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## 7 Obvious (And Not-So-Obvious) Tips to Improve Your Songwriting

As a songwriter of over 15 years, I've picked up a number of tips and techniques, both through personal experience and by learning from other writers, that have helped me to continually improve my craft. **The goal of this list is to give you a solid foundation of strategies to utilize in your writing process so that you can write better songs.**

This list includes some tips that I consider “obvious” but are still worth mentioning because of how fundamentally important they are. It also includes some “not-so-obvious” tips that will give you a different way of looking at how to best take advantage of the time you dedicate to writing. Whether you've been writing songs for a long time or you're just starting out, these 9 tips will give you a baseline to work from.

Happy writing!

### 1. Don't be afraid of “bad” ideas

This may seem obvious to some of you veteran writers, but no matter how long you've been songwriting, this is vitally important to remember. Let me relay a quick story that someone told me long ago to illustrate my point.

When I was a teenager I got the opportunity to take a week-long songwriting intensive at Berklee College of Music in Boston. One of the

instructors was a guy named Pat Pattison, who counts Grammy-winning writers such as John Mayer and Gillian Welch as some of his former students. During one of the classes I took with him, he told a story about a particular co-writing session that he was a part of early on in his career with a big-time songwriter. Here's my best recollection of that story:

Pat is sitting in the writing room, waiting for the big-time writer to show up. He's nervous and doesn't really know what to expect. When the big-time writer finally shows, he walks into the room, turns around, and makes this big deal about closing the door. He seems intent on making sure that no one will hear anything that is happening inside the room. Pat is confused at this behavior, and starts to wonder whether this big-time songwriter is about to enlighten him with some golden nuggets of wisdom that are only known to the big-time songwriters.

Finally, the big-time songwriter seems satisfied with the state of the door. He turns around, looks at Pat, and he says: "I wanted to make sure no one could hear us, because I'm going to have some really bad ideas in this session."

Now, I'm paraphrasing, of course (I heard this story from Pat nearly 15 years ago after all), but you get the point. The big-time writer went through that whole performance with the door so that Pat felt comfortable in the session and felt like he too had the freedom to suggest "bad" ideas. EVERY writer has bad ideas, and there's no reason to be ashamed or afraid of them. If you're afraid of the ideas you deem "bad", you'll never dig deep deep enough to get to the "good" stuff.

This leads me to my next tip...

## 2. Silence your internal editor

Anyone who has ever done any type of writing can probably relate to this predicament. If you're a songwriter, and especially if you're a lyricist, it goes something like this:

You've got your pen in hand and you're in the middle of writing a song. You finish a line of lyrics, but before moving onto the next one, you hear a voice in the back of your head. And it's saying, "that's not right. You should change it. Actually, you know what? Don't even bother. You're not good enough at this anyways."

Sound familiar? This little voice is your internal editor (AKA your "inner critic") and he/she is a nasty little devil! Your internal editor will forever be critical of your ideas and your execution of those ideas. If you let your IE run wild, you'll tie yourself up in a ball of anxiety and self-doubt and you'll end up avoiding writing altogether.

Songwriting, like many other creative pursuits, is a mental sport. You have to find ways to remove those mental blocks that are keeping you from pushing forward. When it comes to the internal editor, this is paramount. Here are two ways to keep your IE at bay:

- 1. Practice free writing.** Whether you want to fill a certain number of pages or write for an allotted time, free writing can help you conquer your internal editor by forcing you to Just. Keep. Going. The idea is that you don't ever stop writing, even if you feel like you've run out of things to say. There are lots of great resources available on how to approach free writing, so I'll let you research those on your own, but that's the basic idea.
- 2. Make writing a habit.** Positive habit-forming is an entire skill to be developed on its own. It takes a lot of discipline, but if you can make a habit out of writing (i.e. it's built in to your schedule), then the

anxiety and self-doubt that you experience will take up less and less of your mental energy. Because when something becomes habitual, it becomes comfortable, and when something becomes comfortable, the mind is less distracted and is better able to focus on the task at hand. You can form this habit whether you're writing lyrics, writing music, or both.

Speaking of forming good habits...

### **3. Write every day**

If you've been writing for any length of time, you know all about this. If you want to become a great songwriter, you can't just wait around until you're "inspired" and then all of a sudden find yourself writing the next big hit. Art doesn't work that way. Chuck Close, an American painter and photographer, put it this way:

*"Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us just show up and get to work."*

That's honestly some of the best advice you could ever get as an aspiring creative. Sure, there will be days when it sucks, when you bang your head against the wall for hours and everything you come up with sounds like a cheap imitation of someone better than you. But you have to keep going.

I can tell you from personal experience that having these kinds of nightmare writing days (or even weeks) is absolutely crucial to improving your craft. Anyone who dismisses those periods as "writer's block" doesn't get it. The times when you fail over and over again to achieve your desired result teach you so much about the process. You'll start to figure out the "traps" that you get into and how to get out of them or to avoid them altogether. If you're paying attention, you'll recognize patterns in your

writing and you'll start to compartmentalize which patterns you like and which ones you don't.

If you do enough of this "pre-work" and you're able to come to terms with the fact that you will fail roughly 80% of the time, you'll start to see results. That's because you've given your subconscious mind something to chew on, which it will do independent of your conscious mind. If you immerse your mind in the work, your mind will work for you. You'll be in the shower one morning, not thinking about writing at all, and an idea will pop into your head that is THE idea you've been searching for. Then it's up to you to capture it!

As a songwriter, you live for those moments. The moments when you get to do this...

#### **4. Collect seeds (and hold onto them!)**

When I was younger I used to think, "If a song I write or an idea I have is really any good, I will remember it." After over 15 years of writing, I can tell you definitively that this is not true.

Writing songs is part discipline, part magic. We've talked about the discipline part: the long hours spent going head-first down the rabbit hole, triumphing over your internal editor, and not being afraid to pursue "bad" ideas.

The magic comes when, after you've done all this work, an idea -- let's call it a "seed" -- sprouts up from the mess of dirt and refuse that is your subconscious and pokes its head out into your conscious mind. Voila! You've got a song seed.

But just like any seed, you've got to treat it with extreme care. Don't think that just because it popped up during your morning shower means it will

still be alive and well in the afternoon (or even 5 or 10 minutes later). Unless you go straight to an instrument or a notebook, the likelihood that you will forget it and lose it forever -- or lose it in its purest form -- is very high. That's why you need to make sure you document it as soon as possible.

In today's world, there is NO EXCUSE for you not to document your song seeds. Just pull out your phone, open up the voice memo app, and hit record. It's that simple. It could be a lyrical idea, a musical idea, or both. If you want to be absolutely sure that you don't lose it to the abyss, make a recording!

I literally have thousands of song seeds saved on my phone or my computer from over the years. Most of them turned into absolutely nothing (or they were unintelligible when I listened back... it's hard to sing a melody, a bassline, and a percussion pattern all at one time!), but more than a few have turned into songs that I'm really proud of.

Here's another (bonus!) tip that is somewhat related to this idea. **Once you've got a completed (or nearly completed) song, record a proper demo.** This could just be you and your main instrument recorded on your phone as an audio or video file, or if you have the gear and skills to multi-track, you could take the time to flesh out the arrangement with additional sounds or instruments. Do this so you can hear the song played back to you while you just sit and listen. Any flaws or areas of weakness that you need to clean up will be much easier to spot.

## 5. Mix up your writing process

So far we've talked a lot about the mindset and approach to becoming a better songwriter. But what about the actual nitty gritty of it?

It's very easy to start writing the same "kinds" of songs. You find something that works in one song, so you repeat it in the next, and then the next... That's not necessarily a bad thing. Artists have built entire careers off of the backs of a couple well-worn and well-executed patterns.

But if you're like me, you get bored writing the same song over and over again. So how do you avoid that? Here are a few ideas:

- 1. Write on different instruments.** If you play multiple instruments, say, piano and guitar, it can be really freeing to switch from one to the other from time to time. But even if you don't play two or more instruments, you can still do this. Let's say you play guitar and every song you've ever written was conceived on your one, trusty acoustic that you've had forever. Try borrowing a friend's guitar or switching to electric for a week and doing some writing on it. You'll be amazed at what happens. The instrument will feel different in your hands, certain notes or chords will resonate in a different way and sound better to your ear, and you will discover some of that magic that comes from putting yourself in unfamiliar territory.
- 2. Write lyrics first, then melody/chords.** Or, if that's what you normally do, try the opposite. Personally, I have always gravitated to writing melody first, which I did exclusively for years. When I had a melody that needed lyrics, I would sometimes end up trying to shoehorn a bunch of words into that rigid melodic phrase. This had a few disadvantages. First, it was likely that I would have to mangle the syntax a bit to get the syllables to work right, which often resulted in a phrase that wasn't entirely natural sounding. Second, a rigid melody that has a very defined set of syllables in each line can be kind of boring! It depends on what genre you're in (if you're writing Pop this is much more acceptable and even desirable), but overall, I find that melodies that meander off course now and then tend to be much more satisfying in the long run. This is more likely to happen naturally if you start with the lyrical ideas and let them lead you to your melodic ideas.

3. **Scramble the chords to your favorite songs.** I heard about this idea recently in an interview with singer-songwriter Daniel Johnston. Daniel is a huge Beatles fan, and when he was younger he heard Ringo Starr say that The Beatles used to re-arrange the chords from songs they liked to create new songs. So, of course, Daniel tried the same. What a brilliant idea! And if it's good enough for The Beatles and Daniel Johnston, well, it's good enough for me.
4. **Co-write.** This is maybe the best thing you can do to mix up your writing process. Everyone you ever co-write with will have a different musical modality that they like to work in. They will have different influences, different tastes, different ways of processing their emotions, and different ways of seeing the world. You may find that ideas that you had previously discarded as "not good enough" are taken up with gusto by your co-writer (another reason not to dismiss "bad" ideas!) and turn into something wonderful. Co-writing can be a very vulnerable thing to do, but if you can get over that initial awkwardness and discomfort, you'll find yourself writing songs that you never knew you had the capacity for.

## 6. Write without purpose

I think that there are fundamentally two approaches to writing a song. You can either "make" a song, or you can "discover" a song.

The songs that you "make" are the songs that you set out to write. You say to yourself, "I just had this experience in my life (a breakup, losing a loved one, a mental health challenge) and I'm going to write a song about it." That's all well and good, and sometimes that can result in a really powerful song.

But in my personal experience, I find that my best songs are the ones that I "discover." When I discover a song, I'm not trying to "make" or "say" anything in particular. I'm simply allowing myself to be a sort of conduit that

is filtering the sum of my experience of the world and channeling it onto the page and into my instrument.

If that sounds kind of “woo wooley” to you, well, you’d have a point. I find songwriting to be a very spiritual experience. As human beings, we live our entire lives in a constant state of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Our brains are so complex that even modern science has barely scratched the surface in understanding how powerful they are.

All of this is to say... **you don’t have to know *why* you are writing a song in order to write a great song.** It might start out as a couple of words or phrases that just sound good to your ear. You get a few more words or phrases, and then all of a sudden, you start to vaguely hear and see “some thing” taking shape. And then you live in that mystery and uncertainty until the song reveals itself to you. You’ll be surprised at how often these songs will articulate something that you’ve felt in a way that you’ve never been able to express before.

There are many songs that I write that I’m not even sure the “meaning” of until pretty late in the process. I just trust my ear, hold on to what sounds good and seems to fit, change what doesn’t, and keep following the path that is laid out before me until I feel like I’ve reached the end. When you do that, you end up feeling like the song almost writes itself.

Speaking of the end...

## **7. Finish your songs**

Is this an obvious point? Honestly, I don’t know... how many “half songs” do you have in your songwriting notebook? I bet it’s a lot more than the complete ones!

Every writer struggles with this, but let me tell you: **there is no substitute for actually FINISHING a song.** Here's what I mean by that: complete lyrics, complete chord structure. You could sit down and play it front to back for some friends or family and there wouldn't be any gaps or any "I didn't quite figure that part out" moments. THAT is a finished song.

This is so vitally important because you gain exponentially more from a finished song than a song that's, say 80% done. There are a couple of reasons for this:

1. **Finishing a song will likely require you to solve at least one "problem" along the way.** When I say a "problem" I mean things like: one or more lines of your lyric that aren't quite fitting with the rest of the song or don't sound right to your ear; one or more chords that don't provide the right emotional backdrop; a weird transition between sections of your song that needs to be massaged so that everything flows right. When you force yourself to revise your original ideas and solve one or more of these problems in order to finish a song, you grow as a songwriter.
2. **When you finish a song, you increase your confidence as a songwriter.** It doesn't matter if it's not the greatest song in the world. What matters is that you had an idea and you executed it. As I stated previously in this list, songwriting is a mental sport. There are psychological highs and lows that you have to be able to roll with. The more successful moments (i.e. highs) you can add, even if it's just a small success like completing a song, the more funds you have in your confidence "bank" to draw on in order to get through the lows.

And the final reason is... when you finish a song, **you can ACTUALLY SHARE IT WITH PEOPLE.**

This, of course, is what a song is meant for. Now, we can disagree philosophically about whether or not you as a songwriter write songs for YOU or for an audience. We don't need to get into all that, but let me ask

you this: if you knew that no one would EVER hear the song that you're writing right now, would you keep writing?

For the vast majority of you, I suspect the answer is "probably not." My point is, I believe songs are for sharing. And if you don't finish your songs, you can't share your songs. And if you don't share your songs (whether it's with a large audience or just with a few close and trusted friends or fellow songwriters) than it can be hard to gauge whether or not you've gotten any better at writing songs. And isn't that why you're here?

## Conclusion

I sincerely hope that these tips have given you some helpful things to think about when it comes to your songwriting. At the end of the day, the biggest challenge that you will have as a writer is finding your own voice. That can take years and years of trial and error and failure. Even after 15 years of writing, I STILL don't think I've found my own voice. And maybe I will never feel that way!

But don't despair... every writer has to go through this process. Just remember that no matter what anyone tells you (including me!), there is no "right" way to write songs. There are no rules! Only suggestions.

*Joseph De Natale is a singer, songwriter, producer and multi-instrumentalist based in Seattle WA. Since 2016, he has released two albums under the pseudonym Faint Peter and has collaborated with dozens of artists and songwriters from all over the world. You can find his work at [faintpeter.com](http://faintpeter.com), [josephdenatale.com](http://josephdenatale.com) and on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).*

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