

Steve & Vikki Cook

OVERCOMING SONGWRITER'S BLOCK

As songwriters, we've all had our times of writer's block, when it seems like the heavens have closed and the creativity has all dried up. What can be done? Well...plenty!

- I. Writer's block can feel like its caused by a lack of inspiration, but this sense of not being inspired can often be because we either do not do the work to generate ideas or we put on our editor's hat too soon and squelch the creative process. There are practical steps we can take to generate quality ideas and get the creative juices flowing again.

- A. Three approaches to generating ideas:
 1. Exercises that generate a wealth of ideas
 2. Exercises that generate creative or poetic ideas
 3. Exercises designed to get you out of a rut and have fun

II. Exercises That Generate A Wealth of Ideas

A. The Questions Method 5 Step process (Example at end of outline)

- Determine your Big Idea/title
 - Determining questions your title asks
 - Create lists of related and contrasting words
 - Select and organize questions into your song form
 - Sketch out rough answers to your questions by section
1. Determine your Big Idea: Make a Universal Theme Your Own
 - a. Approaches to help you explore your theme and make it your own:
 - i. What is your song about?
 - (a) What are the most important thing you can say about your theme?
 - (b) Can you say it in one sentence?
 - (c) Determine the emotion of your song
 - ii. Determine a unique way to say it
 - (a) Use fresh language and images
"The way you say something is as important as what you say."
 - b. Try a new angle or perspective
 - i. Select Your Title
 - (a) Look for short phrases (one to five words) that will stand on their own
 - ii. Pick a title that will inspire and support an entire song
"If the title doesn't captivate you, don't use it"
 2. Determine the Questions the Title Asks

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- a. A good title suggests questions that you need to answer.
Our example title- *Behold The Glorious Lamb*
 - b. A short list of questions your title might raise:
 - i. Why do you say that?
 - ii. What happened to make you feel that way?
 - iii. What will you do about it?
 - iv. What does that mean?
 - v. How does this truth make you feel or respond?
 - vi. What does God's Word say about this?
 - c. The right questions will help you stay focused
 - i. Make a list of 3 or 4 questions you want to answer and stick with them
 - ii. If more questions arise while writing, be sure to check back with your primary questions
3. Create Lists of Related and Contrasting Words: The title is only a starting point. You're not ready to write a song yet.
 - a. Related words - write as many as you can think of
 - i. Follow the trail of associations
 - ii. Put yourself into your song...imagine your emotions
 - b. Contrasting words - words that contrast your title as well as with images, phrases and words found in your "related" word list.
 - i. Using your raw material: Combine these word lists, along with the questions your title asks. Now you are ready to start sketching a song.
 4. Select and organize questions into your song form
 - a. Determine the most important questions to answer, and where they should be answered.
 - b. Sketch out rough answers to your questions by section
 - c. Create a song sketch using conceptual ideas based on your theme/title, key lines (including hook and/or title) and question answers.
- B. Key Word or Theme Development: This can be used to start with a doctrinal theme or Scripture passage to develop lyrics. (See example at end of outline)
1. Select your theme
 2. Collect a group of key verses from Scripture
 3. From your group of key verses select a preliminary group of key words and phrases
 4. From your list of preliminary key words and phrases select 12 Final Key Words
 5. For each Final Key Word develop a list of antonyms and synonyms
 6. For additional word choices add a list of rhyming words for each of your 12 Final Key Words

III. Exercises That Generate Creative or Poetic Lines (Intertextuality)

A. Photo or Picture based descriptions

1. Helps us work on developing sensory image language
2. Generates a group of sensory image lines
3. For every great photo or picture there are, at least, four “layers” that can be generated by the songwriter.
 - a. A description (eyewitness details)
 - b. What is happening here? (meaning)
 - c. What could you hear? (sounds or imaginary dialogue)
 - d. What is “in the air”? (atmosphere or emotion: hope, scent: roses) “The jasmine smelled like hope on the first day of Spring.”

4. Use Flickr.com or another website to find a themed photo. Find an interesting photo that might make a good song scenario and get to work!



C. Generate fresh lyrics from poetry.

1. Poem line replacement. Take an existing work or line and swap out key elements, but maintain atmosphere or structure or feeling or meaning.
2. Go to *www.famouspoetsandpoems.com* and find the theme you want to write about using a keyword search.

3. EXAMPLE:

Mid-Ocean In War Time by Joyce Kilmer
*The fragile splendour of the level sea,
 The moon's serene and silver-veiled face,
 Make of this vessel an enchanted place
 Full of white mirth and golden sorcery.
 Now, for a time, shall careless laughter be
 Blended with song, to lend song sweeter grace,
 And the old stars, in their unending race,
 Shall heed and envy young humanity.*

MY NEW LINES:

The fragile splendour of the level sea (original)
The rising splendor of the setting sun (new line)

The moon's serene and silver-veiled face
The future's dark and shadowy face

Make of this vessel an enchanted place
Make of this forest path a holy place

And the old stars, in their unending race
And the watching stars in their ordained race

D. Create specific lyric devices and create a running list

1. Anaphora-Starting each line the same
*Behold the greatness of our God
 Behold His sovereign ways
 Behold the goodness of his hand
 That fashions all our days*
2. Chiasmus/Antimetabole- Reversal of grammatical structures in successive phrases or clauses
 - *Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country- JFK*
 - *Home is where the great are small and the small are great- Anonymous*
3. Antithesis- Opposition, or contrast of ideas or words in a balanced or parallel construction, or the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, often in parallel structure.
 - *Many are called, but few are chosen- Jesus*
 - *One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind - Neil Armstrong*
 - *Add Clorox. Subtract dirt-advertisement*
 - *Easy on eyes. Tough on tangles-advertisement*
4. Parrallelism-Similarity of structure (or content) in a pair or series of related words, phrases, or clauses.

- *When you are right you cannot be too radical; when you are wrong, you cannot be too conservative - Martin Luther King, Jr.*
- *I don't want to live on in my work. I want to live on in my apartment - Woody Allen*
- *Buy a bucket of chicken and have a barrel of fun - KFC*

5. Epiphora-Repetition of a word or phrase at the end of several clauses.
 Let all the earth sing praise to the Lord
 Let all His people sing praise to the Lord
 Let those He has saved sing praise to the Lord

- IV. Ideas to Jumpstart Creativity and Make it Fun. (Not all will seem to have a direct usefulness for a corporate worship song, but they'll get the creative juices flowing.)
- A. The Start Deck-A stack of reusable index cards that you create over time with songwriting concept jump starters. Use it when you don't know where to start. Examples could be: 1. Write something in 5/8. 2. Start on electric banjo. 3. Make it sound like a 1930s film score. 4. Make it sound like 1950s rockabilly. 5. Start with an interesting synth sound. 6. Start with a lot of delay on your electric guitar.
 - B. The Stuck Deck-Similar to the Start Deck, but these are random ideas to help you move when bogged down when writing a song. These also are reusable. Examples could be: 1. Drop a beat. 2. Change the time signature from or to \square . 3. Change the key signature to a minor 3rd modulation. 4. Use melisma on a word (multi-notes on one syllable). 5. Try repeating a word or a phrase.
 - C. Choose random notes to start your song using twelve-sided dice. Roll 4 or 5 twelve-sided dice. Put in a quick order and assign the numbers to the notes in the key you are working in. Try different rhythms and starting places and see what you come up.
 - D. Use dummy lyrics when developing a melody (They can be nonsensical like "scrambled eggs" was for Paul McCartney on Yesterday or you can use another full set of lyrics from another song to give it form)
 - E. Create a title with appealing alliteration-*How Great is Our God, How You Get The Girl, Take Your Time, Sultans of Swing*. Choose a random word and come up with another word that starts with the same letter. Many hits include alliteration in the title. Create a lyric based on this lyric hook.
 - F. Create a title with two words that rhyme and form an interesting pairing; even if they aren't typically associated with each other-*Night Light, Woolly Bully, Maybe Baby*. Use a rhyming dictionary for ideas.
 - G. Pick a random book and a random page. Pick a phrase and write a song about it.
 - H. Turn on your favorite radio station. Imitate the style of the first song you hear.
 - I. Reverse it! -Try reversing the melody or chords of a favorite song. It is said John Lennon reversed the chords of *Moonlight Sonata* to write the song *Because*. If you have a Digital Audio Workstation like Pro Tools or Logic try reversing an MP3 and listening to it backwards for ideas.

- J. Make an anagram from an existing melody. To do this pick a phrase from an existing melody and rearrange the notes using the original rhythms. For example, the song *Hey Jude*'s first six notes are C, A, A, C D, G. By rearranging them we come up with these possibilities.
DAGCAC, GACDAC, ACCDAG

Anagram Melody Variations

Original-*Hey Jude*-CAACDG

4 Variation #1-DAGCAC

7 Variation #2-GACDAC

10 Variation #3-ACCDAG

- K. Combine two very different stylistic ideas (You are curious what it would sound like if you combined bossa nova with speed metal music.)
- L. Intentionally write a song that sounds like your biggest influence or influences and see where it takes you.
- M. Pick two influences and smash together the two sounds. Ask “What if ____ sat in with ____?”
- N. Recreate music from the deepest recesses of your memory banks; music that you remember from your childhood.
- O. Pick one of your favorite albums of all time, and do a songwriting session where each of your songs “shadows” its numerical equivalent on the album in some way.
- P. Try the Music Immersion Experience-Set aside a block of 3, 6 or 12 hours just to create songs. Don’t go into edit mode. Keep it fun the whole time and see what you come up with.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

- *The Frustrated Songwriter's Handbook* by Karl Coryat & Nicholas Dobson, Backbeat Books, San Francisco
- *Shortcuts to Hit Songwriting: 126 Proven Techniques for Writing Songs That Sell* by Robin A Frederick, TAXI Music Books