

# Songwriting Lessons

Get Started. Build Your Skill. Stay Inspired.



Written by Dylan Laine

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# The Basics

# What Makes A Song?

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The definition of the word “song,” is a short set of words set to music, with the intention of being sung. If the music is instrumental, or, without words, it is more commonly referred to as a “work,” “composition,” or “piece.” For now, I’m going to focus specifically on the different components of a song. **A song is made up of 5 components: melody, lyrics, rhythm, harmony, and form.** If you are a songwriter, studying each of these essential to growing in your skill as a songwriter.

**Melody** is the part of a song that we hum along to. When we hum, the notes that are coming out of our mouth are forming the melody. **The definition of melody is a line of single notes, sounds, or pitches.** If you sing words, rather than hum, you are simply adding lyrics to the melody. A melody is responsible for being memorable, catchy, and pleasing to the ear.

**Lyrics** are the words of a song. You can have a melody without lyrics, but you can’t have lyrics without a melody. Even in a rap song, where the lyrics are more spoken than they are sung, there is still a pitch attached to each word spoken. In fact, even as I’m talking right now, there is a melody to the words coming out of my mouth - it’s just not a very memorable one. **Lyrics are responsible for telling a story, keeping the listener engaged and for conveying emotion.**

**Rhythm** is measured motion in a song, demonstrated through different note (or rest) lengths. In every song, there will be various rhythms. The melody will have a rhythm, the instrument you’re playing will have a separate rhythm, and the lyrics will have the same rhythm as the melody, since they are combined together. **Rhythm is responsible for moving the song forward.**

**Harmony** is the combination of two or more pitches in a song. While there are often vocal harmonies in a song, I am currently referring to the harmonies played by an accompanying instrument such as the ukulele. When the ukulele plays a series of chords in a song, it is essentially providing the song’s harmony. **A harmony is responsible for providing a foundation of pitches that the melody can be sung over.**

**Form** is the map of your song. The song's form, or map, is made up of different sections, and the sections are what we know as verses, choruses, and bridge. *The form is responsible for providing structure and organization to a song.*

Now that you have a better understanding of the components that make up a song, you can apply this knowledge to your own songwriting. If you enjoy writing your own music, I encourage you to spend time learning more in depth about each of these five components. I've created several videos that break these components down in more depth. If you are reading this on the computer, click the following links:

# What Is A Song Form?

Songwriting Sheet by Dylan Laine / Related Video: <https://youtu.be/oUJUJukP5Q4>

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**A song form is a map of your song.** A song form, or map, is made up of different sections. These sections are what we know as verse, chorus, and bridge. So putting that all together, a song form is a map of the verses, choruses, and bridge within your song, and essentially tells you the route, or order, in which the song sections are played.

**Here are a few examples where the term “song form” can be used in a sentence:**

Example 1: The song form in Good Good Father by Chris Tomlin is

verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus.

Example 2: Today I asked my band leader, “*What’s the song form of the new song we’re working on today?*” She replied, “*The song form is AABA.*”

Example 3: If you’re planning on writing a song, it’s helpful to decide which song form you would like to use ahead of time.

**Digging deeper into the map metaphor, envision your home on the map.** Now, think of your home as the chorus. Think of school as verse one, an after school activity (such as sports) as verse two, and a vacation destination as the bridge. Starting from school, your route would be: school, home, sports, home, and eventually vacation, then back home. If you replace those destinations with song sections, the route would be verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus.

When describing song form, the terms “verse, chorus, and bridge” are often replaced with letters “A, B, and C.” **Typically, “verse” is given the letter A, “chorus” is given the letter B, and “bridge” is given the letter C.** So rather than saying “Good Good Father’s song form is verse, chorus, verse, chorus bridge chorus,” we would say “Good Good Father’s song form is ABABCB.”

The song form ABABCB, or verse chorus verse chorus bridge chorus, is the most commonly used song form in today's popular music. There are, however, other song forms to choose from. For example, in the song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” the song form is AABA. All of the A sections start off with “Somewhere over the rainbow,” and the B section starts off with “Someday I'll wish upon a star.” If you are just starting out with songwriting, **I would recommend writing a few songs with the song form ABABCB.** After you're comfortable with this song form, experiment with others!

# What Is A Rhyme Scheme?

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**A rhyme scheme is a pattern of rhymes at the end of each line in a poem or song.**

If two lines rhyme with one another in poem or song, they are given the same letter, such as “A.” If the following line does not rhyme, it maybe be given a new letter, such as “B.” And then, any line ending with a word that rhymes with line “B”, will be given the letter “B” as well. Let’s look at some song examples to deepen our understanding.

In the song “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” the first sentence is “Twinkle twinkle little star.” The second sentence is “How I wonder what you are.” **The last word of the first sentence “Star”, rhymes with the last word of the second sentence “Are.” So we will label both line one and line two with the letter, “A.”** The third line is, “Up above the world so high.” The ending word of line 3 is “high,” which does not rhyme with “star” and “are.” Therefore, we will label line three with the letter, “B.” The fourth line is “Twinkle twinkle little star.” The ending word of line 4 ends with “star” which rhymes with lines one and two. So we can label line 4 with the letter, “A.” And line 5 is “How I wonder what you are.” As you probably have learned by now, line 5 will be labeled with the letter, “A.” **Therefore, our rhyme scheme for “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” is going to be AABBAA.**

Let’s look at the popular hymn “Amazing Grace.” Line One: Amazing grace how sweet the sound, Line Two: That saved a wretch like me, Line Three: I once was lost but now I’m found, Line Four: Was blind but now I see. You can see that lines one and three rhyme with one another. So we will label these lines with the letter “A.” And you can see that lines two and four rhyme with one another, so we will label these lines with the letter “B.” **Therefore, the rhyme scheme for Amazing Grace is ABAB.**

Now that you have a better understanding of rhyme schemes, I want to talk about why rhyme schemes are important in songwriting. I’ve been asked many times by my songwriting students, “Do I have to rhyme in this song?” And while i would never force anyone to rhyme in their songs, I do always strongly encourage it. Here’s why: Listeners crave rhymes. **Rhymes create a sense of stability and familiarity within a song.** Often times, people will have a much easier time remembering your lyrics if there are rhymes within them. And I would say that if you choose not to rhyme within your song, do it with a very specific intention. Maybe in your bridge, you want to create a sense of

instability as you express an anxious emotion. If that's the case, make a choice not to rhyme within that section. But be aware that choosing to rhyme or not rhyme will help dictate a certain emotion and feeling within your listener.

As you start to apply rhyme schemes to your own songs, start consciously listening for rhyme schemes within the songs you listen to. ***You'll notice that some of the most popular rhyme schemes used today are ABAB and AABB.***

An example of what a popular songs rhyme scheme might look like is:

Verse one: AABB

Chorus: ABAB

Verse two: AABB

Chorus: ABAB

Bridge: AA

Chorus: ABAB

I would recommend keeping the same rhyme scheme in your verses. When you get to the chorus, I think it would work nicely to either stick with the same rhyme scheme as your verses, or, to use a new one. The same goes for your bridge. I really only recommend using identical rhyme schemes in the verses due to the fact that they are similar sections to one another, and it's best to keep their formats as close as possible.

# What Is A Chord Progression?

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Whether you're a songwriter, or a musician learning new songs, it's very helpful to understand what a chord progression is, and how it applies to the songs you're learning or writing. **A chord progression is the path or order of chords in a song.** If you are unfamiliar with what a chord is, a chord is a combination of 3 or more notes. For example, the C chord is made up of C E and G. The G chord is made up of G B and D. There is no rule as to the number of chords needed to make a chord progression, although it is common in popular music today to hear 4 chords in a chord progression.

Let's look at the chord progressions within the song "Oceans" by Hillsong United. The chord progression for the verse in "Oceans" is Am C G F. Then that chord progression repeats one more time before going on to the chorus. **Often you will find that there will be a new or different chord progression in each section of a song**, such as the verse, bridge, and chorus. Looking at "Oceans" again, the chord progression for the verse is Am C G F. Then moving on to the chorus, the chord progression is F C G G. That chord progression repeats several times. And then in the bridge, the chord progression is Am F C G. This chord progression also repeats several times.

Understanding chord progressions, and studying chord progressions in the music you listen to, will help you to create chord progressions of your own when you begin writing music. The more I've studied chord progressions, the more I've realized how **the way in which I order my chords can play a vital role in how my listeners will be able to distinguish each new section of my song.** One effective way to writing a chord progression in a way that sets your verse, chorus, and bridge apart, is by starting each new section with a different chord than the previous section started off with.

For example, **if my verse chord progression starts with a F, I might consider starting the chorus chord progression off with C, and the bridge chord progression with Am.** In a recent song I wrote called "Tear My Walls Down," my verse chord progression is F C G Am. My chorus chord progression is C Am F G. And my bridge chord progression is Am F C G. Each section of my song uses the same four chords, yet starts off on a different chord than the previous section. **This is a very simple but effective method to writing chord progressions in a way that help your listeners discern between each new section of your song.**

# What Is A Time Signature?

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