

THE BASICS

HOW TO WRITE A SONG

the beginner's guide

Introduction

You want to write and perform original music. That's great to hear, go for your dreams!

But, you've got one problem, and it's a big problem.

You have a great voice, and a huge imagination, but... you don't know how to write a song, let alone where to start when writing a song.

Don't worry, I've got you covered.

Learning how to write a song can be very easy once you know the basics and use a few useful tricks to help your song stand out from the rest.

In this post we'll go through the basics of songwriting such as lyrics, melody and chords; along with general and additional aspects to consider such as song title, tempo and arrangement.

Contents

What Are The Basics Of Songwriting?	Page 3
The General Aspects Of Songwriting	Page 5
Writing Your Lyrics	Page 8
Chords & Chord Progressions	Page 12
Crafting Your Melody	Page 15
Finishing Touches	Page 19
It's Your Turn	Page 22

What Are The Basics Of Songwriting?

The majority of songs have 3 major parts: lyrics, chords and a melody - vocal, instrumental or both.

Every songwriter has a different approach when it comes to writing music using these 3 major parts, some may start off by writing the lyrics and get down a story as a starting point, others may turn to the music itself and write melodies which later would inspire the story.

The more you write songs, the better you develop a routine or process to write and complete your songs effectively.

Let's briefly look at these 3 major parts, and what they represent.

Lyrics

Your lyrics in a song portray a story, an event or emotion. They can represent anything you desire – from sunbathing on the beach in paradise to feeling lost in a terrifying place.

Your lyrics don't necessarily have to be relatable, but they tend to paint a vivid picture in the listeners head – so they can imagine the beach, they can visualise the palm trees and complete tranquility even if they've never experienced it themselves.

Lyrics tend to be broken down into sections to make it easier for the listener to digest, these are: verse, pre-chorus, chorus, bridge and an intro/outro. Not all of these sections have to be included in your songs.

We'll touch more on lyrics later.

Chords

Chords are not the centre of attention in music, sometimes you won't even realise they're there. However, they provide depth and texture to songs. Sometimes a vocal melody on its own can be thin and slightly boring – and some of us get creeped out by acapellas.

If you play an instrument, or have watched singer-songwriters or acoustic performances on YouTube, you'll find what the musician is playing are chords to the song.

Chords can come in many forms, however beginner musicians and songwriters tend to start off with using basic major and minor chords. These chords are then put together in a sequence, making a chord progression which is repeated throughout the song.

We'll touch more on chords later.

Melody

A melody is what you hear the vocalist sing in terms of their pitch (notes). What notes they sing can impact how the song makes you feel. Sometimes, it's not what the lyrics are, but the notes that are being sung that makes you want to curl up in a ball and cry.

Vocal melodies don't have to be complex, and every person has different capabilities with their voice.

Your melody ties in with your chords, as the notes in each chord you play have to be harmonized with your melody to make it sound ear-pleasing to the listener.

We'll touch more on melodies later.

The General Aspects Of

Songwriting

Let's now turn to the general aspects of songwriting before we head back and learn in detail more on the 3 major parts of songwriting.

Regardless of genre, each song will have a song title, a tempo and a beat. Even if the song is an instrumental piece with no lyrics, you still need these 3.

Song title

Imagine how irritating it would be if every song was called untitled 1, untitled 2, untitled 3 etc. You'd have no idea what each song was without listening to the beginning of each.

There are many ways you can conjure up a song title, here are a few to get you started:

Use the main phrase or word from the chorus

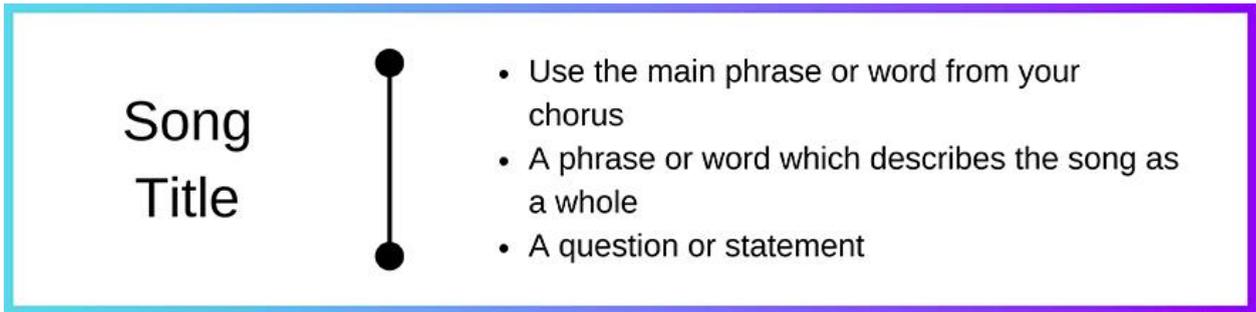
The most common type of song title regardless of genre. E.g. Christina Aguilera – Beautiful. The word 'beautiful' appears several times throughout the chorus.

A phrase or word which describes the song as a whole

This isn't that common especially in mainstream music, but you see it a lot in rock/metal/progressive genres. E.g. Queen – The Bohemian Rhapsody. This phrase isn't mentioned but its meaning is implied in the song lyrics.

A question or statement

Not so common, however it is used on the odd occasion regardless of genre. E.g. Bee Gees – How Deep Is Your Love?



At what point you decide on a song title is up to you. Some think of a song title first, then create the lyrics and melody and so on, and others leave it until last.

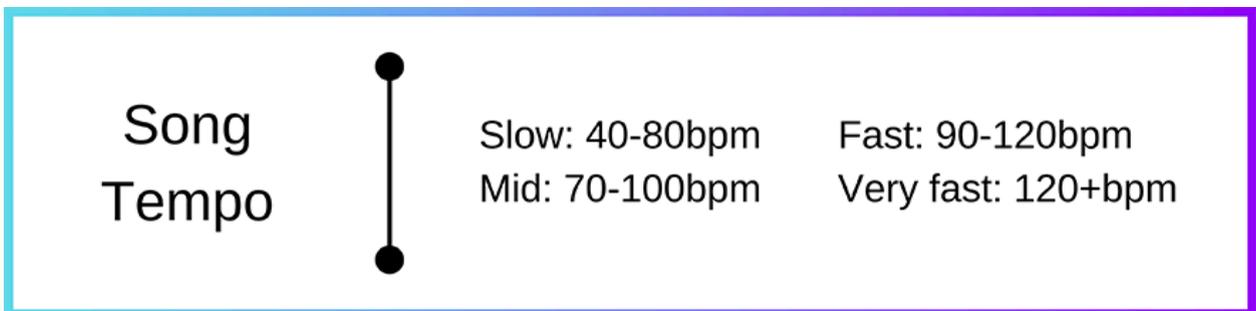
Tempo

The tempo defines how slow or fast the beat is. This is measured in beats per minute (bpm).

A slow tempo can range from 40-80 bpm, mid tempo can range from 70-100 bpm, fast can range from 90-120 bpm and very fast is usually anything 120+bpm.

You decide the tempo of your song. If you want to write a love song, it doesn't have to be slow. If you want to write an angry and frustrated song, it doesn't have to be super fast.

You'll tend to find your tempo once you have your lyrics, a natural pace will form when you vocalise the words.



In Modern music the tempo of a song is usually consistent throughout, however depending on the genre of music you're creating, your tempo can change throughout a song.

The beat (time signature)

Deciding on your time signature isn't something a lot of people tend to think about because unless you're familiar with sheet music notation and theory, you won't know it exists.

Your time signature is basically how your beat is counted. Does the beat feel like 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4... or does it feel more like 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3... etc.

Song
Beat



How is your beat counted?
1-2-3-4-1-2-3-4 or 1-2-3-1-2-3

When you start to vocalise your lyrics and add a melody you'll begin to generate a beat to your song.

Writing Your Lyrics

The lyrics are one of the 3 major parts of creating a song (unless it's an instrumental song).

For some it is the starting point, and it's where they gather their thoughts and try to visualise a scenario in their head and put it down in words.

This is what you want your lyrics to represent; an emotion, an event, a theory, a question etc.

It also doesn't have to be real, it can be complete fiction.

Your lyrics are what other people connect with; they relate to them, they feel what you felt, they understand what you've been through, they come along on this journey with you regardless of where you take them.

So you can see why so many songs out there are based on relationships, love, anger or depression. We can all relate to these emotions, we're human!

However, when you create your song, the lyrics are yours to create. You don't have to focus on what others are writing about. Follow your own imagination. If you want to write about how much you love walking, or an alien invasion, or a person lost at sea; go ahead!

Your song is your piece of Art. You control it!

Your storyline

Before you focus on your lyrics in detail you should always try to brief out a storyline first to give you some direction.

The easiest way to do this is to break down your story into 4 parts:

- Main purpose of your story, this is your focal point – to be used for your chorus.
- 2 different scenarios based on this focal point. It could be 2 different emotions, or 2 different events etc. – one for each verse.
- A revelation or something that changed how the story might end – to be used for your bridge.

Your
Storyline



1. Main purpose of your story (chorus)
2. First scenario (verse 1)
3. Second scenario (verse 2)
4. Revelation or change (bridge)

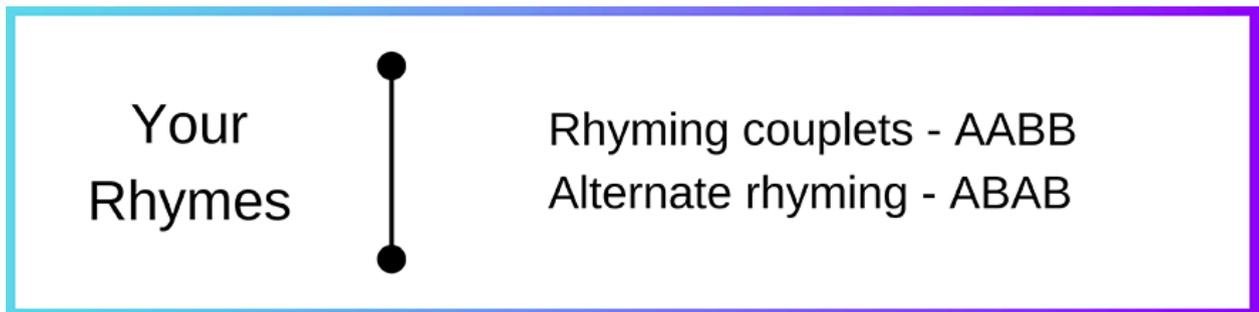
Rhyming

Other than your story, another important aspect of your lyrics to remember is rhyming. Making your lyrics rhyme helps the listener to remember them.

Rhymes can come in a variety of forms but the 2 most common ones are:

- Rhyming couplets – AABB
- Alternate rhyming – ABAB

The A's rhyme with each other, and the B's rhyme with each other.



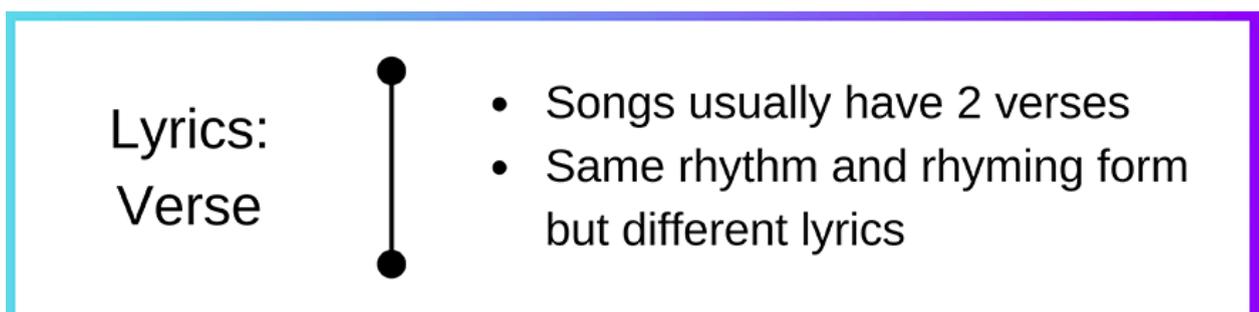
Let's briefly go through the different sections of a song most commonly found:

Verse

Most songs have 2 verses covering between 4-8 lines of lyrics each.

Each verse will usually have the same rhythm and rhyming form, but different lyrics.

In general verses tend to be more rhythmic and active in terms of lyrics, they are used to explain and expand on the main purpose of the song which is covered in the chorus.



Chorus

All songs (99%) have a chorus, this is the focal point of the song and is usually catchy.

It is repeated 2-4 times throughout the song with very few variances each time.

In Modern music, choruses can be anywhere between 2 lines to 8 lines long.

Rhythmically choruses are simple, catchy and repetitive. They also tend to contain the hook of your song.

Lyrics: Chorus		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focal point of the song• In general choruses are rhythmically and lyrically simple, catchy and repetitive
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Pre-chorus

Not all songs have a pre-chorus but they are used to bridge the gap between a verse and a chorus.

A pre-chorus acts as a build up or a quick change in dynamics for a short period of time, as a pre-chorus is usually short with anywhere between 1-4 lines of lyrics.

Lyrics: Pre-Chorus		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Used to bridge the gap between a verse and chorus• Can act as a brief dynamic change
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Bridge (aka Middle 8)

Most songs will have a bridge and it is used in contrast with the verse and chorus, it stands out, it's different. Some songs don't have a bridge and instead may have a 3rd verse, or repeat a pre-chorus in this section.

A bridge is also known as a middle 8 and this is because as standard it takes up 8 bars, so if your beat was 1, 2, 3, 4; you'd repeat this 8 times and that would be the duration of your bridge.

Bridges will rhyme just like verses and choruses, however, if you see any changes to the rhyming schemes used throughout the song it's usually here.

Lyrics: Bridge		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acts in contrast to the verse and chorus• Any drastic changes will usually occur here
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YOUR creative AURA

Intro/Outro

Not all songs have an intro or outro to their songs, some just go straight into the 1st verse. However, having an intro phrase can be effective in preparing the listener for what's to come. Similar to an outro phrase or ending, it can leave the song resolved or open ended.

It could be as simple as starting off with your hook as the opener, or a part of your chorus, or something completely different but relevant to the context of the song.

Lyrics: Intro/Outro



- Prepare the listener for what's to come
- Leave the song resolved or open ended
- Use your hook or part of your chorus

Note: If you need a few tips on how to write better lyrics, check out [11 Songwriting Tips To Help You Write Better Lyrics](#).

Chords & Chord Progressions

Having a chord progression is the final part of our major 3 in creating a song.

If someone is more musical than lyrical, they'll usually start off a song by creating a chord progression.

A chord progression is a series of chords played in a sequence. The majority of songs in Modern music use 3-5 chords. However, the amount you want to use is down to you, but remember that your melody has to tie in with your chord progression.

Chords are selected from a given scale, however this isn't always the case especially in progressive or classical music because they tend to change scale, change tempo... change everything really!

Note: Check out my [Basic Music Theory: The Complete Beginner's Guide](#) as we go through how to create major and minor chords, along with common chord progressions.

If you're a beginner, the first thing you'll need to do before you start crafting your chord progression is figure out which scale your song is in, or planning to be in. Then quickly Google chords in that scale, and you should find 7 chords: 3 major chords, 3 minor chords and a diminished chord.

For example, if I quickly Google 'chords in A minor' I'll find the following chords: A minor, B diminished, C major, D minor, E minor, F major and G major.

Here are a few things you need to consider when creating your chord progression:

- Do I want the same chord progression throughout the entire song?
- Am I creating a chord progression based on a major or minor key?
- Should I stick to basic major and minor chords?
- Should I use a common chord progression formula?

Chord
Progressions



- Do I want the same chord progression?
- Major or minor focused chord progression?
- Should I use a common chord progression formula?

1. Do I want the same chord progression throughout the entire song?

You can focus on just one chord progression for your entire song, however usually you have one progression for the verse and a slight variation for the chorus.

So, if your song is in A minor your chord progressions could be:

- Am – F – Dm – Em (i-VI-iv-v) – for both verses
- Am – Em – F – Dm (i-v-VI-iv) – for the chorus

Once you have your chord progression, then you have the layout to create your vocal melody. This makes creating your vocal melody a lot easier because you know the limitations of what notes you can potentially use in each section.

2. Am I creating a chord progression based on a major or minor key?

Your chord progression will be based on your scale from your melody.

If you've written your vocal melody first, you would have chosen a specific scale to work from. For your vocal melody and chords to be harmonically sound you'd need to use chords from that given scale.

If you've chosen C major as your scale, then your chords will be based off this scale. If you've chosen Db minor as your scale, then your chords will be based off this scale. If you've chosen a major scale, you'll favour major chords; and if you've chosen a minor scale, you'll favour minor chords.

Sometimes it's difficult to show if you've written a song in a major or minor scale, because of relative scales (scales that have the same notes).

An example would be C major and A minor, both which contain the notes: C D E F G A B. This is usually overcome by starting off your chord progression with the first chord in the scale, for example to show you're in C major, you'd most likely start off playing the C major chord.

3. Should I stick to basic major and minor chords?

Using basic major and minor chords are the easiest way to create your chord progression if you're a beginner.

There is nothing wrong with being basic, because if you're a beginner you need to start somewhere. And going straight into the deep end isn't the right thing to do when crafting a chord progression because if you overcomplicate it, it can leave you feeling overwhelmed and confused.

I started off using basic major and minor chords, and I still create songs with them today.

Chords add texture and depth to a song, there is usually less room for expression here, which is why we have melodies and harmonies in songs.

Once you've created several songs using these 2 types of chords, you can if you wish venture onto other chords in your progression such as suspended, added, inversions, 5th, 9th etc.

But you'll need to understand that different chord types can have unusual sounds, and some may not be necessary to use.

For example A minor contains the notes A C E. If start to implement inversions we change the rotation of the notes, therefore a 1st inversion would be C E A and a 2nd inversion would be E A C. As we go throughout the inversions the sound the chord makes becomes more bright and unstable. If this is the emotion you require, then use it, otherwise stick to A minor.

4. Should I use a common chord progression formula?

If this is your very first song or you're a beginner then stick to a common chord progression formula.

These are:

- I-VI-iv-V (1-6-4-5)
- I-V-VI-iv (1-5-6-4)
- I-iv-V (1-4-5)

Chord Progressions



- I-VI-iv-V (1-6-4-5)
- I-V-VI-iv (1-5-6-4)
- I-iv-V (1-4-5)

Remember, the chord you should focus on the most will be your tonic chord. Therefore, if your song is in A minor, the chord A minor should be referred to a lot.

Crafting Your Melody

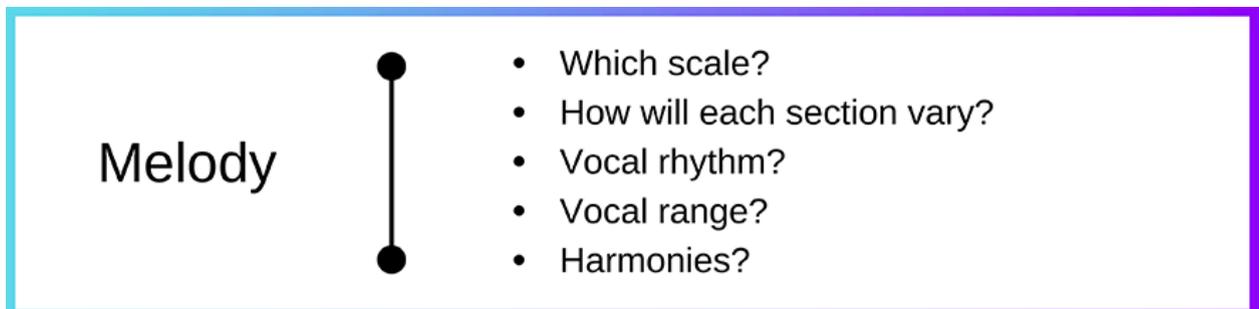
The melody is also part of our major 3 in creating a song.

It is probably the least used starting point when writing a song, but we're all different and we tend to begin where our skills are the strongest. So if you're a melodic genius, start here if you like.

Note: It is worth noting that familiarising yourself with the basics of music theory is highly beneficial for creating a melody. Check out my post [Basic Music Theory: The Complete Beginner's Guide](#).

Before you begin crafting your melody there are a few questions you'll need to answer first:

- What scale shall I be creating the melody from?
- How do I want each section of the song to vary from each other?
- How many melodic phrases shall I craft?
- What will be the rhythm of my vocals?
- What will be my base and extended vocal range in the song?
- Will I need to add harmonies to certain phrases or sections?



It's a lot to consider initially, but going through these will help the process of designing your melody a lot easier.

Let me quickly explain each one:

1. What scale?

If this is your first song or if you're a beginner, choosing a major or minor (natural) scale is best. Major scales are generally happy, and minor scales are generally sad. Depending on your main emotion, pick which one would suit your song best. Once you've picked your scale, make a note of the notes in the scale as these you'll use for your melody.

2. How shall I vary each section?

Listeners need to know the difference between your verse and chorus. This is usually done by focusing on different notes for each section. Your verse may be lower in pitch, whereas your chorus is higher.

For example in G major your verses may focus on notes A3-E4, and your chorus may focus on F#4-C5. By doing this the listener can distinctively tell that each part is different.

However, you can also vary each section by the dynamics you use in your voice, or your vocal register. So you may focus on the same notes in both your verse and chorus, but if you sing your verses quietly and softly, then sing your chorus with power and strength, then each section will impact the listener differently.

3. Melodic phrases?

These are a group of notes forming a musical idea within your melody. Each lyric line will usually be its own phrase following its rhyming pattern. If you're using rhyming alternates ABAB, then you'll usually have a melodic phrase for A and a different one for B.

For example your verse could be ABAB, and your chorus could be CDCD. This means that your verse and chorus have completely different melodic phrases – in total you'd have 4 melodic phrases to create. If you've written lyrics first, your melodic phrases are usually determined by your rhymes.

Here's an example:

- ❖ *A - Blown the dust off these shelves*
- ❖ *B - Crazy how the wicked can dissolve time*
- ❖ *C - Battered and bruised*
- ❖ *C - Alone now unused*
- ❖ *D - Pretending like everything's fine.*
- ❖ **Ancient Ruins – Nicola Bleu**

How this song is structured in terms of syllables, an ABAB format of melodic phrases wouldn't work. For this song it's format is ABCCD, which is then repeated for the second half of the verse.

4. Vocal rhythm?

Vocalise your words out loud and you'll tend to find a natural speaking rhythm. Your rhythms will also be repetitive too and will usually match your melodic phrases. Therefore, your phrases for A will be rhythmically the same, and B's will be rhythmically the same.

5. Vocal range?

A part that sometimes gets overlooked unless you understand the capability of your own voice. Most Modern music tends to stay within an octave to an octave and a half; G3-C5. Be

aware of the strongest part of your range and where you are weaker. Don't focus on the 5th octave if you struggle to sing in that region.

6. Harmonies?

Once you've completed the foundations to your song you may consider adding harmonies to certain phrases to enhance the impact on the listener. Go through your song and see where you can add in harmonies.

There is a plus side though, each verse usually has the same melody, just different lyrics and a chorus melody can also be generated from the rhythm of the verse but with different notes; giving the listener a sense of familiarity.

You should spend more time perfecting your chorus melody though, as it's the part of the song everyone will remember and sing along to.

Here are a few pointers on crafting your melodies:

- Make your verses more rhythmical to add groove and momentum.
- Repeat melodic phrases, and repeat rhythmic patterns throughout your song to create familiarity to the listener. It will help them remember your songs.
- The melody of your chorus should focus on a different set of notes compared to your verse to create a contrast.
- Make sure your melody ties in with your chords otherwise your song will sound unpleasant.

Note: If you need more tips on how to craft the perfect melody, check out [11 Songwriting Tips To Help You Craft The Perfect Melody](#).

Finishing Touches

Right, we've covered the major 3 parts of a song and some general stuff. Now for some finishing touches you may need to consider:

Arrangement

How do you want your song to be arranged?

This can be from the standpoint of your lyrics, your melody and other instruments.

Once you have all the components to your song, you'll then start to piece it together like a puzzle.

This part of the process is where you assess all your work and make edits.

Perhaps your verse to chorus rhythm doesn't quite fit therefore a melodic interlude or pre-chorus is needed.

Perhaps your chorus doesn't really pack the punch melodically compared to the verses.

<p>Finishing Touches: Arrangement</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Edit and review your work• Do your lyrics work?• Does your song structure work?
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Here are the most common song arrangements:

- Verse – chorus – verse – chorus – bridge – chorus
- Verse – pre chorus – chorus – verse – pre chorus – chorus – bridge – chorus
- Chorus – verse – chorus – verse – chorus – bridge – chorus
- Verse – pre chorus – chorus – verse – chorus – bridge – pre chorus – chorus

Different arrangements can impact the listener differently.

Riffs/motifs/licks/interludes

If you plan on creating heavily guitar based music then crafting a riff is usually a must.

Get your listeners instantly recognizing its you just by that 4 bar riff. You may not be into Metallica, but I think we can all recognize the intro to 'Enter Sandman.'

Or perhaps you want to create a solo. You can design your solo by transitioning through a variety of funky licks you know.

Sometimes we have a few bars between verses and choruses but we don't really desire adding additional lyrics, what can we do?

We can fill in the blank spaces with a melodic interlude, as it's useful at keeping the listeners attention especially if they've got to wait 10 secs until the next section begins.

Finishing Touches: Riffs/Motifs	● ●	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you need a riff?• Do you need a melodic interlude?• Are there any blank spaces you need to fill?
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Or you might want to create a motif, a short musical phrase as an iconic part of the song that really stands out. I'm sure we all would recognize the main motif in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

All these 4 musical ideas you may need to consider for your song!

Additional instruments

If you plan on writing singer-songwriter type music where it's just you singing and strumming chords then you probably won't consider the use of any other instruments in your song.

However, if you plan to focus on rock, electronic, hip-hop, r'n'b etc. You'll need to consider instruments such as drums, bass guitar, pads, synths, percussion, brass and strings etc.

Finishing Touches: Instruments	● ●	Consider the following: Guitar, bass, drums, piano, synths, percussion, brass and strings instruments
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If you play additional instruments then that's awesome, if not, you can find free and paid samples to add to your song.

Or even better, team up with those who are familiar with these instruments and collaborate!

Recording/producing

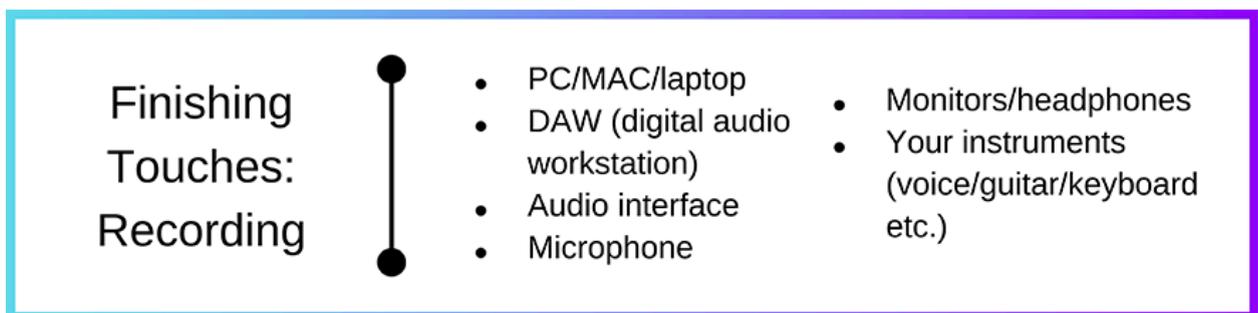
This final touch isn't really essential to writing a song, but if you want to take your song to the next level and take on the World, knowing how to record and produce your music is a big must!

There are an endless amount of options I could write here in terms of gear, processes, and literature about recording and producing music, but I'm not a professional producer.

However, buying gear to make your own home studio has never been more cost effective.

You can achieve so much with a super basic setup:

- PC/MAC/laptop
- DAW (digital audio workstation)
- Audio interface
- Microphone
- Monitors/headphones
- Your instruments (voice/keyboard/guitar etc), if you have any...



If you're really on a budget, you can buy bundles such as the Focusrite Scarlett Solo Studio for less than £200. It includes a DAW (Pro Tools), an audio interface, a condenser microphone with cable and headphones. Great if you're a beginner as you can set it up easily and record straight away!

If you don't play an instrument or want to focus on electronic music then Native Instruments have an awesome collection of free samples and plugins including samples of drums, piano, guitar, synths and much more.

It's Your Turn

There we have it!

All the songwriting basics you need to know when you want to start writing a song.

Now it's your turn to go ahead and write some amazing music, I hope this post has been beneficial to you.

Good luck, and get creative!

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