



THE
GOLDEN RULES
OF
SONGWRITING

AND WHEN TO BREAK THEM

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W E L C O M E

Hello Fellow Songwriter!

Thank you for connecting with me. It is such a joy and privilege to get to connect with fellow songwriters all over the world through mentorship and the simple joy of geeking out about the craft and creation of music. :)

I created this brief overview of an in-depth live course I teach in the hopes that it will reach more people and support you in growing your songs from good to great to exceptional.

Remember that YOU are always the expert on your music, and the only voice that really matters when it comes to your artistry. While these "rules" show up often across commercial songwriting (especially in the Nashville approach), I believe authenticity is the most important aspect of creating art that connects with your audience, and with your own inner artist.

Have fun with these! I look forward to hearing what you think as you play with them. Warmly and in gratitude,

Rebekah Powell

ABOUT ME

I'm a #1 Award-Winning Songwriter and Certified Master Life Coach from Nashville, TN.

I work with songwriters and artists to help them build confidence, deepen their craft, and create authentic, fulfilling, joy-filled lives and careers. Learn more about working with me at RebekahPowell.com



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01 KEEP A COHESIVE STRUCTURE

Oftentimes when we first begin writing, we tend to simply free-form create things, and that's a great starting place. When we want to share what we've created, it becomes important to structure what we have to say so that others can understand it. To create a great piece of art, we need boundaries. We need margins to work within so that we have tension and structure to lean on to balance the more ethereal nature of poetry. When I say "structure," I mean the layout of the song (e.g. verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus) and the rhyme scheme.

when to break it

After mastering traditional form and rhyme structures/schemes, playing around with non-traditional structures is a great way to keep things fresh and exciting. BUT! Only after mastering it. It's important to learn the rules before you break them.

02 WRITING TO THE RHYME WILL MAKE YOU A LIAR

Now I know I just said a solid rhyme scheme is very important but... The thing that matters the MOST in great songwriting is that you get in touch with the "voice" of the song, the character singing it (even and especially if that character is you), and what is wanting to be expressed. If you write lyrics just to satisfy the rhyme scheme, it will end up sounding inauthentic, not as emotionally connected, or even grammatically incorrect.

when to break it

POP SONGS Y'ALL. While great pop is grounded in authenticity, oftentimes commercial pop music is more about an overall vibe or hooky rhyme scheme than a clear heartfelt message.

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03 SHOW ME, DON'T TELL ME

"A picture is worth a thousand words." If we condense the concept of songwriting down to a singular primary goal, that goal is to tell a rich, detailed, emotive, complete story in a very short amount of time, often in as few words as possible. The more imagery you can use, the more vivid and clear story you can show your listener without overdoing the verbosity of the lyric.

when to break it

Writing a song that is meant to evoke stream-of-conscious thoughts, or in the currently trending style that I call "observational lyric." An example of this would be a lyric like, "you were sitting across from me / while I cried into my coffee / feeling hurt, hurt, hurt" - these simply describe what's happening in a literal sense and can be very effective.

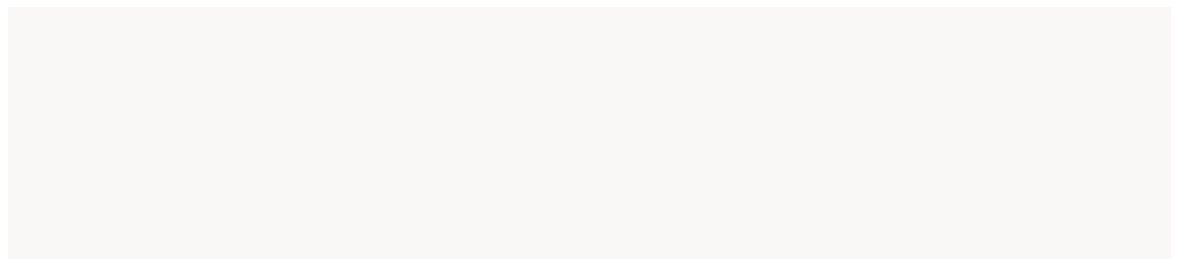
04 MAKE YOUR LYRIC AND MELODY MATCH

So much of what we convey in songwriting goes beyond words. While the lyric is very important, of equal importance is the melody (otherwise, we'd be writing poetry or prose). When I say the melody and lyric should "match," I mean that the feelings alluded to or described in the lyric should match the feelings alluded to in the melody. If you have a song about heartbreak, the melody should echo the feel of heartbreak in tempo, mood, and chord progression. We usually want to avoid an uptempo happy feeling melody paired with a sad lyric, or vice-versa.

when to break it

Intentional discord, sarcasm, and playfulness can be fun to experiment with. A great example of this is CeeLo Green's "F*ck You." The story is sad, but the music is garishly upbeat. That tension can work for you, but you really have to use it expertly otherwise it might come off as inauthentic, or for an average listener, it might just feel like something is "off."

notes



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05 CREATE A BALANCED, EVOLVING MUSICAL LANDSCAPE

As you're writing, be aware of what I call "the geography of the song" - the way the melody, structure, tone, tempo, alliteration, meter, and other elements interplay to create an overall feel. I like to picture songs as being made up of different joining topographical features, like landscapes. For instance, if I have a verse that feels choppy, with lots of hard consonant sounds, alliteration, or staccato notes, I might picture that like a rocky landscape, and want to balance that by opening up into a chorus that feels more like an open meadow - long open vowels, smoother or longer transitions between notes, etc. Changing the "landscape" during the song will keep your listener interested, and also moves the story forward.

You can accomplish this balanced, evolving musical landscape with dynamics of melody, lyrics, spacing, rhythm, alliteration, meter, length of lines, etc. You can also accomplish this by presenting new information, feel, or content in the song either musically, lyrically, or both. For example, if you talk about the past in verse one, you might talk about the present or the future in verse two.

Overall, it can be helpful to ask the song what it wants to do, or try to listen to it as if you're hearing it for the first time, then ask yourself "what does my ear want to hear next?"

when to break it

Sometimes we want to explore a singular landscape or experience. This might be a more reflective or meditative song, or something that has a great groove that you just want to stay in.

notes

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06 BE WILLING TO GET IT "WRONG"

Leonard Cohen famously said, "Being a songwriter is like being a nun. You're married to a mystery." In my experience, this is absolutely true. While we understand that creativity is part of who and what we are as humans, we don't understand how it works or when or where or why it finds us. Songwriting can thus be approached as a spiritual practice, both when writing solo and when collaborating.

To the best of your ability, invite yourself to stay open to new ideas, perspectives, ways of approaching the song. There is ultimately no such thing as "right" or "wrong" when it comes to creativity. So allow yourself to explore with curiosity and openness. Also, never fear a re-write! Second, third, fourth, or even fifteenth versions of a song don't threaten an older version of the song. You can always return to what you had before.

Lastly, remember that it's impossible to get better and look good at the same time. Be willing to write all of your not-so-favorite songs on your way to the ones that really speak to you and your audience.

when to break it

While you're starting out, or when you've just written something new that you're excited about but maybe feel a little protective of, trust that protective instinct. Don't self-sabotage by sharing with people who might critique you when you're not ready to be critiqued. Sharing our art with others is an incredible act of bravery and vulnerability, so be gentle with yourself, and find the right listener or mentor to share with as you grow, someone who will celebrate and support you.

Another time to break this "rule" is when you feel really strongly about a line or idea in collaboration. I might say "I'm willing to be wrong, and at the same time I feel really strongly that this is the right line/choice for this song."

notes

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07 FINISH THE SONG

Uh oh. :)

Raise your hand if you have a graveyard of half-finished songs or ideas. 

To varying degrees, we all do. It can be really tempting to start a song when we're excited about the idea, then give up on it when we hit a wall or it starts to get difficult or not fun anymore. Art is slippery. It's never going to pan out perfectly the way you heard it in your head. That's okay, finish it anyway. Even if it doesn't feel right yet, finish it. Prove to yourself that you can do it, by doing it. Then, if you feel called to, re-write. But either way celebrate yourself for following through.

when to break it

You might be genuinely ready to retire the half-finished idea if the song stops calling to you, or if you feel like you're trying to force it. You have to have a measure of openness, of emptiness, in order for creativity to fill you. Sometimes we get to a blocked point on a song and just need to take a break and shift some energy. That might look like a literal short walk around the block, or metaphorically walking away entirely. This might take 10 minutes, or might take 10 months. Trust your instincts.

Remember...

The more you practice these techniques, the easier it is to become a channel for the music and artistry that want to come through you. Your music has chosen YOU as its creator, as its translator, because of your unique ability to express it in ways no other person can. So have fun with it, and trust the call to creativity.



READY FOR MORE SUPPORT?



I offer one-on-one and group mentorship programs for songwriters and artists looking to build confidence, deepen their craft, and create authentic, fulfilling, joy-filled lives and careers.

Schedule a free introductory call at:

REBEKAHPOWELL.COM

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