

A MODEL FOR SONGWRITING

Songwriting, as with any art form, can be challenging to teach. The challenge comes from the fact that it is, essentially, a personal expression that should not be restricted by rules. Songwriting is subjective and, therefore, should be guided by what the creator (or, in this case, the composer) likes. Simply put, if you think that it sounds good, then it is... at least to you.

That being said, there are ways in which those who are new to songwriting can get started. One such way is to study the work of those who have done it before; study the “masters”. Considering what other songwriters have done is a great way to get the ball rolling since it is often on pre-existing works that models are formed. Listening to music that you like from the perspective of a composer, as opposed to simply as a listener, is a way of gathering information and recognizing what is possible when composing a tune. In other words, studying what has already been done provides a way of learning what works and what doesn't. Of course, the question of whether something works or not remains subjective, but observing what others do helps you to develop your own ideas.

Outlined below are two of the most basic building blocks that should be considered by the beginning songwriter. They include form and harmony (melody will follow in a subsequent shortly).

“What Are Some of the Common Song Forms?”

When we listen to, or play, music—especially as musicians—our comprehension of a piece is often determined by its structure, or **form**. More specifically, a lot of the music that we are exposed to is structured in a particular way so that our expectations are realized largely by how a song is organized into parts.

When a song is placed within a particular genre of music (e.g., rock n roll, blues, jazz), it often brings with it certain characteristics that allow listeners of such genres, at least experienced ones, to expect things to happen during the listening experience. When this expectation is fulfilled, we often enjoy the listening experience more than if we are constantly in a state of unknown (“here comes the chorus” versus “I have no idea what is going to happen next”).

As listeners, we are often comforted by our ability to expect certain things to happen and to have those expectations realized. Our level of expectation and comfort comes from the extent to which we have exposed ourselves to a particular genre.

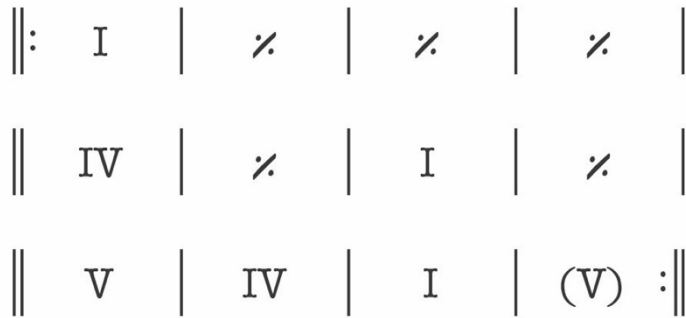
As composers, on the other hand, familiarity with common forms can provide us with models on which to drape our original ideas. It can provide us with a starting point in the compositional process by giving us “parts” to focus on while writing (“this is my verse”) but can also provide us with a clear exit strategy (“the song will end after my final chorus”) so that our original song has structure but also doesn't go on aimlessly.

For many of us, common song structures are relatively familiar. For the beginning songwriter, some common song forms that you might use as model are described below.

1. 12-Bar Blues

This form is based on a repeating 12-bar chord progression, which is diagrammed below. The understanding is that this progression can be played in any key (major or minor),

commonly using the chord qualities associated with that key. Often times, songs that use the 12-Bar Blues form simply repeat the progression over and over. One of the characteristic features of this progression is the shift to the IV chord in measure 5.

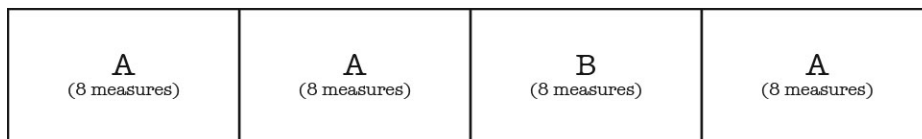


Listening Examples:

1. “Crossroad Blues,” Robert Johnson (1936), key: B♭ Major
2. “Johnny B. Goode,” Chuck Berry (1958), key: B♭ Major
3. “Tush,” ZZ Top (1975), key: G Major

2. AABA Form

This form is used in many styles of music, from classical to jazz to pop. It’s based on sections that repeat and is less defined by characteristics of each section, such as what chords are used. In other words, we identify a particular section (A) that repeats (A). The repetition is often exact, with the exception of the lyrics. We then get a contrasting section (B), followed by a return to the opening material (A). One thing to note is how these sections are traditionally matching in length (commonly 8 measures each, and so AABA is sometimes referred to as “32-bar form”). From this, we get the term “the middle 8” that is used to describe the contrasting middle section, since it is 8 measures long.



Listening Examples:

1. “Take the A Train,” Duke Ellington (1939)
2. “Blueberry Hill,” Fats Domino (1940)
3. “From Me to You,” The Beatles (1964)

3. “Block Form A” (Variations of AABA)

Depending on how strict we are with our expectations in AABA form, it is possible to use this structure as a guide to many popular songs. Consider, for instance, “I Want to Hold Your Hand” (The Beatles, 1963):

“Oh yeah, I’ll tell you somethin’...” A (12 measures)	“Oh please, say to me...” A (12 measures)	“And when I touch you I feel happy...” B (11 measures)	“Yeah you, got that somethin’...” A (12 measures)
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Variations such as these are very common, but the general AABA structure provides pillars through the listening and playing experience and help us to understand how a song is constructed.

4. “Block Form B” (Verse/Chorus/Bridge)

Loosening up how we hear these sections shows us how we might have arrived at the often-used Verse/Chorus/Bridge song structure that is found so often in popular music today. In such cases, it’s common to find the verse and chorus presented twice each before the bridge. The bridge (which functions as a contrasting middle section) then leads into a final chorus:

Verse	Chorus	Verse	Chorus	Bridge	Chorus
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Consider, for instance, “Hurts So Good” (1982) by John Cougar Mellencamp:

“When I was a young boy...” Verse	“Hurts so good...” Chorus	“Don’t have to be so exciting...” Verse	“Hurts so good...” Chorus	“I ain’t talkin’ no big deals...” Bridge	“Hurts so good...” Chorus
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As we get to this type of song structure, our hearing may be guided less by the individual length of each section (number of measures) and more simply by the different parts. The point is that when considering form in songs, recognizing repetition is key. Variations will present themselves, but rarely to the extent in which nothing is repeated. Consider “I Love Rock n Roll” (1982) as performed by Joan Jett & the Blackhearts:

“I saw him dancin’ there by the...” Verse	“Me, yeah me...” Pre-Chorus	“I love rock n roll...” Chorus
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This song presents a three-part structure: verse/pre-chorus/chorus. This three-part structure repeats into a second verse/pre-chorus/chorus, but the song does not include a bridge.

The more you consider form in the songs you listen to, the more similarities you will find between those songs. But you will also more easily recognize the variations. For instance, it’s not uncommon for the final chorus to be doubled (repeated). Or it’s common for a song to have an instrumental break, such as a guitar solo (though these breaks are commonly played over existing parts of the song, such as the verse music).

The goal is to recognize the returning sections as a way of organizing the song’s form. This recognition will help the beginning songwriter a great deal. Planning your original songs around “parts” or sections will provide you with a structural outlook in the compositional process and give you direction.

“So, Which Chords Should I Use?”
 (The 15 Major Keys & Their Chords)

Most of us, when starting to compose, will rely on major and minor chords as the harmonic foundation to our original song. But knowing which chords to use can be challenging. A good starting point is to choose a particular key, since often times the chords that are found within a single key are enough to create sufficient harmonic variety for a complete song.

A general knowledge of key signatures can be handy, though “music theory” is not necessary to compose. Nonetheless, knowing a couple of keys that you like to work with (when considering, for instance, your vocal range) is useful. There are 15 major keys to choose from, which are shown below:

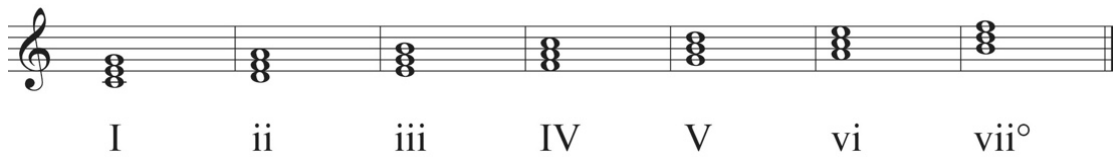
Sharp Keys	Flat Keys
C Major: C–D–E–F–G–A–B–C	F Major: F–G–A–B♭–C–D–E–F
G Major: G–A–B–C–D–E–F♯–G	B♭ Major: B♭–C–D–E♭–F–G–A–B♭
D Major: D–E–F♯–G–A–B–C♯–D	E♭ Major: E♭–F–G–A♭–B♭–C–D–E♭
A Major: A–B–C♯–D–E–F♯–G♯–A	A♭ Major: A♭–B♭–C–D♭–E♭–F–G–A♭
E Major: E–F♯–G♯–A–B–C♯–D♯–E	D♭ Major: D♭–E♭–F–G♭–A♭–B♭–C–D♭
B Major: B–C♯–D♯–E–F♯–G♯–A♯–B	G♭ Major: G♭–A♭–B♭–C♭–D♭–E♭–F–G♭
F♯ Major: F♯–G♯–A♯–B–C♯–D♯–E♯–F♯	C♭ Major: C♭–D♭–E♭–F♭–G♭–A♭–B♭–C♭
C♯ Major: C♯–D♯–E♯–F♯–G♯–A♯–B♯–C♯	

C Major G Major D Major A Major E Major

B Major F# Major C# Major C♭ Major G♭ Major

D♭ Major A♭ Major E♭ Major B♭ Major F Major

In terms of chord grouping, it is handy to know that each of these keys contains the same succession of **chord qualities** (albeit with different roots). For the sake of general labelling, we will represent this consistency using Roman numerals. The numeral represents the scale degree of the major scale on which the chord is built (the root), and the case of the numeral represents its quality (major or minor; the degree sign beside vii differentiates it from the other lower case, minor chords).



As an example, this would translate into the following chords when using a C major scale:

C Major, D minor, E minor, F Major, G Major, A minor, B diminished

By comparison, the chords in the key of A♭ Major would be following:

A♭ Major, B♭ minor, C minor, D♭ Major, E♭ Major, F minor, G diminished

Note how the chord roots have changed, as a result of the generating scale, but that the chord qualities have remained the same. This is the case with all 15 major keys.

“But What Order Should the Chords Go In?”

Regarding chord progressions, **harmonic syntax** is the order in which chords progress. In much of the music that we listen to (“western music”), for instance, moving chords by fifth is common. This means that the distance between the roots of each chord is separated by the interval of a fifth:

Ex: F up to C = F (skip over g, a, and b) C *or* F down to B♭ = F (skip over e, d, and c) B♭

The qualities of the chords involved will be commonly derived from whatever key they belong to, as described above. In the song “Hey Jude,” for instance, the progression shown in the example is based strictly on fifth-related chords in the key of F Major.

Ex: “Hey Jude” (The Beatles) • Key: F major (F, G, A, B♭, C, D, E, F)

FMaj | CMaj | CMaj | FMaj | B♭Maj | FMaj | CMaj | FMaj

RN Analysis: I | V | V | I | IV | I | V | I

1. The Cycle of Fifths

Any of our major scales can be expressed as a succession, or series of fifths. For instance, the following example arranges a C Major scale as a series of descending fifths:

Ex: C–D–E–F–G–A–B *becomes* C–F–B–E–A–D–G–C

Here are some examples of songs that use fifth-related progressions. (The asterisk in the examples represent chords in which the quality of the chord has been changed.)

Ex. “Hey Joe” (Jimi Hendrix) • Key: G Major (G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G)

CMaj | GMaj | DMaj | AMaj | EMaj

RN Analysis: IV | I | V | II* | VI*

Ex. “Fly Me to the Moon” (Frank Sinatra) • Key: C Major

Amin | Dmin | GMaj | CMaj | FMaj | Bdim | EMaj* | Amin

RN Analysis: vi | ii | V | I | IV | vii°...

Ex. “I Will Survive” (Gloria Gaynor) • Key: A minor

Amin | Dmin | GMaj | CMaj | FMaj | Bdim | EMaj* | Amin

RN Analysis: i | iv | VII | III | VI | ii° | V | i

Reminder: these analyses are “casual,” simply for demonstrating extended fifth-related progressions.

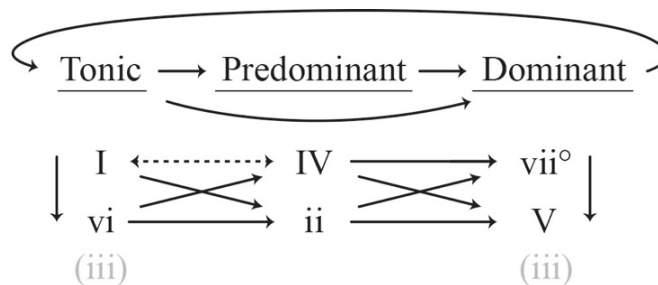
2. Harmonic Function

Traditionally, chords tend to move through progressions based on their harmonic function; essentially, the *role* that a chord plays within a progression.

There are three functions, and these are categorized based on their level of stability within a key:

- 1) Tonic = most stable
- 2) Dominant = least stable
- 3) Predominant = intermediary (prepares dominant)

The following table groups the chords within a given major key into their respective functional category. The arrows show the general direction that those chords tend to move within chord progressions:



“C’mon! I Want To Use More Than Just 7 Chords!”

Even though there are many songs that are composed with only a few chords, it’s possible that you’re hearing something that doesn’t stick to a single key. Or, maybe, you just want to explore a couple of other harmonic possibilities. One way to do this is to consider the contents of **closely related keys** (keys in which the signature only differs by 1 or 2 accidentals). The following table places the chords from C Major in the middle, and then places its two most closely related keys on either side of it.

F Major	C Major	G Major
FMaj	CMaj	GMaj
Gmin	Dmin	Amin
Amin	Emin	Bmin
B♭Maj	FMaj	CMaj
CMaj	GMaj	DMaj
Dmin	Amin	Emin
Edim	Bdim	F♯dim

What you will notice is that, since the key signatures are very similar (the scales only differ by 1 note each), many of the chords are common. But there are a few different ones (highlighted in bold), and those might be just enough to add a little extra spice to your progressions.

Special Note: “Hey! What About Minor?”

We’re likely all aware of the fact that not all songs are composed in the major mode. And, yes, there are minor key signatures that might be considered. For the time being, however, there is a relatively common way (no pun intended) that minor mode tends to get used in popular music.

Each of our major keys has what is referred to as its “relative minor.” The relationship between a major scale and its relative minor is that both scales use the exact same notes. The difference is that, in the case of minor keys, the related major scale is reordered to start from its 6th note. Thus,

C Major (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C) rotates to become A minor (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A)

A simple progression of the two tonic chords of a major and its relative minor is not uncommon in pop music progressions. Consider, for instance:

“Hallelujah,” verse (Leonard Cohen) • Key: C Major (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C)

CMaj | Amin | CMaj | Amin...

RN Analysis: I | vi | III | vi...

“Dust in the Wind,” introduction (Kansas) • Key: A minor (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A)

CMaj | CMaj | Amin | Amin

RN Analysis: III | III | i | i

Shifting mode from major to its relative minor, or vice versa, is also very common between parts of songs, e.g., the verse uses a major-mode progression (a chord progression in the key of C Major starts with a CMaj chord) and the chorus uses a minor-mode progression (the chorus then starts on Amin).

“Really?! You Mean I Have to Follow These ‘Rules’?!”

Because we are focusing on popular music, we need to understand that some of the principles that are being introduced are loose. For instance, when it comes to chord progressions, it isn't uncommon to find examples that go against traditional rules of syntax.

This “breaking of the rules” should be considered a stylistic thing; one that contributes to the musical language on which we are focusing. It certainly doesn't determine whether or not your song is good or bad, right or wrong. But it also doesn't change the fact that being aware of what is traditional enables us to recognize that which we might consider to be “exceptions to the rule.”

As composers, let's remember that our compositional choices are subject to taste and not to rules. The best way for you to decide whether or not you think something sounds good is to try it out. Generally speaking, building chord progressions using any of the chords that are found within a single key will most likely sound good together (since they are linked by their generating scale).

ASSIGNMENT

1. Find 2-3 songs that are in the style that you would like to compose and try to analyze their form. Ask “is this a 12-bar blues?” or “does this song have a bridge?” See if you can jot it down on a paper.
2. Choose key that you would like to work in a write out its chords and make note of the relative minor (sixth chord). Start playing around with progressions to see if there is anything that jumps out at you. Then, write out the chords of the most closely related keys (refer to the F Major—C Major—G Major table shown above).

A MODEL FOR MELODIES

Creating melodies can, in some way, be the biggest challenge in any composition. Indeed, it's the melody that catches our ears. From Mozart to Little Richard, The Beatles to Coldplay, the melody is most often what makes the song, more so than the song's form or chord progression. But like those latter components, melody has a starting point.

What we need to realize about a melody is that it often sits on top of a chord progression in such a way that it can outline its underlying changes in some way. The manner in which it does this is that it uses notes that are found within the chords, creating a direct connection between melody and harmony. In other words, a melody can often times imply a chord progression based on how its notes are contained within chords. As a result, we can often think of the notes of a melody (at least the most structural ones) as chord tones, and so it is with chord tones that we will begin to construct our melodies.

Chord Tones

When working with triads, i.e., major and minor chords, we are working with chords that have three different notes in them. This means that a major or minor chord could support any of those three notes. Take, for example, a CMaj chord. This chord is made up of the notes C, E, and G. When building a melody over a CMaj chord, therefore, any of these three notes could serve as a starting point for our melody.

Let's now look at a chord progression: CMaj → Amin → Dmin → GMaj. As described, each of these chords contain three notes each. Given the chords in the progression, the most obvious melody might be the notes C to A, followed by D to G, and those notes would change along with the chords. Though this melody would work from a theoretical perspective, it may not be the most interesting. Nor might it be the easiest to sing on account of its continuous leaps. These observations are, of course, subjective, but we may want to at least explore our options.

In some cases, chords contain common tones (notes that are shared between the chords). This could minimize the need for unnecessary leaps and offer variability. For instance, we might consider a melody that uses the note C over the first two chords followed by D over the second two. This could work because the note C is common to both CMaj and Amin and the note D is common to both Dmin and GMaj.

The Power of the Third

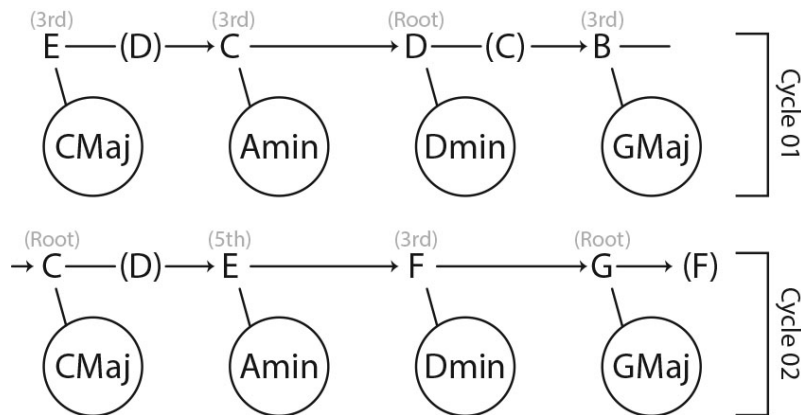
Each triad has a root, a third, and a fifth. When it comes to using chord tones, it is worth noting how the third of the chord plays a special role: it provides a given chord with its quality. More specifically, when dealing with major and minor chords, it is the third of those chords that provides them with their quality (meaning whether they are actually major or minor). Including this chord tone in your melody will bring out a certain character that is not present when the melody focuses on the chord's root or fifth. Therefore, using thirds over our sample chord progression would result in a melody that uses the notes E to C, followed by F to B.

Embellishments

The last thing to consider is how we might use additional notes beyond those found within the underlying chords. It's common, for instance, to embellish melodies with notes that are not part of the chord, i.e., *non*-chord tones. The most common non-chord tones are **passing tones** and **neighbour tones**. A passing tone connects two notes that are separated by a third, e.g. C-(D)-E, where D is passing between C and E but is not part of an underlying chord. A neighbour tone steps away from a chord tone and then returns, e.g. E-(F)-E or C-(B)-C.

Consider, again, our sample chord progression. In the case where our melody over the first two chords was C to E, we might decide to connect those two notes with the note D, which is not found within either of the underlying CMaj nor Amin chords. However, this passing tone D (connects the two chord tones by passing between them) helps to make the melody a little smoother.

NOTE: What is important to understand here is how all of the notes that we are considering as part of our melody belong to the key that generates our chord progression; in this case, the C Major scale. Consider, therefore, the following:



The diagram shows our sample chord progression, cycled through twice. In the circles are the chords while the letters above are the melody. In each case, a chord tone is attached to a circled chord by a line (which chord tone it is is described in grey type), while non-chord tone embellishments are shown in parentheses. Because our chord progression is generated using the key of C Major, all melodic notes are taken from that scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C).

As we can see, using chord tones as our point of departure ensures connection between melody and underlying harmony. Non-chord tones can be used as embellishments in various ways, but chord tones tend to create our melody's structure. All notes, both structural melodic tones as well as embellishing non-chord tones, are taken from the scale that defines our song's key (or, at least, the key of the part, i.e., the verse, chorus, etc.).

ASSIGNMENT

1. Using your chosen song as model, as well as your preferred key, begin composing chord progressions for each part of your song. A couple of basic guidelines to help distinguish your part:
 - Consider not using the same chord to start each section, i.e., start the verse's progression with a different chord from that which starts the chorus's progression.
 - If your verse starts with a minor chord, try starting the chorus with the chord of the relative major, e.g., if your verse progression starts with Emin, try starting your chorus progression with GMaj.
2. For any progression that you feel happy with, try to start assembling melody notes. Remember, chord tones are a great place to begin and that you've got three to choose from for each and every chord.