

# THE PERILS OF PERFECTIONISM

BY ALEX FORBES

*Of course you only want to share your best songs with the world, but when it comes to creativity, perfection can be the enemy of progress. Use this experiential worksheet to take your foot off the brakes and kick your writing into high gear.*



We all strive for excellence in our creative endeavors, and most of us are going for it 100%, every minute of every day. Even when we're failing miserably, it's still the best we can do at that particular moment — it's just that for some bloody reason it's not working.

This natural tendency towards perfectionism can get out of control, though, and interrupt the flow of our best ideas. When we experience an “aha! moment” — and feel the sudden urge to capture it in the form of music or lyrics — our need to Do It Right, Right Now can become our biggest stumbling block. Sound familiar?

## How To Tell If You're A Perfectionist

Over the years I've discovered a few warning signs that, indeed, the ugly side of perfectionism is rearing up its ugly head. Check the boxes that apply to your own creative process (at its worst):

- I feel like I'm drowning in a gigantic pile of incomplete works-in-progress
- Everyone's heard that I'm a songwriter, but no one's actually heard my songs lately
- I envision doomsday scenarios if I ever DO reveal what I've been working on
- Whenever I start writing, my critical inner voice rips each line to shreds
- I spend ridiculous amounts of time “polishing” until I lose all perspective

If you checked most or all of those boxes, read on.

## The Perfect Cure For Perfectionism

Indeed, there is a pathway out of this maze of self-doubt. I know because I've lived it, and have coached hundreds of others through it. My loving shorthand for this approach is “Dare To Suck.” Or

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for those with more delicate sensibilities, “Dare To Fail.”

Huh!?

Let’s face it, a perfectionist’s worst fear is that their work will bite the big one. Publicly. But here’s the thing: until you reach the gates of heaven, or whatever your personal version of that blessed moment is, the vast majority of your work WILL, in fact, adhere to the 90/10 Rule — in favor of sheer dreck. We’re talkin’ stanky here.

But (and this is a Big But) unless you’re willing to trudge through all that Bad Writing, you’ll never arrive at that blissful destination called Great Writing. It seems obvious enough. The hard part is actually ALLOWING yourself to wallow, unashamed, in the mud of mediocrity. And that’s not just a passing phase... it’s an ongoing, essential part of the creative process itself.

Here are some ways to bypass your perfectionist streak, and get that nasty 90% out of your system, so that you can generate more great stuff:

### **1. While Writing Songs, Shoot For Quantity Over Quality**

Turn down the voice of your inner critic, however loud or insistent, and start filling page after page with whatever pops out. Blather on and on. The more the merrier. And here’s the key: don’t delete or cross out ANYTHING. That probably sounds impossible, but I guarantee that if you write a lot, when you go back later (and make sure it definitely IS later) some of it will inevitably rise above the rest and tug at your heartstrings. (I delve into this process in more detail elsewhere, since it really is the key to success.)

### **2. Seek Out Safe People & Avoid Toxic Ones**

A lot of us are frantically doing our best to please those Less-Than-Supportive people in our lives who dole out plenty of “helpful” advice, even if they’ve never written anything more emotionally resonant than a grocery list. What’s truly helpful for writers’ progress is a heavy dose of unconditional encouragement as we discover what it is we have to say, and put it into words. So start surrounding yourself with friends, colleagues and family members who are consistently in your corner, no matter what. And yes, they’re out there!

### **3. Invent Some Hard Deadlines**

Having lunch with a friend, or even three? Use that meet-up as an excuse to share your latest and greatest songs. Is there an open mic, a party, or a writing contest that’ll provide the opportunity to dip a toe in? Or if you’d rather do it from the comfort of home, howzabout joining an online community? Personally, I find the threat of public humiliation a rather bracing motivational tool, and fill my days with a wide variety of collaborations, meetings, and feedback loops. Just don’t fall into the trap of isolating in front of your computer like a zombie for months on end. (I know, it’s so tempting.)

### **4. Rummage Through Your Archives**

This is best approached as a one-time exercise, designed to rid yourself of the Ghosts

Of Writings Past. Pick through the ol' scrap heap and see what, if anything, still screams out for your attention. MAYBE there's something in that that slimmed-down stack that'll serve as a jumping-off point for your brand-new work. Afterwards I challenge you to relegate whatever doesn't pass the smell test to the physical or virtual attic, where it's sole purpose until the End Times is to gather cobwebs. Because as wondrous as they were when you wrote them, these creations can now be viewed, respectfully, as mere steppingstones on the path to greatness.

### **5. Seek Out Coaches, Mentors and/or Teachers**

This is one of my personal favorites, since I would never have achieved diddly without the support of my own coaches, mentors and teachers. It's also the surest way to put your writing on the fast track. The moment you open up to the mere possibility of building an effective support structure, your team members miraculously start appearing. Like in the movie *Field of Dreams*, if you build it, they will come. And for my money, there's nothing more powerful than the company of like-minded souls to nudge you out of your comfort zone — and into the miraculously IMPERFECT real world!

I know, I know... you're terribly busy, but the beauty part is this: all five of the tasks on this list can be completed in ONE DAY if you put your mind to it. After all, how long does it take to blurt out a page of what-might-possibly-be-lousy writing? No time at all! And creating a firm deadline — you can do that in the time it takes to type a text.

The only thing that's stopping you is that pesky perfectionism. Do your soul a favor and kiss that part of your brain goodbye, at least temporarily.



# Song Dynamics: Are You Creating a Roller Coaster Or a Freight Train?



by Alex Forbes for [CreativeSongwriter.com](http://CreativeSongwriter.com)

## “Suck ‘em In, Build ‘em Up, Pay em Off!”

In my years as a professional songwriter, I’ve noticed that it’s almost always the most dynamic, thrill-ride-type songs that become the most successful. Why? I think it’s because all of us, even listeners who’ve “heard it all before,” want to be moved, emotionally, spiritually and physically. We want to be transformed for the better, preferably in the next 3 minutes. And our bodies, minds and hearts respond most strongly to well crafted lead-ups and payoffs, dramatic highs and lows, and unexpected twists and turns.

Sure, a little bit of predictability is fine — in fact it’s rather comforting — but to be effective a great song has to deliver some real punch, too. If you want to create “singles” rather than “album cuts,” consciously strive to keep your listeners’ blood pumping.

So, how can you increase your song’s “thrill factor”? What follows are descriptions of several tricks of the trade that will enhance the dynamics of your song. For the sake of brevity, let’s assume you’re writing a song in the classic Verse/Chorus form. Many of these guidelines apply equally to AAA and AABA songs as well, but by definition both of these simpler forms lack the sustained adrenaline rush that a full Chorus provides. And besides, 95% of the new songs out there making a buck are written in the Verse/Chorus form.

## Part I: Creating Powerful Lyrical Dynamics

### The First 60 Seconds of the Ride

A skilled lyricist has dozens of tools available to magnify a song’s dynamic peaks and valleys. Starting with the first few lines of Verse 1, your purpose is to “suck ‘em in” and “build ‘em up.” I compare this to the part of the roller coaster ride where you pull away from the platform, then start inching up the first steep incline. In your song, this is where you set the scene, quickly establishing a bit of the Who, What, When, Where and Why. How can you make your listeners sit up, fasten their seat belts and hold onto their hats? Consider these elements:

- **The speaker’s point of view or perspective.** Is he or she angry, euphoric, defiant, yearning, wise? A strong point of view is much more compelling than a wishy-washy one. Therefore, dare to take a courageous stand that’s clear and palpable from the very first lines. No pussyfooting about.
- **The speaker/listener relationship.** Who’s speaking to whom? Am “I” addressing “you,” are

“we” addressing a larger “you,” or is the singer speaking in the third person about “them”? Make the strongest possible choice that suits your original spark of inspiration. Also, let us know right off the bat what it is about the nature of this particular relationship that makes it remotely interesting. What’s in it for us, as listeners?

- **The tone and mood.** Is your song’s tone formal, slangy, conversational, arty? Is the mood you’re evoking edgy, soothing, romantic, anthemic... or something else entirely? Again, don’t hold back! Wimpy is much less likely to hold anyone’s attention than bold, so take some risks.
- **Reveal who YOU are.** This is often the most challenging aspect of songwriting — that it requires that you actually delve beneath all cliches, all of your fondest influences, in fact, the rest of the known world, and “show us some leg.” The best songs lay their writers’ uhhh, hindquarters, on the line, proudly and unreservedly. Are you willing to do the same?
- **The song’s organizing principle.** Is it a story song, a “laundry list” song, a novelty song, a “state of being” song? Do your first few lines establish your song’s essential nature? Does each successive line add momentum and deepen listeners’ curiosity?
- **Your use of literary devices.** Have you used **repetition, imagery, alliteration, metaphor, wordplay, symbols, humor** and more to enhance and amplify your meaning? A great lyric doesn’t just plod along, it makes your case in the most colorful, exciting way, like a star defense lawyer presenting an opening statement to the jury. Force us to see it, feel it, taste it, touch it... you know the drill.
- **Rhythm, rhyme and meter.** Have you made the most of the rhythms and sounds inherent in our great language, using vowel and consonant, accents and metric patterns to enhance your meaning? Experiment with a variety of line lengths to force your melodies into unpredictable shapes. Definitely tend towards rhyme schemes that are NOT a-a-b-b or a-b-c-b, intentionally tossing in lines that don’t rhyme at all, or that rhyme within the line instead of just at the end. Avoid those same-old-same-old boxy, patterns that we’ve all heard way too many times.

Form-wise, you’ll generally start off with a single Verse, an A-Verse and a B-Verse, or a Verse followed by a Pre-Chorus. No matter which structure you choose, by less than a minute into your song listeners should know where the singer stands, what’s going on, and why they should care. People’s attention spans are notoriously short (and getting shorter!) so keep it lean and meaningful, editing out any excess verbiage.

Well-constructed Verses create what I call “the inevitability of the Chorus.” They’re brimming with tension, unanswered questions, and heightened expectations. Ideally, your listeners are invested in the outcome, sitting on the edge of their proverbial seats, yearning for the moment when you “pay ‘em off” with your Chorus.

### “Ahhh, the Payoff at Last!”

A great Chorus delivers a breathtaking thrill of intense gratification. After the lead-up of a well-written Verse, the Chorus feels inevitable, yet not predictable. Weigh these elements of your Chorus, to see if it’s got the goods:

- **Clarity of your song's message.** Your moment of truth has arrived, so don't squander it. Work to discover the strongest possible way to convey your song's deepest conviction. To continue the roller coaster metaphor, make this first peak moment steep enough and dramatic enough to take their breath away.
- **The song's Hook.** Have you condensed the essence of your song into a diamond-like nugget of lyrical truth? Does it effectively provoke thought, emotion, laughter, or spiritual uplift? A great Hook unifies the mind, the body, and the heart in one really short, sharp shock of recognition. It's like universal shorthand, capturing a uniquely human experience in a few brief words.
- **The level of "stickiness."** Is your Chorus like gum on your shoe? Is the lyric singable and simple, pithy without being ponderous? Ask yourself, "Does my Chorus, and especially my Hook, contain enough substance to bear repeating?" Because a killer Chorus will be repeated endlessly through the ages!
- **Level of contrast with the Verse.** As the Country song says, "How can I miss you if you won't go away?" Bend over backwards to amplify the contrast between your songs' sections, using different rhythms and rhyme schemes, lyrical densities and line lengths, patterns and styles of repetition, types of sentences (declarative, narrative, questions, commands), etc. Otherwise your listeners will get that sinking "been there, done that" feeling.

### **"What Next?!" Vs. "So What?"**

After this initial peak moment, the energy level will usually ease up somewhat in Verse 2, but give your listeners lots of reasons not to wander off. This is equivalent to the part of the roller coaster ride after that first big drop when you catch your breath and pick up speed for the next hill. Keep your song's momentum going strong by advancing the story, upping the ante, and otherwise deepening people's insight into the situation you're exploring. As one music business person put it, your listeners are either going to be saying, "What next?!" or "So what?" I know which one I'd prefer...

Whether or not to write a Bridge, which will traditionally appear after your second Chorus, is a common dilemma. The purpose of a Bridge, lyrically, is to provide one last zinger — a final insight, twist, revelation, or perhaps another memorable sub-hook. So if you're going to go for it, create a very different pattern and shape from what came before. If you feel you've already said all there is to say, try taking a snippet of your earlier lyric and repeating it as a chant, breaking down the instrumentation that surrounds it, or letting the singer cut loose on it.

Whatever you do, the Bridge needs to provide enough contrast to the second Chorus to maximize the impact of the Out-Chorus when it comes back in. It's that part of the roller coaster ride where you suddenly go upside down, or take an unexpected sharp left, just before you go flying over the last few hills and come flying in to a stop.

## **Part II: Creating Melodic Dynamics**

### **Building a Marriage That Cannot Be Torn Asunder**

If the purpose of your song is to sear a fresh idea indelibly into the hearts and souls of your listeners,

a killer melody has the power to really make it stick. Whereas your lyrical lines hit people above the neck, the right lyric married up with the right melody hits 'em more in the gut. It's this one-two punch that gives songwriting the potential to move people to laugh, cry, dance, act and feel.

For my money, the best melodies, like the best lyrics, are the most manipulative ones — and I mean that in the most positive sense of the word. A successful melody unfolds like a great short story, packing a lot of action into a brief span of time, and delivering a valuable realization by the end. So the question becomes this: how can you “suck 'em in, build 'em up and pay 'em off” most effectively with your melody, alone and as it works in combination with your lyric.

For the sake of simplicity, let's imagine that you already have a near-completed lyric in a Verse/Chorus form, and are experimenting with finding the best melody for it. The first step is to dive deeply into your lyric, letting it permeate your innards. Then turn on your recording device, quick!

- **Let the lyric tell you what it wants.** Is it begging to be a soaring ballad, an edgy rock track, or maybe a groove-oriented dance or R&B song? Every spark of inspiration has, at its core, a strong identity, and our job as songwriters is to honor and serve that unique expression.
- **Speak the lyrics out loud.** I know it feels silly, but this is a great way to notice where the natural accents, pauses and internal rhythms occur. Try underlining words, circling rhymes, and putting accents on the page to indicate strong accents or rhythmic patterns. Indicate which lines might bear repeating.
- **Which do you write first, the Chorus or the Verse?** Either... just start somewhere! The key to writing better melodies is writing lots of melodies, and the more risks you take, the more likely you are to hit upon a melody that marries up perfectly with your lyric. So try 100 ideas on for size, knowing that soon you'll narrow it down to the best ones. Trust that you'll have an
- **Establish “home base” right off the bat.** Use your first few notes to carve out some melodic territory, i.e. what key you're in, and what scales or families of notes you're choosing from. Let the lyrics point you in the right direction, but don't be afraid to play against expectations by putting a “happy” lyrical line against the notes of a minor chord, for example.
- **Play with contrasting melodic shapes.** Many of us get one great melodic or rhythmical idea, then repeat it *ad nauseum* for the entire 3 minutes of our song. Instead, mix it up, using longer and shorter phrases, more complex and simpler passages, wordier and sparser patterns. Also, don't start every single line of every section either before, on or after the downbeat. Notice that most hits vary this type of patterning over the course of the song.
- **Experiment with new methods of melody-writing.** Many of us automatically pick up a guitar or sit down at a keyboard to write, but the trick is to not fall into your usual melodic or chordal ruts, or historically well-worn patterns. Bust out of your comfort zone by writing *a capella*, limiting yourself to a single finger, and/or co-writing with someone who has different strengths. Or pick up a new instrument! (Kazoo, anyone?)

In terms of thematic development, the moment you string a few notes together you'll usually be off

and running. Once you've found a melody that suits the meaning and rhythmic/rhyme schemes of your first few lines, the question becomes this: How can you keep the ride exciting, unpredictable and yet still accessible? How can you build on what you've started, eventually bringing your song to a climactic, emotional payoff?

The trick is to use enough repetition to make your melody catchy, while adding enough "new information" to keep it from becoming boring. If there's too much new information, listeners will just tune out, overwhelmed. So it becomes a balancing act, and your instincts really come into play. The mind and the body both love repetitive patterns, so it's a matter of making up a stimulating variety of patterns, and arranging them in the most satisfying order.

Also, contrast is key. As with your lyrical sections, make each melodic section distinct, or people will feel that they're treading water. Here are some ways to juice up your melody:

- **Seek out the best melodic marriage for each line.** Don't settle for a melody that simply "reads" your lyric as if it's a grocery list. Instead, use your melody to wring meaning out of every syllable, every silence, every rhythmic nuance in each line. What unexplored opportunities is your lyric giving you? Don't settle for the first melody that pops out of your mouth... unless it's absolutely knocking your socks off.
- **Decide what's most important, and emphasize it.** Use every trick in the book to drive home your main points. Make your best line or your Hook stand out by using a killer high note, a rhythmic jolt, a surge of repetition, an unexpected melodic twist, or all of the above!
- **Create drama using tension, release and resolution.** Once you've established your musical "home base," use your Verse melody, and the Pre-Chorus if you have one, to ratchet up the tension, which you'll finally release in your Chorus. Don't give away the store too soon.
- **Use melodic range for effect.** For example, place your Verse melody lower in the singer's register, with closer intervals, saving the "money note" for the Chorus. On a similar note (as it were), vary the melodic intervals you use. For example, your Verses might use closer intervals, whereas your Chorus might take bolder, larger leaps up or down.
- **Vary your note lengths and rests.** Don't get into a rut of making each syllable last 1 beat, for example. And give listeners ample time to absorb new melodic information by inserting a "pause that refreshes." These are also great spots to insert instrumental riffs and hooks. As you did with your lyric, make sure your melody keeps listeners on the edge of their seats wondering what will happen next.

I could go on, but "writing about music is like dancing about architecture," as someone once said.

Finally, keep in mind that all the craft and polish in the world won't make up for the absence of "heart" and inspiration! So keep digging inside for those gems, and then go to town!

# WRITE SONGS THE MUSIC INDUSTRY WANTS TO HEAR!

by Alex Forbes for [CreativeSongwriter.com](http://CreativeSongwriter.com)



***Sure, "art for art's sake" is cool... but what if you're pursuing a career as a songwriter? Here are some ways you can tailor your songs to suit the requirements of music business professionals.***

Many of us bemoan the state of commercial music today, but what are you doing to improve things in your own microcosmic corner of the universe? Are you working to create the next wave of great material — songs that have a lifespan of more than a few weeks or months? How can you use your talents to actually make a powerful contribution... and make a living while you're at it?

The first step is to take a good look inside and explore what you as a unique individual have to say, lyrically and musically. What do you think about, believe in, stand for? What makes you tick? These precious truths that bubble up from the soul provide the driving force behind great songwriting. These sparks of inspiration, these "aha! moments," are what listeners crave when they play a song. They're also what People Behind Desks are desperate to find. Do you have the courage to lay bare your personal truth in public? I firmly believe that's what it takes to achieve success with your songs.

The cynical among us will say, "no, you just need the right equipment, a catchy hook and a whole lot of money behind you." Sure, those things help, but if you're trying to break into the business your song has to simultaneously grab people by the guts, tickle their ears, and slam them over the head like a 2-by-4. Strive to write songs that take risks, tap into the universal via the personal, and motivate people to laugh, cry, feel, dance or take action.

Make an effort to innovate, not imitate what's already out there. In other words, write your passion. Songs miraculously translate to listeners the exact emotion you felt while you were writing them. Do your best to work that magic!

Another quality that professionals look for in a song is strong dynamic flow. Skillful use of the many conventions of songwriting can manipulate listeners in the most enjoyable way. Don't be afraid to push those emotional buttons! Here are some ways to go about it:

- **Suck listeners in with lyrical, melodic and chordal tension.**
- **Create a question in their minds: how will this turn out in the end?**
- **Throw their bodies off balance with chords or melodies that are unexpected or quirky.**
- **Take a strong point of view that's boldly provocative.**
- **Paint a vivid picture in the mind's eye.**
- **Set a palpable mood.**
- **Construct an entire sonic and/or lyrical environment.**

Once you have piqued people's interest, crank up their involvement using all the techniques in your lyrical toolbox,

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# BREAK OUT OF YOUR BOX

## 25 Ways to Expand Your Songwriting Creativity

by Alex Forbes for [CreativeSongwriter.com](http://CreativeSongwriter.com)

**Do you ever get stuck in a songwriting rut? Hit the wall? Want to throw your guitar, piano and/or collaborator out the window? Me too.**

Here's a handy list of proven techniques that can bust you out of your habitual patterns and spice up your writing life. Experiment with any or all of them to keep your songwriting fresh.

**1 Write a song on an instrument you don't ordinarily play.** We often get into predictable, familiar patterns on our own instruments. Our fingers just naturally "go there." Or alternately, try writing with no instrument at all, just a recording device. You'll be amazed at what comes out.

**2 Whichever aspect of a song comes first, do it last instead.** If you usually write from a lyric, try starting with a drumbeat, a chord pattern, or a melodic hook. Likewise, if you usually start from the musical end, shake it up and contemplate a blank sheet of paper. Or do both simultaneously.

**3 Try collaborating, or if you already co-write, seek out new partners.** It's great to collaborate with people whose strengths supplement your weaknesses, but you can learn something new working with anyone. Abandon your preconceived notions about who's "right," and just write!

**4 Invest in home recording gear.** These days, it's really inexpensive to build a rudimentary home studio, and you'll exponentially magnify your possibilities as a songwriter. Don't worry that you're not a brilliant engineer (yet). You can always bring a song elsewhere when it's ready for a final version.

**5 Expand your support system, starting with your contact list.** You probably know dozens of people connected to music, it's just that you never considered them as part of your team. Declare out loud that you're committed to being a songwriter, you'll start to attract others like a magnet.

**6 Create lots of deadlines.** Sign up for open mics, book a gig, make a date to co-write with someone. There's nothing better than the threat of public humiliation to provide motivation!

**7 Put your old songs in cold storage.** Give yourself a fresh start by burying those dinosaurs and writing what's true for you NOW. New songs provide a jolt of energy and are far more open to rewrites.

**8 Write through whatever's blocking you.** When you're up against a brick wall, write about that experience instead of faking it. The best songs emerge from being "in the moment," and if what you're in is deep frustration, go with it. Vent freely and fully, and eventually the block will melt away.

**9 Put yourself in a strong character's shoes.** Find a great book, film or play and write from someone else's perspective. This is excellent practice in writing for other artists, or in expanding your vision of yourself as an artist.

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**10** **Go to a museum, explore Nature, visit a different culture.** Fall madly in love, or mourn its loss. We all need to “fill the well” so that we have a broad palette of meaningful experiences to write about. Open yourself up emotionally to new things. Explore the unknown and get re-inspired.

**11** **Go online and research artists who don't write their own songs.** Or imagine that any artist you enjoy is looking for their next big hit. (They probably are!) As you write, picture your song coming out of their mouth. What universal truth can you imagine them expressing for you?

**12** **Set a timer for 10 minutes and write with no holds barred.** Write your absolute truth RIGHT NOW, no editing, no crossing out, no stopping, never taking your pen off the page. You can go back afterwards and engage your left brain — your critical mind — later on. Get used to fearlessly unleashing “the real you.”

**13** **Interview a co-writer, performer, friend or family member.** Ask them about something that's truly important to them, then listen hard and write down what they say verbatim. Go back and extract the essence of what they said, and any great lines. Powerful, unusual songs can come out of this exercise.

**14** **Try a brainstorming technique.** One method is to write a word, subject, phrase or title that holds meaning for you in the center of a page. Then circle it. Now free-associate anything, no matter how crazy or seemingly random, that is sparked by that idea. Write each idea in its own circle, expanding out in an array of interconnected shapes. This breaks you out of “linear thinking.” Go back and note any rhymes, images, sounds or connections that might spark a song in you.

**15** **Carry a notebook and/or recording device at all times.** You might be inspired by the rhythm of a train, a scrap of overheard conversation, the way the moon looks through the trees, or a headline in the newspaper. It's all good. If inspiration strikes and you're empty-handed, just sing it into your smartphone!

**16** **Participate in music, to the hilt.** Take a class, go to music biz events, start your own songwriting support group, find a mentor. Get lots of practice giving and receiving constructive criticism on your work. It forces you to grow, and loosens your attachment to any one song.

**17** **Read a lot!** Novels, poetry, lyrics, blogs, newspapers, non-fiction. Deepen your appreciation of the incredible possibilities of language. Notice how other writers create drama, capture detail, and evoke whole environments

using only words. Learn the proper terminology for literary devices and techniques, and have them at your fingertips.

**18** **Listen a lot!** To all kinds of music. You can glean knowledge and inspiration from material you would never write yourself. We are bathed in music, from the radio to the supermarket to the web to our own collections. We just have to pay attention to what it's teaching us.

**19** **Ask yourself, “Why is this particular song a hit?”** It may not be to your taste, but there is almost always a reason (besides money and power) why a certain song is chosen as a single. What elements of its melody, lyric, arrangement, production and/or performance make it stand out above others in its genre?

**20** **Less can be more.** Can you pare down your song and get your message across with fewer lyrics, fewer melody notes, fewer chords, or more sonic “space”? Some of the greatest songs are also the simplest. Let the listener's imagination fill in the blanks.

**21** **Delve into the scariest, deepest recesses of your soul.** Our raw, vulnerable emotional “hot spots” can enrich our songwriting with the most compelling human truths. What moves you, in your heart of hearts? If you're brave enough to go there, you're probably speaking for many others who wish they could.

**22** **Go easy on yourself.** Writing is risky. Have compassion for yourself when you “hit the wall” in your writing process. Even the greatest talents don't hit a home run every time they go to bat. Rest assured that your muse will reappear in good time. In the meantime, take a nap, have a great conversation, eat... live!

**23** **Dare to suck.** In other words, allow yourself to fail miserably, privately and in public. Just go for it. No one was ever flogged to death for writing a bad song, at least not lately. What's the worst that can happen — sheer humiliation, right? You'll live. Make what you have to express more important than how it's received.

**24** **Think of each song as a steppingstone.** Don't make any single song the “be all and end all” of your songwriting career. Let each song, each creative process, stand on the shoulders of the ones that came before it. Even when a “song start” is abandoned along the way, some part of it might be salvaged for a future effort. Or maybe not. As they say, “Don't worry, we'll make more!”

**25** **Finally, appreciate the process more than the result.** In this business, it can be years before you get paid for a particular song, if ever. Meanwhile, your life is lived in the now. Might as well enjoy the ride!

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## SO, YOU WANT TO



## COLLABORATE?

by Alex Forbes for [CreativeSongwriter.com](http://CreativeSongwriter.com)

**Congratulations!** Collaborating is one of the most rewarding and productive activities a songwriter can engage in. It's also one of the most challenging. Co-writing will stretch you in ways you can't even imagine up front.

Take a look at the *Billboard* Singles charts, and you'll notice that the vast majority of hit songs were written by 2 or more writers. Why? Because many songwriters have discovered that the collaborative whole is far greater than the sum of the solo-writing parts. We're all human, with strong suits we can capitalize on, as well as weaknesses we can supplement with the strengths of others.

Many artists find that writing alone year after year is limiting. The jack-of-all-trades approach may produce flashes of brilliance, but solo writers often find themselves stuck in a rut.

If you're feeling the urge to merge with other talent, first take a hard look at yourself as a songwriter from an objective standpoint. Picture your next co-writing appointment as a potluck — what will you bring to the party?

- **Are you passionate, enthusiastic, hard-working, and fun?**
- **Are you willing to commit time, energy, money, and your heart to the worthy cause of making great music?**
- **Do you have unique talents and powerful things to say in your songs?**
- **Are you willing to give and listen to constructive feedback?**
- **Are you familiar with the ground rules and terminology of your chosen field?**

and, most importantly:

- **Have you generated a body of work that shows off your strong suits as a writer?**



## BE LIKE A MAGNET

How can you attract quality co-writers? First of all, let's face it, most successful, talented writers aren't looking to pull *you* up by the bootstraps. However, many will want to collaborate if it looks like they'll get something of value from the partnership. Therefore your job is to create material that other writers think will contribute to their success.

And keep in mind that most people to want to work with partners who have achieved a comparable level of development. I can't expect Serena Williams to invite me over to play some tennis, or Tiger Woods to challenge me to a round of golf, until I work on my game just a wee bit more. Why should songwriting be any different?

Make it your goal to become a collaborator magnet. This means getting your contributions into the best possible shape before you walk in the door.

You will inevitably be judged by the actual goods you lay on the table. And if you're honest you'll admit you're weighing your potential collaborators the same way. This is as it should be. Look with an objective eye over your body of work thus far.

**Do you have:**

- **Neatly typed lyrics, laid out in identifiable song form?**
- **Best versions of instrumental tracks, melodies, hooks and/or riffs?**
- **Lists of possible titles?**
- **A few potential "song starts?"**
- **Any finished songs professionally demoed?**

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These are the “calling cards” you will present to other songwriters and artists. You want to hone them rigorously so you can show them proudly, secure in their value — not apologizing, cringing, or making excuses for their shortcomings. Isn't that the standard of quality you'd expect in return?

You “pay your dues” by polishing up your talents, your diamonds, to a bright sheen. Eventually, if you take your own gifts seriously, word will spread that you have something valuable to offer. This process is sometimes called “eating your way up the musical food chain.” It doesn't happen overnight. There are no “quick fixes,” as in any field of endeavor.



## “YA GOTTA KISSA LOTTA FROGS”

Participation is the key. Join up, play out, take risks... basically, you have to lay your talent, your heart and your soul on the line!

No one comes knocking on your door out of the blue, begging you to co-write. You have to make a concerted, consistent effort to create writing relationships from scratch.

In fact, I've noticed that collaborating is very much like... dating!

- **Some collaborations are flings: good for a few tunes, but not for the long run.**
- **Some are nightmares: you want to run screaming in the opposite direction.**
- **Some are unrequited: you feel the urge, but your partner doesn't.**
- **And luckily, some are magical: you stick with them for a long while, maybe even forever.**

And yes, it can be heartbreaking. But I guarantee you'll feel fully alive! There's never a dull moment in this quest because you and your co-writer aspire to the high calling of creating great art together.

You just have to keep writing, re-writing and putting it out there, trusting that eventually you'll attract like-minded souls. So where exactly are these like-minded souls hiding?

A few days of research can provide you with a wealth of

opportunities. Here are some paths that have produced results for me, and I've collaborated with at least a hundred other writers since 1983:

- **Take a songwriting class**
- **Find a teacher, or better yet, a mentor**
- **Start a local songwriting support group**
- **Hire or start a band, even if it's only for a limited number of gigs**
- **Join a Performing Rights Organization (ASCAP, BMI, or SESAC in the U.S.)**
- **Check out programs offered by music business organizations (The Songwriters Hall of Fame, The Recording Academy, Women In Music, Nashville Songwriters Association, etc.)**
- **Join the various online songwriting communities — just Google it!**
- **Check local publications and listings for showcases, classified ads & open mics**
- **Search the Internet for performers in your vein of music**
- **Go to local music stores and check their bulletin boards, or put up your own sign**
- **Post a free ad on Craigslist.com**
- **Read or subscribe to music business publications**

You're only limited by your imagination and your level of commitment.

In summary, there's no such thing as a free lunch, but there is a delicious feast available if you're willing to tap the well of your own talents. How's that for a mixed metaphor?

Finally, I suggest people delve fearlessly into their deeper selves when they write songs. Listeners can always tell when you're being truthful and real.

In a nutshell:

- **Write your truth, and write a LOT.**
- **Dare to write gawd-awful songs in the quest for the brilliant ones.**
- **Create a support team that will hold you to higher standards.**
- **Develop your strengths and supplement your weaknesses as a writer, player, singer and engineer.**
- **Read the books, do the exercises, subscribe to the publications... know your field!**
- **Participate to the hilt, creating relationships with a variety of potential partners.**

Together let's raise the level of songs in the world, so that these become the good old days of music again!

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i.e. rhyme, meter, imagery, metaphor, alliteration... you name it. Avoid clichés like the plague, or turn them on their heads somehow. Experiment until you find the melody lines that best show off your lyrics, and vice versa. Salt your song with enough repetition to make it memorable, but not so much that it becomes predictable. Use chord progressions that are fresh, stimulating the ear rather than lulling it into complacency.

When it comes time for the ultimate payoff, your Hook, don't settle! This is your Money Shot, and most music biz pros will hit the "eject" button if they don't hear a strong hook in one listen. One listen! Here are a few ways to enhance your hook:

- **Construct your song so that all roads, lyrically and melodically, lead to your hook.**
- **"Don't bore us, get to the chorus!"**
- **More hooks is merrier! Instrumental riffs, backups, rhythmical chord movement, and verse melodies can provide secondary hooks.**
- **Fear not repetition (up to a point, of course).**

- **Throw in memorable "monkey wrench" words that stand out.**
- **Make sure the world can sing along.**
- **Play with the language: use slang, twists of phrase, even invent a new word!**

Finally, People Behind Desks really appreciate it if you know your marketplace. Don't bring them a country ballad when their artist is a heavy metal guitar-shredder. And if you're the performer, make sure you have at least 3 crowd-pleasing, radio-ready songs in hand. Make a detailed study of the hits in your chosen genres, and incorporate those lessons into your work. The Internet has made it incredibly easy to educate yourself about what's selling these days, so there's no excuse for ignorance.

Look at the world for a moment from the perspective of a music industry pro: They'll respond positively if they think your song will save their job. By bringing them dynamic, single-worthy, heartfelt material you'll be well on your way to doing just that, and creating a career for yourself as well. Happy songwriting!

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# 5 INSANELY GREAT SONGWRITING TOOLS

(and they're all gloriously FREE or ridiculously CHEAP!)



by Alex Forbes for [CreativeSongwriter.com](http://CreativeSongwriter.com)

*As a professional songwriter for 30 years, there are certain digital tools that have become indispensable to me. Check out a few, and start wasting approximately ZERO minutes when inspiration strikes during your next rapid-fire writing session. Don't hesitate... go for it!*

## Tool #1: [OneLook.com](http://OneLook.com)

This site is my absolute favorite discovery. The landing page looks deceptively simple, masking the awesome power of its database.

Let's say you're writing a lyric, and the concept is that your ex treated you like dirt. But the word "dirt" doesn't sing well. You just put magical formula in (in this case, a colon followed by the word "dirt"), and BOOM — up pop 243 words related to dirt — great for nudging you out of that tight spot you're stuck in! Plus you can search for words that start or end with a specific word, have a similar underlying concept, etc. Amazing!



## Tool #2: [B-Rhymes.com](http://B-Rhymes.com)

I LOVE this site and app, use them all the time. The extensive lists of slant/off/near/partial/imperfect rhymes would do Cole Porter proud — except wait... he preferred perfect rhymes. Simply type in the word you want to sort of rhyme with, and voila: a gazillion B-rhymes that venture farther and farther from the original word.



## Tool #3: [OpenMikes.org](http://OpenMikes.org)

So many of us songwriters chain ourselves to a computer or submit our material to faceless websites, missing out on the opportunity to strut our latest stuff in front of living, breathing humans. Nothing compares to the thrill of performing your song for an audience... even an audience consisting of two drunks and a bored bartender. Signing up for an open mic also forces you to practice your songs relentlessly or risk utter humiliation, creating a powerful incentive. Enter your zip code in this database and see what opportunities lurk in your neighborhood. Then invite all your friends and have a blast. Much more fun than Karaoke, right?



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[www.CreativeSongwriter.com](http://www.CreativeSongwriter.com)

#### **Tool #4: iTalk Recorder Premium** (\$1.99)

Your smartphone probably came with a voice memo app, but believe me, this one ROCKS. I've been using it religiously for years thanks to a few key features.

For one thing, you can set iTalk to Record your session with one simple click the minute you open the app, which is ultra-handly when you have a burning idea that might disappear on the next stiff breeze. Secondly, it's super-easy to label a rough take of your latest masterpiece, then email copies to yourself and everyone else who needs one.

Thirdly, you can pair the smartphone with the desktop app, and wirelessly transfer larger (or multiple) files to your computer in a snap — handy if you've recorded a 3-hour writing session and need to search through it for a particularly tasty idea. Finally, you can set the level of quality, allowing you to limit file size. Never lose another minute of inspiration!



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#### **Tool #5: GuitarToolkit** (\$2.99)

I pretty much use this app every day — and it's NOT just for guitarists! Along with a super-accurate tuner, it's got a tap-tempo metronome, a chord-identifier and a library of a gazillion, chords, scales and arpeggios. There are even chord charts of some songs packed in there, though I've never used it for that.



I saw some reports of users being spammed by ads, but this has never been my experience, so maybe those folks have their settings wrong, or work for competing app companies, haha. I give it 10 stars outta 5.

There ya have it! If you want more songwriter-friendly freebies, visit my site,  
[CreativeSongwriter.com](http://CreativeSongwriter.com)

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