



# Song Doctor

helping you get better  
at writing songs

[www.songdoctor.co.nz](http://www.songdoctor.co.nz)

## Guide to Rewriting your Song

So, you've got some less than glowingly positive feedback on your song. A judge's offhanded comment, that sideways look from a band mate, another distracted chatting and drinking audience, a 'this is not what we're looking for' email indicates something's up. Or not!



It's what you do now that separates the wheat from the chaff, and if you've the courage to take heed of feedback from folks you respect, then you're doing really well. Congratulations! You're still standing!! A lot of so-called songwriters throw in the towel about now.

### So now what???

The truth is very, very few songs 'arrive' in the world as a discrete entity, untouched by the 'cut and paste' buttons or the dreaded red pen. Most of the hardworking songs out there have had multiple rewrites. Most songs can do with rewriting at some level from first creation.

If you're lucky enough to get specific constructive criticism, hooray! Identifying an issue within a song is half the battle. More often you get more nebulous comments or a vague non reaction or a blanket slam. Constructive feedback that your message doesn't come across clearly, that there's not enough contrast between the verse and the chorus, that the melody is too linear is actually fantastic to get, but if you still didn't make that final of a songwriting competition and get a marker's comment like 'some good lines', it's not very much to go on!

Working on your songs won't kill your muse. It actually lets you flex your muscle! When I work with beginner songwriters, once they've got what is essentially a first draft, often they don't want to or don't know how to change it, even when it's not working. Any feedback is taken very personally. It can be very hard to separate the song from the writer. I've seen tears and tantrums, detailed murder campaigns against particularly vitriolic reviewers, silent fugs and tons of catastrophic thinking – *I'll never make it/won't ever get a grant/label deal/the grade I want in my performance assessment...* Wah!Wah!!Wah!!!!





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Your original song already exists! A rewrite doesn't make it disappear in a puff of smoke! But if you're actually serious about wanting to get better at writing songs, then you have to figure out how to rewrite your work too, that rewriting is just part of songwriting.

### Your Way or the Highway?

No one can write what you write. Songwriting is extremely individual, which is why imitations of great songs sound just so fake. When you start digging deep into your songwriting process, and developing your own style, factor in rewriting as part of your way of working. Prepare for a feedback loop of whatever length that makes you wanna buff your song so shiny it hurts. By developing your resilience rather than your resistance, you will learn that rewriting is a really powerful tool on your belt and it can kick your song right up the stairs from ho-hum to good to really freaken' great.



### The first port of call for feedback is you

When you first finish your song, it's such a good feeling. Where before there was nothing, now stands something new! Yeeha! But you know what, now is the time to move into what the geeks call the 'verification' phase of the creative process. I prefer to recall Oscar Hammerstein II's great line about now:

*'Say what is on your mind as carefully, as clearly, as beautifully as you can'*

Well, have you? Remember what you are trying to do now is make your song better, not drive it into the dirt. If you feel what you have written is not your best work, then don't be afraid to let stuff go. Think how could I change this for the better? Might be a tweak, might be a total makeover. The biggest thing is nailing your song's intention, especially nailing it to the title. Is the message of your song working? It may mean something to you but does it register with anyone else?



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Once you start rewriting, **get into the AB habit**. Use quick fire basic recordings (before and after) to back up your decisions and remember them. This gives you an at hand palette of options and choices for your lyrics/chords/melodies that you can use. Is it better than before? This is the question to keep asking yourself. It's ultimately your prerogative, but your various versions (which you've naturally kept in your safe and secure space/notebook/file/computer/drive/cloud) will show the journey your song has travelled.

Songwriters can write as many drafts of a song as it takes before they are happy with it. When Roseanne Cash won the prestigious Burton Award for her song *Hold On*, she spent the next month going over the song word by word, note by note, because she still hadn't considered it 'finished'. Recording your drafts and reviewing them back to back can reveal strength and weaknesses in your rewriting.

### I can't feel a thing!

What do you feel when you hear your song? There is an inherent emotional appeal to many successful songs. Not everyone can initially say why they like a song, but often just that they do. If you don't feel anything, and you've written it, what's everyone else gonna do? Go back to the initial trigger for your song and your intention, the **'what'** and then rebuild how you were trying to say things in your song and often it's the **'how'** that is responsible for the emotion in your song, or the lack of it.

Try rebuilding the feel, the pulse of your music. Try using a different key or vamping on a different instrument. Change the tempo dramatically and see if it conjures up the feeling you want to get across. 10-20 bpm can make a big difference.

Look at the chords you're using, and for a start, just change one. Employing the **principle of substitution** can be really subtle – an E becomes an E7 or an A becomes A9 but it can invoke a very different vibe, maybe closer to what you trying to achieve.





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*The difference between the right word and the almost right word  
is like the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. Mark Twain*

Look hard at the lyrics. Any good or just so-so? Are there some details you're proud of? Or is the *moon in June, she's the most beautiful girl in the world* and *you woke up this morning*? Snore!

Have you set the scene, introduced the characters, made some great images, used interesting language or used everyday language interestingly? Are the lines in your song that are saying the same thing, not pulling their weight or are there just to fill a rhyming template? Can I figure out what the title is from listening once through?

Remember we don't need your life story in one song – it is a form in miniature. We just need one story of someone's life that makes the listener's more bearable! Sometimes, you may find you've got too many storylines fighting for air in your song. Great! That gives you enough raw material to build two songs or take the best idea and really run with that.

More isn't necessarily better. Every line (make that every word!) needs to earn its place in the lyric. If it really doesn't, then outski! The same goes for the number of verses. This will have a big impact on the length of the song – a common trap for beginners is to have a large number of 5-6 minute songs, slowly collapsing under their own weight.



Look at the structure of song. It should be an intelligible framework for the listener – not a prison for the writer. Use it to further your song's intention or message, and don't be afraid to get your hands dirty and reorder the components. Does your song go somewhere and can we follow it? Does it have a shape: verses, pre-chorus, chorus or a bridge?

Do we get a **decent contrast** between the verse and the chorus? It helps to balance enough difference within the song and yet enough repetition for the listener to remember chunks of it.



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**Developing momentum** is really important after the first chorus. You may not want to drop the energy back to zero by repeating those intro chords between the chorus and Vs 2. Snip them out and go launch right in. You may want to spice up the song with what my mastering engineer calls ‘ear candy’ – here’s where a new hook comes in or the rhythm and pace of the verse lyric shifts a little. Avoiding predictability and maintaining our interest. Don’t rely completely on arrangement or production to ‘fix things’. I’ve had songwriters tell me what they’re going to do at length rather than show me what they’ve actually written!

You don’t always have to have a bridge – some writers will prefer a middle 8 solo or a breakdown or have a first verse that has part ‘a’ and part ‘b’, while verse two is just part ‘a’. But if you do have a bridge, here’s where you can really use the melody to drive the momentum of the song by peaking the pitch at the top of the bridge – literally!



### But I’m really stuck!

Fret not. Everyone needs to **refuel** at some stage, with oxygen/food/new music/no music/a different band/ a new collaborator. Any of these help! Taking a break can do wonders for recreating your creativity. Perspective is darn easy to lose and you may just need to file your song somewhere safe and look at it later. If nothing is coming to mind, step back. Songwriting is not always a linear process. It is filled with cul-de-sacs, dead ends, and wrong ways up one way streets! This is completely normal. Taking a break buys you time to let things brew and to come up with another approach. Sometimes, it can let you generate an entirely new section that when hooked up with your killer first verse makes a great new song. Remember, if you have written something you like before, you can do it again.



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### How do I know when it's done?

The beauty, and I guess the tyranny, of songwriting is that because the songwriter owns the composition copyright, it is potentially forever alterable by that or those writers. Most songwriters will go through some sort of trial scenario when they feel they've got something worth trying out, when they've got something that feels right or right enough to lab test! The practical aspects of singing a song live, rehearsing it with a band, working with a live recording or a studio mix act as solid tests to the strength and durability of a song. You may discover you are in lyric overload where you have so many words travelling at the speed of sound, your audience loses the thread of your story. You may find you don't have enough air in there for your vocalist to breathe! You may experience that unnerving sensation when someone tells you who your song sounds like, when you've never even heard of the artist they're referring too!

What I do know is the more time you spend with your song in development, going through various rewrites and upgrades until it feels completely natural playing it by yourself, it will feel really great when you play it with other people and to other people.



Have trouble with your rewrites?  
I can help you with that.  
I can help you get better at writing songs.

**Email me on [songdoctorclinic@gmail.com](mailto:songdoctorclinic@gmail.com)  
I'm all ears.**

