my heart."* You will notice in this sentence that *"loved"* and *"kept"* denotes PAST tense.

*" I love her but she keeps breaking my heart."* In this example *"love"* and *"keeps"* denote PRESENT tense. In the examples above, *"Breaking"* can denote either past or present tense.

Having just told you not to combine your tenses in the same verse, you can, however, combine past and present tense in your song if your story is about a past event or what



someone did to you in the past and how it is affecting you in the present. In order to combine past and present tense effectively, you would be best to use the past tense in your first verse and then use present tense in your second verse. OR use past tense in the first set of four lines in your first verse followed by present tense in the next set of four lines in your first verse, bearing in mind that verses in contemporary music generally consist of two sets of four lines, making them eight lines in total for each verse. By keeping the tenses separate in each verse (or part of each verse as demonstrated above) but still otherwise speaking of a past event (in verse 1, for example) and then speaking of the present situation (in verse 2), you are drawing a clear distinction between past and present (or vice versa). This will create a clear timeline that the listener can easily follow. This is especially important considering that you have approximately three minutes or so to clearly tell your listener everything.

Unless you are specifically wanting to talk about what happened to you in your past and how you are trying to resolve it in the present, you would otherwise use either past or present tense, i.e; one OR the other, but not both. However, if your story transgresses time for past and present, then it is permissible to use both tenses. An example of this would be:

*"You kept breaking my heart before (past event)*

*and I'm not going to let you do that to me again." (present situation)*





## Whose perspective?



The majority of songs are written from the first-person perspective; and for good reason: They make your story more personal when being told from your own viewpoint as the songwriter / protagonist, which, in turn, allows the listener to connect with you emotionally if you talk about how YOU are feeling; what YOU are sensing, and so on. For example: "*I felt the bullet brush my face when she pulled the trigger*" sounds so much more personal and will quickly form a connection with your listener than if you were to say "*He felt the bullet brush his face when she pulled the trigger.*"

Take, for example, the song '*Weekend In New England*' by Randy Edelman which he writes solely from the first person perspective:

*"Last night I waved goodbye*

*now it seems years*  
*I'M back in the city*  
*where nothing is clear*  
*But thoughts of ME holding YOU*  
*are bringing US near"*

Below are the same lyrics written in the third person perspective.

*"Last night HE waved goodbye*  
*now it seems years*  
*HE'S back in the city*  
*where nothing is clear*  
*But thoughts of HIM holding HER*  
*are bring THEM near."*

Comparing the two examples above, it clearly demonstrates that writing from a first person perspective has a lot more emotional impact than when writing from the third person perspective (TPP). It can often be difficult to identify and establish an emotional connection with the lyrics when they are written from the third-person perspective. However, that doesn't necessarily disqualify the use of writing from the TPP: it has been done in a number of successful songs: one example being "*She*" by the Beatles. Despite these successful TPP songs, the majority of songs are written from the first person perspective. TPP songs almost seem to create a barrier between the songwriter and the listener, whereas, first person perspective songs have no barrier because the songwriter is opening up his / her heart and sharing their personal experience directly with you, the listener.

## Create something from something else



An exercise in creative writing is to place a object on a table or hold it in your hand or study it from afar; focusing all your attention and thought on the object and writing what you see in your mind's eye; what you feel. For example, your object might be a spiked wrought iron fence embedded in a sandstone footing. Focusing long enough, you might see it differently. Instead of a spiked wrought iron fence embedded in a sandstone footing, you might see a sword impaled in the head of a dragon. This image might allow you to hear the words of the impaler and the death rattle of the dragon, which, in turn, might transport your imagination to a medieval land of warriors and Kings and dragon slayers; of knights and maidens fair; of your own love for a particular maiden. As your imagination explores this land, these people, you write down all the things you see; all the things you experience: what you smell, what you taste, what you feel and hear. The taming of the dragons. Conversations of betrayal: the plotting of the king's assassination, and much more. You might see something totally different while you are looking at the wrought iron fence. Try to visualize something as resembling something else. These can all be ideas for your songs.

## Summary: Tips for better songwriting



- Study the songs of the great songwriters. Listen to the sophisticated songs of Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and other great songwriters of their time and study how their songs were structured. The same structure and nuances still apply today.
- Read great poetry, prose and literature and study their structure as well. Look at how certain elements are combined to tell a fascinating tale.
- Find out why a particular piece of prose or poetry or song moves you emotionally.
- Begin with a clear idea of what you want your song to be about.
- Write lyrics that are interesting and provocative, and that tell your story differently to how others have told a similar story.
- Create a lyrical and imaginative landscape for your listener to explore.

- Develop themes that resonate.
- Create an emotional connection with your listener.
- Don't be afraid to share your inner most thoughts and write about your own experiences.
- Write in such a manner that your listener is willing to go along with you on your journey as you tell your story.
- Practice your craft and learn how you can improve upon it. Practice and repetition are two factors that will help you become a good songwriter.
- Create tension within your lyrics and between them. Do the same with the melody or instrumentation.
- Create light and shade. Conflict and resolution.
- Make sure that your story is well- structured and has a fluid progression especially if it is a narrative-type song.
- Avoid the overuse of adjectives.
- Avoid clichés.
- Don't bloat your song with too many lyrics. Sometimes less is more. Include only the information that you feel is vital for the telling of your story. Cull the rest.
- Try to make your opening line of Verse 1 the most important line of your song in order to grab the attention of your listener.
- Put your finished song aside for a few days or weeks and return to it with a fresh mindset. You may just see some changes that need to be made to it to make it a much better song than when you first completed it.
- Rewrite, re-write, re-write and re-write your song until it is finely polished and you feel it can't be improved upon it any further.
- If you get writer's block, put your song away for a day or two and come back to it with a clear mind and fresh ideas.
- Become familiar with the different forms of song structure.
- Use the correct tense.
- Try to write from the first person perspective in order to create a better emotional



connection with your listener.

- Use metaphors. They create interest as well as conflict to the norm by saying something differently. But avoid their overuse in your song.
- Avoid writing in an abstract fashion. Also avoid writing lyrics that are too ambiguous. You might understand what you are writing about but your listeners may not.
- Don't become too concerned if you are having difficulty with the rhyming. Check out the on-line rhyming dictionaries mentioned earlier and start exploring the possibilities of new rhymes and the different ways of rhyming. Experiment.
- Don't become disheartened and give up. If you become stuck with trying to write a particular line, or find a rhyme, move on to something else and come back to it later.
- Develop and hone your own style of writing.
- Above all else, have fun with what you are creating.

ENDE

Now that you have read through this tutorial, my hope is that it has helped you become familiar with the songwriting process and will allow you to be bold, confident and enlightened on your songwriting journey. There is a song out there with your name on it just waiting for you to write it.

Good luck! And happy songwriting!

GS

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About the author: Great Scott is a lover of planet Earth and a full-time interpreter: he interprets everything differently to everyone else. Also, he knows absolutely *nothing* about songwriting. :)