

Songwriting 101: Learn Common Song Structures

*From MasterClass - by CARLOS SANTANA
Carlos Santana teaches you how he creates a distinct,
soulful guitar sound that moves the hearts of audiences.*

Songs are one of humanity's oldest forms of self-expression. Scientists recently located a "music center" in our brain, which makes us react to music in much the same way we react to other pleasure-inducing stimuli. Songs make us feel through rhythm and melody, but they stay with us thanks to the familiar patterns that comprise song structure.

What Is Song Structure?

Song structure refers to how a song is organized, using a combination of different sections. A typical song structure includes a verse, chorus, and bridge in the following arrangement: intro, verse — chorus — verse — chorus — bridge — chorus — outro. This is known as an ABABCB structure, where A is the verse, B is the chorus and C is the bridge.

Hit songs and pop songs tend to follow the standard structure while jam bands and experimental musicians might diverge from the formula. If a song sounds familiar to us when we hear it for the first time, it's because our ears have been trained to recognize the most commonly used song structures. But that's not to say there isn't value in variation as well.

What Makes A Song?

There are six primary parts to a song:

- **Intro.** Like the beginning of a film or novel, a song introduction should catch the listener's attention. However, it should do this without overwhelming them. For this reason, song intros are typically slower and more low-key. The goal is to establish the rhythm, tempo, and melody of the song, and introduce the singer or singers' voices.
- **Verse.** The verse of a song is a chance to tell a story. Lyrically speaking, this is where the story actually develops and advances. In most songs, the chorus and pre-chorus generally use the same lyrics each time, so the verse is your chance to get your message across. It might be helpful to split the story you want to tell in two and think about how the second verse can build on the first. Some songwriters use the second verse as an opportunity to change or subvert the meaning of the chorus, or even the entire song with different lyrics. It's a chance to be creative and explore the different emotions you're trying to bring out in your listener.
- **Pre-chorus.** Although optional, a pre-chorus helps to heighten the impact of the chorus. A pre-chorus usually contains a chord progression from either the verse or the chorus, building upon that familiarity. It's another chance to experiment—a pre-chorus can utilize different harmonies, for example, or break the pattern of the song.
- **Chorus.** The chorus is the culmination of all the big ideas in your song. This is often why the title of the song also appears in the chorus. It's a summary of what the entire song is about. The chorus typically also contains the hook—the catchiest part of the song. Choruses should serve as the climax to the song. The verses and pre-chorus both serve to build up to this one moment; therefore the chorus should reflect that release of tension.
- **Bridge.** The bridge typically happens only once towards the end of a song, usually between the second and third chorus. It's a change of pace in the song—it stands out both lyrically and musically. The point is to jolt the listener out of her reverie and remind her that there's more to this song than just repetition. This can be achieved through something like switching to a

relative key in the same key signature (for example, from A-Minor to C-Major) or through something like a guitar solo.

- **Outro.** This is the end of the song. An outro should signal clearly to the listener that the song is coming to an end. This can be done in a number of ways, but typically is achieved by doing the reverse of the intro—in other words, slowing down. More often than not, the outro is usually a repeat of the chorus with a slow fade-out.

What Are the Most Common Song Structures?

When it comes to songwriting, there's a reason pop songs follow largely the same structure. This tried-and-tested formula has proven successful for decades for songwriters across genres.

Something about these common song structures resonates with listeners and keeps them wanting more.

AABA (32-bar-form). This musical structure was dominant in American popular songwriting in the first half of the twentieth century, beginning with Tin Pan Alley pop greats like Bing Crosby and Cole Porter. The form consists of two eight-bar A sections, an eight-bar B section (usually contrasting in harmony to the first two A-sections), and a final eight-bar A section which retains the core melody of the previous A-sections. The 32-bar form became popular in rock songs in the 1950s and '60s before being overshadowed by the verse-chorus form.

Famous examples of the 32-bar form include:

- "Great Balls of Fire" by Jerry Lee Lewis (1957)
- "All I Have to Do Is Dream" by The Everly Brothers (1958)
- "Surfer Girl" by The Beach Boys (1963)

Verse-chorus form. This is one of the most popular song structure forms, used in pop songs, rock music, and the blues. In contrast to the 32-bar form, the chorus plays a key role in the verse-chorus structure since it differs substantially in both rhythm and melody from the rest of the song.

Famous examples of verse-chorus song structure include:

- "That'll Be the Day" by Buddy Holly (1957)
- "California Girls" by The Beach Boys (1965)
- "Penny Lane" by The Beatles (1967)
- "Foxy Lady" by Jimi Hendrix (1967)
- "Smoke on the Water" by Deep Purple (1973).

ABABCB. Or: Verse / Chorus / Verse / Chorus / Bridge / Chorus. This is a variation on the verse-chorus structure, with the addition of a bridge. A is the verse, B is the chorus and C is the bridge.

Famous examples of ABABCB song structure include:

- "High and Dry" by Radiohead (1995)
- "What's Love Got To Do With It" by Tina Turner (1984)
- "Hot N Cold" by Katy Perry (2008)

What Are Variations on Common Song Structures?

As with any creative form, there are exceptions to the rule. These successful variations have worked for many musical artists across different time periods and genres.

No chorus

AABA or Verse / Verse / Bridge / Verse

In this type of song structure, one of the main elements of a song—the chorus—is missing. To make up for this, each verse typically either begins or ends with a refrain: a line or few lines that repeat throughout the song. (This is usually the title of the song.) This song structure is common in the work of artists like Billy Joel and The Beatles. For example, in The Beatles' "We Can Work It Out" (1965), the refrain is the song title.

No bridge

AAA or Verse / Verse / Verse

This structure is not often used because it involves so much repetition. Similarly to the AABA structure, this structure also relies on the use of a refrain to keep things interesting and to help give the song focus. A famous example of this structure is Bob Dylan's "Tangled Up in Blue" (1975). Dylan uses different melody variations in the verses to keep things from becoming too repetitive.

Songwriting is an exercise in creativity: learn the basics of common song structures first, then build upon the ABABCB to create a sound that's entirely unique to you.