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How to Write a Song – A Step-by-Step Guide

Introduction and Welcome

Hi there and thanks for downloading this free tool to help you with your songwriting. Whether you are a beginning writer or a grizzled veteran of this time-honored and beloved craft, I hope that you will find at least a few decent “nuggets” of information in this guide to help you with your songwriting. As you know, writing a song can sometimes present quite the challenge, even for the most sophisticated of writers. Below you will find a step-by-step guide for crafting your latest and greatest masterpiece. Please know that this is only one of many different approaches to writing a song and not the only way to write. Nevertheless, I hope you will find the below process provides at least one clear and organized system to assembling all of the necessary ingredients to craft songs that you like. If you are new to songwriting, this is a great place to start. If you’ve been at it for a while, the below may give you some new insights to help you refine your process or get out of a rut. In any event, I am delighted that you are reading this guide and sincerely hope that you will find value here.

Step-by-Step Guide to Crafting a Song

**Overview*

In this guide you will:

- 1) Select a **song object** to work with (further defined below).
- 2) Approach your song object from a clear **point-of-view**, **tone**, and **writing angle**.
- 3) Write a **hook chorus**
- 4) Establish the **song form** that works best; and
- 5) Flesh it all out by **writing in sections** (verses, bridge, etc).

By the end, you should have a completed song. Let’s get started, shall we?



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Step 1 – Identifying the Song Object

“As far as songwriting, my inspirations came from love, life and death, and viewing other people's situations.” -Ed Sheeran

“All is fair in love and songwriting.” -Norah Jones

“If you pour your life into songs, you want them to be heard. It's a desire to communicate. A deep desire to communicate inspires songwriting.” -Bono (of U2)

Songs are a form of communication. This first step in the process is all about being clear for yourself as to what you want to express and communicate with your song. The goal is to uncover the essence or root of your song, what I like to call your “song object.” I like to use this idea of the object, because it’s more malleable and workable than just deciding what the song is specifically “about.” Think of the song object much like a painter thinks of the subject of his or her painting; that is to say, the object is that which you will capture and frame to the listener with your words and music. The song object can be broad in scope, like a general mood or feeling in your mind (maybe the lyrics don’t make a lot of literal sense, but they invoke a certain feeling or mood). Maybe you’re just feeling edgy or melancholy, or peaceful, etc. Or, the object can be very specific too, like a particular story you will tell from your life, or one you made up. Whatever the case may be, the object, i.e. that which you are presenting to listeners to experience, needs to be clear in to *you*. Your job as the writer is to capture this object and frame it for the listener so that your song communicates that which you intend to communicate, however literal, figurative, plain, or distorted you present the object. As you (or some other singer) sings the song, they need to be able to connect with the song in a way so as to communicate the underlying message of the song.

Ideally, the object of the song arises naturally. It could happen while you’re strumming a few chords on guitar and singing a little melody, or humming a tune in the shower. Maybe you hear a line you hear someone speak while you’re standing in line at the grocery store that makes you feel like writing a song. It’s a very organic process you just need to be ready for when it happens. That is to say, you don’t have to actively sit there and decide on the nature of your song because you already have things burning on your brain, or some feeling that you want to express through your music. For example, if you’ve just fallen in love and you just want to express how you feel, the object of your song - the need to express your love to a particular person - arrives quite naturally as you sit there jotting down lyrics or exploring sounds on your instrument to match the feelings in your brain and body. As Bill Withers put it “[t]o me, songwriting is you sitting around scratching yourself and something crosses your mind.” I love that quote, so funny and totally true. Very important to let ideas arrive, rather than forcing the issue.



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Exercise #1:

Now that you know what I mean by “song object,” see if you can select one for your song. The object can be a song title, a line you heard, a mood you’re feeling based on some chords you’re playing on an instrument. If nothing crosses your mind right this second, don’t worry, that’s normal. You don’t need to force the issue. Maybe over the course of today, carry around a little notepad (or use your phone) to jot down any song ideas/objects that cross your mind as being potentially viable for a song. Personally, I like to use the voice recorder application on my phone to record my ideas as they arise over the course of time.

I’ll leave you with a few example options that are coming into my mind right now and the narrative that I would take on in exploring the objects further. These titles are not great, they’re just options based on what’s passing through my own head right now (literally, as I’m typing out this guide). You’ll have your own ideas based on what’s happening in your own mind. I’ve included song titles; you can do the same if you want. Including the song title is helpful to make the object of the song clearer to you.

**Small Town Tenderness* - I love the feel I get from being in a small town and hanging around the locals. I had breakfast at this little spot called Penny’s All American Cafe in Pismo today, and the vibe was super down home. I’m here on a work trip. The place (and the people) had tons of charm and I took several pictures just to capture the essence of that moment. In the song I would explore those feelings and probably connect them to being a kid visiting my grandparents in a small town. The song title could be the name of the cafe, or that alliterative title of Small Town Tenderness rolls of the tongue.

**Let it Feel Alright* - Life is feeling good right now, finally after a pretty long period of darkness for me. I’m really happy (which is not that common). My hang up now is fearing losing a lot of the wonderful things in my life or that I’m going to blow it somehow (especially with my new lady friend, haha). I would explore these fears and sing some kind of mantra about how it’s alright to feel alright.

**Green is The Color of the Sea* - My girlfriend has beautiful emerald green in her eyes that remind me of the Sea. I’m playing some guitar parts right now that have this droning repetitive quality to them that make me feel really peaceful; it’s this Em9 thing. It makes me feel this connection between the peacefulness of the sea on a lightly cloudy morning and the softness of my lady’s eyes. Maybe a little cheese ball, but whatevs.

Okay, your turn. Can you pick three song objects? You can take your time with this part, and let the ideas arise naturally. But, keep in mind, your ideas don’t need to be perfect. There’s no punishment for jotting down an idea that doesn’t pan out in the end. Just write down some ideas to get yourself going.



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Jot your song objects down on a piece of paper or write them down digitally:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

Here are just a few more tips to get you going in the right direction as you make your song object choices.

You don't need to be perfect. As you pick your topics, just let them be what they are. They don't need to be amazing (mine certainly aren't). We all would love to have assurance that every time we put pen to paper a great song will come of it. The truth is, that's just not the case. Part of being a writer is getting past self-judgment and allowing ideas to flow freely on the regular (daily, weekly, monthly). Some ideas will be amazing, and some ideas will just stink. It's important to get into the habit of just picking an idea, sitting down to write, and getting it all out there. You can pass judgment on your songs as they accumulate one by one; at that point, it will be clear which ones are keepers and which ones don't make the cut. You will improve over time.

Being relatable is nice. Songs are powerful tools for self-expression, so by all means do your thing. Write about any quirky old things that come to mind for you. That being said, if you want people to connect with your songs and share in the experience with you, it's nice if you can tap into topics, feelings, and ideas that affect other people. Some of the major human themes you can explore are those that are shared by many if not all people. These are universally understood common experiences, that allow listeners to identify the with the artist/singer. Effectively, your songs give people the words to describe their own feelings or experiences. Common themes are love, loss, anger, fear, frustration, jealousy, joy, humor, disgust, empathy, admiration, joy, and obviously a whole lot more.

Clarity is powerful communication. Be clear about what you're trying to communicate. Even if it's just trying to express a feeling and the writing is abstract, be clear with yourself as to what you're expressing. This will be important when it comes time to perform the song, so whoever is singing it can connect with the words and melodies. I was recently in a co-writing session with a talented friend of mine, but we kept getting into extremely murky waters with our song. He likes to stream of consciousness write a lot, which is totally cool, but every time our song would take on a direction he would put out more lines that went in completely random places. It was pretty frustrating. I don't like to say no in co-writing sessions, so we ended up writing for hours and hours until we could get to the heart of what we were trying to say. It was exhausting. Do yourself a favor, be clear about what your song is trying to communicate



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as soon as possible. It's okay to ruminate about a little as you determine what you're trying to say, or you can change mid-song if the lyrics are pointing you in another direction, but try to express yourself clearly. Clarity is power and fuel for the imagination. Once your brain knows what it's locking in on, it can explore that area in great vividness and detail. That's not to say you can't be abstract in your presentation of thoughts and words, but the underlying song object (even if it's just a mood) should be clear at least to you as the writer.

Step 2 – Choose the Point of View, Tone, and the Writing Angles You Will Take

Ready for step 2? Awesome, pick your favorite song object. We'll work with that one now and come up with (a) a point of view from which to address the object, (b) an emotional tone/treatment of the object, and (c) some ideas for what angle(s) to take in approaching the object.

For my song, I'm going to work with "Let it Feel Alright" from my song object choices above. I'm liking the complexity of the emotional content there (fear/unhappiness over the sense of losing happiness), so I'll roll with it (plus, it's already got a built in title). What about you? What's the song object of your choice?

Exercise #2

Select the song object you want to work with for the rest of this guide. Jot it down here:

Okay, great. Now let's discuss point-of-view, tone, and writing angle.

Point of view (POV)

The Point of View ("POV") is a critical aspect of songwriting, because it establishes how the singer (whether that's you or someone else) will relate to the object of the song. Most importantly, the POV of the singer establishes the emotional role and story-telling role that the singer has relative to what he or she is singing about. It's very important to consider POV upfront and to be deliberate in your approach, rather than switching POVs throughout the song and making it unclear to the listener how the singer is supposed to relate to the song (which will only confuse the listener).

There are four types of POV, and you'll need to be very careful about switching between POVs within a single song (though it is possible). The POV you choose will also have a direct effect on the emotional and logical effectiveness of your song.



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First Person - this is where the singer is referring to things by framing them in terms of “I”. This places the singer in what most would consider the most vulnerable position. It can be very powerful to frame things this way. For example a lyric that says “I love you deeply” is very strong sounding. On the other hand, overuse of “I” can render your song emotionally over the top and cheesy. For example “He loves you deeply” is not as bold of a statement, and could be received a little better depending on the context of your song, or not.

Second Person - This is where the singer frames everything in terms of “you.” This directs away some of the spotlight relative to the singer, but still typically implicates how the singer relates to the “you.” Be careful of sounding preachy, judgmental, or just plain mean while choosing this POV.

Third Person - This is where the singer is singing about someone else in terms of “she” or “him” or “it.” This POV is great for story telling, and directs the spotlight off of the singer. The pop artist Ben Folds has a great discussion on why he uses this POV a lot in order to avoid being “emotionally lewd.” In his songs, he often chooses imaginary characters that he writes about and expresses his own emotions through the characters.

Third Person, omniscient - This POV places the singer relative to “she” or “he” but in addition the singer has access to all the thoughts and understandings of all the people in the song’s narrative.

In my song, even though the song is about me, I’m going to switch the spotlight around onto a character and write from the Second Person perspective (because I feel overly emotionally lewd if it’s about me). That is to say it will be about how a certain “you” feels. For me, I’m going to imagine I’m consoling a friend at a bar about his fear of losing his lady friend (think “Hey Jude” by the Beatles) How about you? How are you going to address your song object?

Exercise #3:

Just choose a POV that you will use in presenting the song object. In other words, who is the main character in your song? Are you going to be saying “I” this and “I” that, or deflect the spotlight onto someone else? Make a decision upfront now and jot it down:

POV: _____



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Emotional tone

The emotional tone you take relative to your song object is critical in songwriting. When I say emotional tone, I mean how the singer is going to feel relative to the song object he/she is singing about (e.g. angry, sad, in admiration, relaxed, etc). In a song there are only so many minutes to convey a sentiment or idea. It's very difficult to switch how you're expressing yourself emotionally towards the song object during a single song without sounding really bizarre or psychotic. It's typically best to be committed to one emotional tonality and hammer that home to the listener. In my song, I will be "consoling" to my imaginary friend about not giving into his insecurities about being with his new girlfriend. How about you?

Exercise #4:

Write down your emotional tone here.

Emotional Tone _____

Writing Angle(s)

A writing angle refers to all the different approaches you will take to address the object of the song. In other words, you can talk about a single song object in several different ways. As a crude simple example, think of three ways you could describe an apple. You could, for instance, talk about it's shape, you could talk about it's texture and color, and you could talk about it's taste. Think of a spotlight (metaphorically). You can shine the light onto the object from all types of different angles. There may be different emotional angles, different ways to describe the physical characteristics of the object, differences the object has taken over time, etc. For example, you could approach the same object from different points in time; say, like you're talking about a relationship where the first verse is about when you met, the second is when you fell in love, and the third is when you decided this one was forever (or how it all ended tragically). Or maybe you can view the object from different emotional variations; for example you could write a song about being depressed where the first verse is about the way it feels, the second verse is the way others view you, and the third verse is the frustration of not being to shake it off. You can approach a song object in so many ways, you'll have to use your imagination.

For your song, see if you can select three (3) possible angles to approach your object. As an example, for my song I will choose the following (which will become my verses ... more on that later). As you may recall, my song was about consoling a friend who is afraid to lose the good things that have come into his life, especially his lover: (1) I will tell my friend that his worry about losing his woman is unfounded (2) I will tell him that



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it's clear that he's confusing his past with the present, and (3) I will tell him to step into the current situation and embrace this woman's love because he deserves it.

Exercise #5

How about you? What 3 approaches (or more) will you employ to address your object. Write them down:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

Step 3 – Write the Hook

A hook is the part of your song that will stick in people's heads, often located in the chorus. For example, the lyric "free falling" from the Tom Petty hit is the "hook". Must you have a hook? No. But, many songs do and it's part of this approach, so give feel free to give it a shot. This step requires you to start thinking musically and not just lyrically. The hook, for purposes of this method, will connect your song object to a melodic phrase (i.e. a phrase you can sing a tune to). For the lyrical aspect of your hook, you can use a title you've come up with. Like for mine, I think the title will make a nice hook: maybe "It's alright, let it feel alright." Or, you could think of a short phrase that would be relatively easy to set to a melody even if it's not your title. If you're not sure of what this all means, think of these example as hooks (phrases set to strong melodies). Just sing to yourself the quoted titles: "Heard it Through the Grapevine" by Marvin Gaye or "Knocking on Heaven's Door" by Bob Dylan or "Poker Face" by Lady Gaga (you get the idea). It could be a single word too (e.g. "You" from Coldplay's Clocks, "Umbrella" from Beyonce's "Umbrella", etc.).

Tangent (if you're interested) ... A little more on this subject. It should go without saying, but writers sometimes forget that songs are supposed to be sung. Placement of the lead vocal is therefore incredibly important not just because of the content of the lyrics but also to ensure that the song remains musical. Actually, in case you're interested there is a whole career in the industry nowadays of "top-line" writers, whose sole job is to put singable words on top of pre-recorded beats, loops, and musical hooks. I often hear writers doing battle over whether the lyrics should be written first or the music. To me, it doesn't make a difference, so long as some aspect of what the vocals are going to do (i.e. melody or lyrics) is addressed immediately. I don't care if you've crafted the most beautiful poem in the world or written the most epic guitar part of all time: if there is no room in your work for a vocalist to be able to sing, then your concoction has no use to you for purposes of songwriting. The poem could be great for an open mic spoken word,



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but if it is too wordy or rhythmically defunct for use in a song, then there is no use trying to jam your poem (a square peg) into a musical context (a round hole). Same goes for that guitar masterpiece, which might make for a great instrumental recording, but if there's no space among the cascading notes and dense chordal arrangement for the lead vocalist to do his or her thing, then the guitar piece is probably not going to work for purposes of writing a song.

Exercise #6

Write down the lyrics to your hook, and **sing out a melody** you will use to articulate it in song. You don't need an instrument other than your voice for this step (but you can use one too if you want). Again, it doesn't need to be perfect. Just try to make your melody sound like it matched the emotional content of the words you're singing. Don't get in your head about it, use your musical instincts and try to allow what you sing feel authentic emotionally.

Hook: _____

Tip: Make a Recording - you can use your phone, or any kind of recording device or software to record your hook. It's best to record it right away so you don't forget it. It doesn't have to be a fancy recording. You're just documenting your idea.

Step 4 – Develop the Song through Clever Application of Song Form

Okay, so you've got (1) a song object, (2) a point of view, an emotional tone, the three (or more) writing angles that you can take relative to that object, and (3) a hook. If you've made it this far, you're in good shape. The next step is to arrange your material into a "song form", so that the song has some kind of structure. When I say song form this refers to the way to divide the song into sections, some which repeat and others that do not repeat. Having a good grasp on form is important because it gives you a clear outline of what you are trying to do with the song as a whole. Being able to precisely define the form you are choosing is analogous to being able to sketch out an outline of the chapters of a book before writing the book itself.

For this approach, let's select the following form:

Verse - Chorus - Verse - Chorus - Bridge - Chorus - Verse - Chorus

The role of *the verse* is to advance the narrative of your song or shine some new perspective on the object of the song; in our case, to lay out one of the three writing angles we've picked. Recall from above, you selected three different ways to write



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about your song object. In my example, I decided (1) I will tell my friend that his worry about losing his woman is unfounded (2) I will tell him that it's clear that he's confusing his past with the present, and (3) I will tell him to step into the situation and embrace this woman's love because he deserves it. These three sections will be my 3 verses. What will your three verses be about (see Exercise #5)?

The role of *the chorus* is to bring forth in full splendor the hook. Often, the hook is the last line of the chorus, but not always. Your choice here. My hook, as you may recall is the same as the title of the song "Let it Feel Alright" or "It's alright, let it feel alright." What about yours? Make sure you can sing your hook (see Exercise #6).

The bridge is another part of the song that takes into new material musically and lyrically. It's an optional section, but can be a nice addition to a song when used effectively. Its purpose is to draw attention away from the verse and chorus material that the listener has at this later stage of the song become more accustomed to hearing. It's an anti-boredom device to create additional interest within the song before the chorus (and potentially another verse) come back into the forefront. It's like going on a songwriting tangent for a second only to come back to the main hook. In my song, I'm thinking my bridge will have the singer ask his friend a rhetorical question like "what's the point of making yourself miserable over something that you haven't lost."

Exercise #7

Can you think of an interesting slant to your song for a bridge? Take a stab at it and write it down here.

Bridge slant: _____

Exercise #8

Take a moment to arrange your song into a structured view, like this (notice that I've already started to frame the lyric in terms of the POV from the Second Person):

Verse 1

Friend, your worry about losing this woman is unfounded

Chorus

"It's alright, let it feel alright."

Verse 2

It's clear that you're confusing your past pain with the present



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Chorus

“It’s alright, let it feel alright.”

Bridge

“what’s the point of making yourself miserable over something that you haven’t lost”

Chorus

“It’s alright, let it feel alright.”

Verse 3

Step into the situation and embrace this woman’s love because you deserves it

Chorus

“It’s alright, let it feel alright.”

Okay, now you’re turn. Go ahead and lay out your lyrical structure like the example above.

Verse 1

Chorus

Verse 2

Chorus

Bridge

Chorus

Verse 3

Chorus

Step 5 – Flesh out the Verse, Chorus, and Bridge

Okay, you’ve made it to the final stage, congratulations!! Now it’s time to turn your skeletal outline into an actual song. Whoa! You can write starting from the top (i.e. from the first verse down), or, if you’ve never tried this before, try writing the chorus first. Weird, I know. I’m going to write the chorus first for my song, because it will make it much easier when I write the verses to be clear as to the direction each verse takes relative to the chorus/hook. In other words, at the end of every verse I’ll know already what’s about to be said in the chorus so my verses can flow naturally into the chorus.



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You can write the words first, or you can write a melody to sing. Either way. I'm going to write some words that are singable in my head, then set them to a guitar backing part. Your chorus doesn't need a backing part, just the main lyrical lines set to a vocal melody. Also remember the hook is the main feeling/idea of the song, it doesn't need to explain all the details. It's the overall, big picture sentiment you're trying to convey. Like a big pay-off.

Here's my chorus (it's not great, whatever. It's just an example):

Don't get down tonight
She's there by your side
You've seen that look in her eyes
You don't have to hide
It's alright, let it feel alright

Exercise #9

Write your chorus here:

Okay, now let's hammer out those verses (and the bridge). Same deal, they'll need to be set to a singable melody so make sure you can sing the words (whether you're setting the song to a guitar part, piano, drum track, etc, or not). The verses frame the hook from different angles. Each verse will need to lead into the chorus and make the hook take on some kind of meaning/effect (literal or abstract). I'll take a shot with mine:

Verse 1 - **idea** —>Friend, your worry about losing this woman is unfounded

You took her love with a grain of salt
You say you're watching it slowly unfold
In a moment, you've lost it all



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But I can see you're not right at all, friend so

Chorus:

Don't get down tonight
She's there by your side
You've seen that look in her eyes
You don't have to hide
It's alright, let it feel alright

Verse 2 - **idea** —>It's clear that you're confusing your past pain with the present

That frozen flame from your past
Who told you it would always last
And she left you in a puddle all sad
But this girl's nothing but sweet tenderness, so

Chorus:

Don't get down tonight
She's there by your side
You've seen that look in her eyes
You don't have to hide
It's alright, let it feel alright

Bridge - **idea** —> what's the point of making yourself miserable over something that you haven't lost

What's the point of making yourself miserable
When it's clear you're both inseparable

Chorus:

Don't get down tonight
She's there by your side
You've seen that look in her eyes
You don't have to hide
It's alright, let it feel alright

Verse 3 - **idea** —> Step into the situation and embrace this woman's love because you deserves it

Open up your heart to her warm embrace
She'll leave you reeling in so many ways



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You'll find her love staring you in the face
Your pain gives way to this better place, so

Chorus:
Don't get down tonight
She's there by your side
You've seen that look in her eyes
You don't have to hide
It's alright, let it feel alright

Exercise #10

Okay, your turn

Verse 1

Chorus:

Verse 2:



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Chorus:

Bridge:

Verse 3:
