

Christian Songwriting



What comes first, the Words or the Music? Well, that depends on the direction of the Wind...!

Below is a starting method for you, Words (Lyrics) first, then Music. If you get an idea for some music first, just start there. Some people write words & music together. Some write words, then hand them to a musician to get the chords. Songwriting is 10% inspiration, and 90% perspiration. It doesn't matter how great, or how reverend, you feel your idea is, you still need to present it to the music team, and the congregation, in a palatable musical way.

LYRICS

METER

Words have a natural rhythm, or pulse. When we construct lines of words with a similar pulse, we get 'lyrics'... something that is 'singable'. Let's look at some lines of lyrics with different kinds of beat. To do this, just separate their syllables:

> > > > > > >

Dan-iel said the Li-on snor-ing kept him up all night. **This line has a meter of 2 (there is a strong beat every 2 syllables)**

> > > >

No, I don't like fish said Jo-nah to God. **This line has a meter of 3**

> > > >

Mo-ses gave a migh-ty shout and said we need a drink-ing foun-tain. **This line has a meter of 4**

We do our best to find words that maintain the rhythm, so each line will sing properly. If you really want a word that doesn't quite fit the meter, it's ok, sometimes you can just sing it, chewing the word a bit. Don't make it a habit, as it doesn't sound that great (Songwriters call this **deadwood**). Good singable lyrics just roll off your tongue when you say them.

Speak your lyric out loud. If it feels awkward to say, it will feel awkward to sing.

RHYME (REPEATING SOUNDS)

Why Rhyme? Sounds that repeat, are pleasant to hear, when they come back (it is familiar, and it generates appeal).

You can '**Perfect Rhyme**'... *and little did he know, he was standing on her toe.*

The most common, but it can become a little childish-sounding, particularly done every two lines (rhyming couplets). You can get more balance by perfect-rhyming lines 1 and 3, then 2 and 4.

Professional Songwriters are big fans of '**Alliteration**' as the method to get repeating sounds. This allows you to splash repeating vowel and consonant sounds midway along lines, not just on the ends. It really brings elegance to lyrics.

...for who has sight so keen and strong, to follow the flight of song?

Perfect Rhyme endings, plus Alliteration (splashes of repeating 's' and 'f').

You can also '**Half Rhyme**'... *the taxi stopped, the driver wept.*

Instead of using vowel sounds, here we use consonants... the sound 'p' and 't' bind the two lines.

This is sophisticated to the ear, but the repeating sound, though subtle, is still apparent and useful if you're trying to soften a song that already has a lot of perfect rhyme.

Some lyrics don't have any rhyming structure at all. These tend to be more heart-felt songs than congregational sing-along songs.

Good rhyme adds musicality, but forced rhymes weaken the lyrical flow.

Use occasional half rhymes (time / mind, stay / pain) to break a rhyme pattern when it starts becoming predictable.

Also, break a rhyme pattern when you want emphasis on a line.

LYRICAL CONTENT

Good lyrics aren't just words — they're emotional architecture.

Every strong lyric is built around one clear emotional idea.

If your song were a message to someone, what would it say... in one sentence?

Choose a perspective (angle) and stick to it.

1st person: (I) personal, confessional.

2nd person: (You) direct, confrontational or intimate.

3rd person: (He) storytelling, observational.

Many good Christian songs are ruined by switching perspectives. One moment you're singing I, I, I, and the next thing there are You's and We's, which immediately robs any intimacy the lyrics were creating. You can switch person, but only if it's not distracting.

Use Repetition (repetition is how listeners remember... *it helps it sink in*). Repeat key phrases.

Use your verses to explore details, while the chorus anchors the message.

Verses = story. Chorus = purpose. Bridge = clear the air for a moment, then return.

Great lyrics come from rewriting, and rewriting, not from inspiration alone.

Free-write (brainstorm) for 5 minutes. Highlight the strongest lines. Build the song around those.

Cut anything that doesn't serve the core truth. If a line only exists because it rhymes (but it's weak), then rewrite it!

Every now and then, you need to look at your lyrics and think... if I had to say that something was still 'deadwood', it would be this, or that. Songwriters have to learn to be completely honest with themselves... or their creations will suffer.

Be emotionally specific. Listeners connect to details, only when they feel them.

"On Thursdays, I only use the color Orange in my Bible" might not be something that a lot of the congregation can connect with.

***There are no concrete rules, just make sure the lyrics flow out of your mouth,
Centre on a single theme, and have one perspective...!***

MUSIC

What comes first, the Melody or the Chords? Well, you can forget the direction of the Wind!

If you already have an idea about the melody, you have already influenced the pending chord progression greatly. Melody notes come out of the chords that accompany them. It's going to be a case of the chords chasing your melody ideas. If you already have the lyrics, it is most common to play different chords, while you read the lyrics. Words have natural melody built in to them, and when you hear the chord combined with the words, your ear recognizes the synergy. Lastly, no lyrics or melody, you just want to try and write a cool chord progression in its own right? Read on.

HARMONY

Chord Progressions are worked out on one of the two 'chordal' Instruments... the Keyboard, or the Guitar.

Choose a Key for your song:

The most comfortable keys for singing, are those where the melody sits between A3–A4 for women and E3–E4 for men. Consequently, for mixed congregations:

C major — simple range, sits comfortably for many voices

D major — slightly brighter feel, still accessible

E_b major — very common for choirs, friendly for most altos/tenors

F major — warm and moderate range, avoids extremes

G major — great for group singing, easy for guitarists too

These keys keep the melody in a zone where most people don't have to screech, or dip so low, that the throat closes.

Find the Chords for that Key:

Example: we'll use the Key of C: C D E F G A B (I II III IV V VI VII)

Now, using the perfect-harmony formula I II^m III^m IV V(7) VI^m VII^{dim} so you get C Dm Em F G(7) Am Bdim

These are your chord choices to accompany the lyrics, though by no means do you don't need to use them all.

If you're into sophisticated chord options...

You can take your music to another level with subtle harmonic twists e.g. swap major with minor (Gm instead of G, or E instead of Em) or throw in a 7th (Em7, F7) or sus (D4) or aug (G+) occasionally.

Example: I → VII^b → IV → I (Instant folk/rock flavor).

Compose your Chord Progression:

Speak/Sing your Lyrics out loud, over and over, while you test different chords. Don't put a chord on every word, create bunches of words.

C Em Dm G

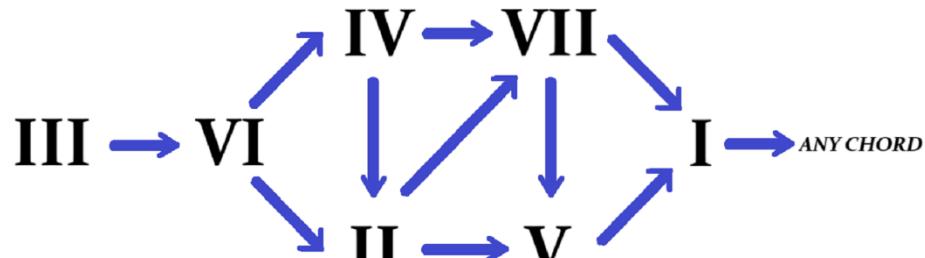
I breathed a song in-to the air, it fell to earth, I knew not where;

F Em Dm G₇ C

For who has sight so keen and strong, to follow the flight of song? ~Longfellow

Great chord progressions feel inevitable — like the melody had to land on them.

Which Chord Next?



III really only goes to VI.

VII sounds best in 1st inv.

Which Chord to choose, depends on the Chord Progression you are generating with your melodic phrase.
Going to I IV or V (primary chords) is strong sounding. Going to II III or VI (secondary) is smoother sounding.

You can choose a certain progression to create an emotional color, to suit the lyrics:

Bright / hopeful	I-V-vi-IV	Strong pull + smooth voice-leading
Nostalgic / bittersweet	vi-IV-I-V	Starts on minor, resolves upward
Dramatic / epic	i-VI-III-VII	Wide harmonic jumps
Intimate / reflective	I-iii-IV-ii	Soft, inward movement

If you hum your melody over the progression, does the emotion match?

Some writers use *functional harmony*. You work back and forth between three platforms.

At any one moment you are in one of the three, and you choose one of the other two.

Tonic (home): I or vi

Pre-dominant (setup): ii or IV

Dominant (tension): V or vii^o

A classic example that never fails is the well-known: I → IV → V → I

Use repetition with some variation. This gives listeners their 'needed' familiarity, along with some freshness.

eg. Repeat your first 4-bar progression, but change one chord the second time, then maybe shift the harmonic rhythm (e.g., hold one chord longer). *Example:* I-V-vi-IV then I-V-IV-IV then contrast ii-ii-V-I.

MELODY

Once you have the chords in strategic places along your lyrics, you have defined the harmonic plane. The natural melody that is contained in all words, will be making itself apparent by now. Use this, and choose points to push the melody higher or lower, for effect.

Strong melodies aren't accidents (that's why they're not that common)— they're engineered with intention.

Start with a singable contour. A melody lives or dies by its shape. Aim for a clear arc: rise → peak → fall

If you had to draw your melody as a line, would it look purposeful or random?

Use mostly stepwise motion (move one note at a time), with occasional leaps (jump a few notes) for emotional lift.

We usually 'resolve' leaps (e.g., leap up, step down).

Does your melody have a "hook" (something catchy) that repeats? This is not to make your song commercial, it is to help people enjoy singing your song. Can people still hum it after 30 seconds?

The rhythm inside the melody matters a lot (listeners remember rhythm first).

The rhythm of the tune should have predictability, with an occasional surprise... as with the music.

Leave the occasional breathing space — pauses create phrasing.

Some melody writers start with the rhythm... try this:

Write a melody using only one note. Make it interesting with rhythm alone. Now add notes.

Use tension and release intentionally (great melodies breathe).

A rising melody causes tension. A falling melody causes relaxation. Place the peak of your melody $\frac{2}{3}$ through the phrase.

Test your melody without harmony. Hum it, Play it on a single instrument.

Is it still feels meaningful? If it collapses without harmony, smooth out and strengthen it.

CONTRAST

You will undoubtedly have two sections, Verse and Chorus, where the Verse changes words, and the Chorus repeats. Whatever "Song-Form" you choose, it is crucial that each section is quite different from each other, or by 4 minutes the listeners will be getting bored.

It is common to add a third section (Bridge) which should be completely different again. This will refresh the ear, and it makes it more pleasing when you go back into the song itself.

Change the pace of your lyrics e.g. less words to a line, in the Chorus for example, to create lyrical contrast. Use different rhyming schemes in the verse and the chorus. It is quite common for the chorus to rhyme every two lines (couplets).

Use a different selection of chords in each section, including chords that you didn't use elsewhere, to create a tonal contrast.

The musicians should play different accompaniment styles in the different sections, to increase the sense of contrast.

There are no real rules, so I'll just leave you with some parting words...

*With the Lyrics, be honest... no deadwood!
With the Music, always let the ear have the final say!*

If something doesn't convince you 100% ... you're probably right!

CREDITS

This material is offered freely to the Christian Churches; downloadable at www.Pietango.com

Text: Original, by the Author, a Christian Musician and Recording Engineer.

Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible attributes and divine nature have been evident. They are clearly understood through his workmanship, and all the wonderful things that he has made. Therefore, those who fail to believe and trust in him are without excuse, or defence. **Romans 1:20**

All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, but God treats us much better than we deserve.

Because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins. God sent Christ to be our sacrifice. Christ offered his life's blood, so that by faith in him we could come to God. **Romans 3:23**

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. **Romans 10:9**

For the Scripture (*Isaiah 28:16*) says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed." **Romans 10:11**

These things have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; and that by believing, and relying on him, you may have new life in his name. **John 20:31**