

# HOW TO WRITE A SONG ON THE GUITAR

Hands on  
Tutorial for  
Guitarists

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Hands on Tutorial for Guitarists

This free ebook is part of a song writing tutorial available on

<http://blog.sofasession.com/how-to-write-a-song-on-the-guitar-hands-on-tutorial/>

The online version includes sound and video examples of all techniques presented in this article. It also features a song that has been created using the techniques.

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In this ebook I am going to show you how to write a song on the guitar – without any knowledge of music theory. I have no background in music theory whatsoever, the process I'm laying down in this article made me write over 50 songs on my guitar, of which some are very popular for the audiences I am playing.

Writing a song on the guitar can be challenging because it is not easy to figure out where to actually start. I will help you getting started.

In each step I will first present the technique that I applied on every song I wrote and then illustrate it with a concrete example.

At the end of this ebook I will share some helpful resources for songwriting available on the internet.

# Chapter 1

## Requirements

You are a guitarist and own a guitar.

You know what a chord is.

You can read tabs and can play chords that are noted as tabs.

Let's get started!

# Chapter 2

## Inspiration

Inspiration will help you narrowing down the potential endless possibilities of WHAT KIND of song you're going to write.

Will it be a heavy metal song? Or a folk song? Will it be a love song? A funny song? Or do you want to write a sad song about that horrible thing that happened to you lately?

In my experience the best way to get inspired is by listening to music.

It's very likely that you are already inspired and that you know what kind of song you want to write on your guitar.

If not do this: Create a playlist of songs on Spotify or Youtube that you like, find inspiring and that you enjoy listening to. This playlist should include songs that are in the style and mood of the song that you are attempting to write.

Listen to this playlist in preparation of your songwriting session.

If there is a particular song in your playlist that you really like, check if other playlist have the same song and browse those playlists for more inspiration. If you find another good song, add it to your playlist.

In the particular case of **my song**, I wanted to write something with a slight pop / folk influence, because this is the kind of music I'm listening to at the moment. I kind of already knew what I wanted to write about: Austria (my home country).

The idea came from a particular song by Michel Polnareff, a French musician that I really adore. In his song "Lettre à France", he sings about his home country, France and how he misses it (he basically spent half his life in exile). I heard this song on the radio.

That particular song was the starting point of my inspiration.

So before even picking up my guitar, I already had a rough idea what the song will be about. But what about the music? Since I knew it will be a song about Austria, I created a playlist on Spotify with Austrian artists and listened to the playlist when I was riding in the subway or when I was travelling. It included some very well-known artists here, as well as some artists that are maybe lesser known and that I discovered while browsing playlists of other people. I tried to pick songs that fit my idea of a song with a pop / folk edge.

Listening to the playlist did not only give me the joy of listening to great music, but it also got me into the mood to write my own song.

# Chapter 3

## Pillars of Music

One of the most valuable lessons I learned on my own is to respect the three pillars on which a good song is based.



My songwriting approach incorporates those three pillars into a process.

The guitar is a great instrument to write a song, because all of those pillars can be incorporated into your songwriting process: Harmony by chords, rhythm by the strumming pattern that you chose to play and melody by playing melody lines on the guitar and later by singing.

I always follow the order above when I start to write a song on the guitar: First working on harmony, then rhythm, then melody (vocals).

Sticking to this process has made writing songs on the guitar much easier for me.

# Chapter 4

## Harmony

I assume that you are inspired by your playlist and have a rough idea what your song should sound like and what topic it shall cover. Let's start with the harmony for your song.

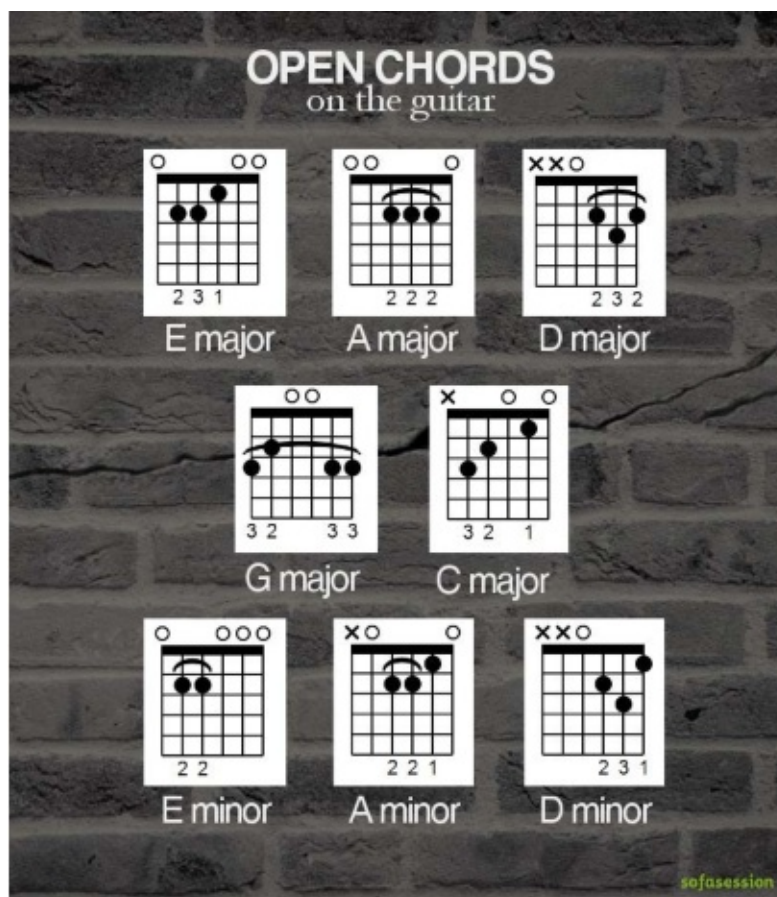
In this step you will layout one part of the song (verse or chorus) by creating a chord progression.

A chord progression is a progression of chords that are played throughout a certain part of your song. There are no rules on how many chords you need to play throughout your verse or chorus. Actually, just one chord alone could do the trick.

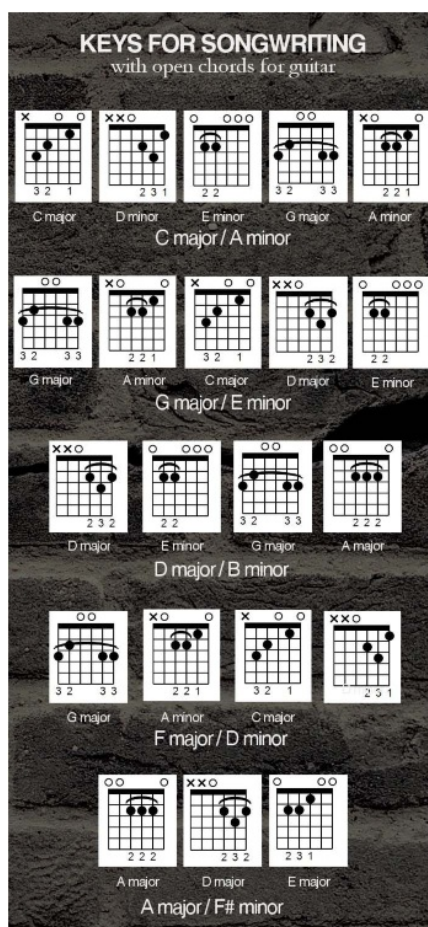
Protip: do not overcomplicate your progression! **Less is more!** Some of the best songs on this planet consist of three chords only. There is actually videos on YouTube that will show you how many well-known songs consist of only three chords. Google it, you will be surprised.

First, pick a key that you are familiar with and that has many open chords. Open chords are chords that you can play on the first three frets of the guitar and that contain one or more open strings. By using open chords you can really focus on the sound of what you are playing and the music, instead of counting frets and transposing chords all the time, which will draw your attention away from the music.

Here's a list of all open chords that you can play on your guitar.



And here is a list of keys ranked by the highest number of open chords per key.



If you do not know where to start, pick one of the keys above. For your information: C major / A minor is by far the most popular key in music.

Now let's create a chord progression, which is simply a sequence of chords.

Again, I suggest that you start with an easy progression. Now that you have selected a key, just try other chords in your progression. Experiment with different number of those chords, different sequence.

Example: For the key of C major you could try C Major – G Major – A Minor – C Major. Or C Major – D Minor – G Major – C Major.

All of those two progressions are composed of chords listed in the respective key in the chart above.

The most important: Rely on your ear! Cycle and play through the different chord possibilities and pick the one that you like the most.

Congratulations. You have just created your first rough sketch of a part of your song.

In case you didn't find a progression for your song, I have described another approach using an app further below in this tutorial.

Let's see how I applied this method above on my song.

First I picked a key, namely D major. It's not the number 1 key in terms of open chords in the list above, but it still ranks at number 3. The reason why I picked this key is because lately I had written a lot of songs in the key of A minor and E minor and I just wanted to use something different this time.



The next step was to create a chord progression.

I picked the progression D – G – A – D, which is the I – IV – V – I chord progression. I picked it because the two others chords in this progression, G and A, are open chords, so they are easy to play. Also, this progression is the classic three chord Rock'n'Roll progression. My background is actually in rock music, so I went for a real standard here. I just feel very comfortable using it and I really wanted to keep it simple.

# Chapter 5

## Rhythm

Let's add ingredient number 2 to your song: rhythm.

Rhythm translates to speed (beats per minute or bpm) and time (4/4, 3/4, 6/8), with time being the more important aspect in my opinion.

If you don't know what time you should pick, you can always use the safe bet, which is a 4/4 beat. It's the most commonly used time in popular and rock music and you are for surely familiar with it.

However, I encourage you not to be afraid to experiment with other times as well. Writing a song is really a lot about trying things out that you have not tried before.

Once you have picked your time and speed, pick how often you play the chord in that time. You could for example repeat the first chord twice before playing chord 2, 3 and 4. Or you play all chords for the same amount of time.

Experiment with different timings when it comes to the chord change until you found a progression that works best for you.

The last step is to create the real rhythm of your progression. Let's say you chose a  $\frac{4}{4}$  time. There are many ways how you can play a chord in a 4/4 bar. You could pick the strings like an arpeggio on every note (e.g. Nothing Else Matters by Metallica), or using a strumming pattern to strum the chord (e.g. something that Bob Dylan might do). You could strum the strings on all beats of the chord (1 – 2 – 3 – 4) or apply any other kind of strumming pattern.

Experiment with different techniques and patterns. Move from strumming to picking and vice versa, add a rest somewhere in the pattern that you are playing to see how it sounds.

In case you cannot come up with a pattern of your own, check **StrumPatterns** for inspiration.

This step is a real creative process and it might take some time until you feel you have it right. Don't worry if you do not come up with something that pleases you within half an hour. It usually takes me 2-3 days with some breaks between my songwriting sessions to create a pattern that I really feel comfortable with.

For my song, I wanted to pick an odd-time signature of 3/4. 3/4 is the time of the Waltz, which is typical for Vienna. As my song was going to be about Austria, I deliberately chose to take this time.

So I played around with my little chord progression (D – G – A – D) in a  $\frac{3}{4}$  signature and this is how it sounded.

When it comes to the timing of the chord changes, I went for something very very simple: Just apply a chord change every bar.

By now I had a very rough sketch of a chord progression with a time. In my case, I wasn't too

happy how static my rhythm sounded... so I started playing around with changing emphasis on the time, until I came up with a rhythm that was actually in the key of 6/8.

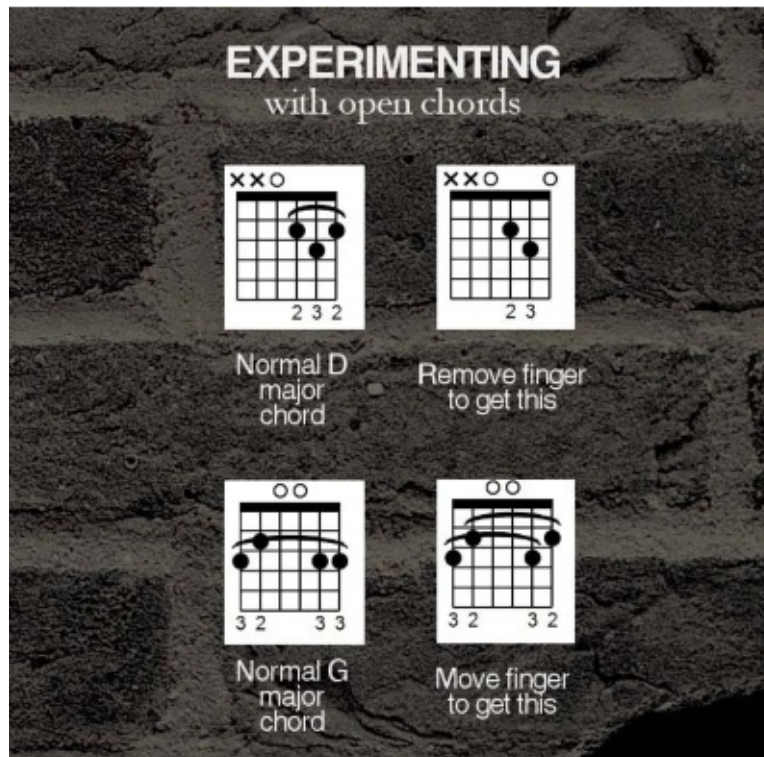
# Chapter 6

## Add variations to the chords

I mentioned earlier that I like to start with keys that can be played with open chords on the guitar. The great thing with open chords is that you can play around with removing some fingers on the fretboard to change the sound of the chord.

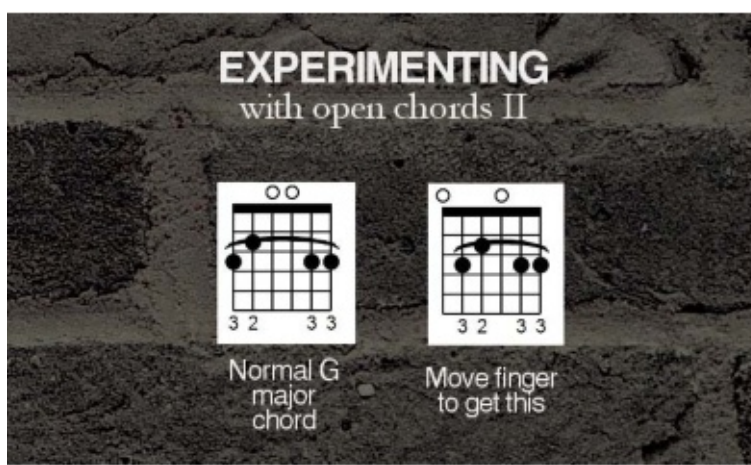
It really is just about small details that will make your song come to life. We are now going to apply this concept of small change on the chords that you have chosen before, to spice them up.

This technique will work very well on open chords. Starting with a standard chord shape and play around with removing one finger from the fretboard and let the open string sound instead. Here's an example: play a D chord and now remove your finger on the high e string. Or move a finger when you play the G major chord. The chord shapes will change like this



As I said I don't want to focus on the music theory behind it. The new chord you created has still the general feel of the D chord in the first case, but it sounds more open, creating tension and excitement.

I also like to try the following: If you have a chord change (for example G – C) try so substitute some of the notes of the latter with notes of the former. This could lead to something like this:



Put this in the context of a chord progression like Am – G – C. Try it out... this does sound interesting, doesn't it?

You get the idea. Don't be afraid to experiment and mix the notes of different chords. There are good examples of songs that take advantage of that technique (Oasis – Wonderwall) that play the same two notes throughout all chord changes in the song. It really can spice up your progression tremendously.

# Chapter 7

## Melody

When you write a song on the guitar, the most important part is actually the melody and vocal part. A lot of guitarists heavily underestimate the importance of it. They think that the songwriting is done with harmony and rhythm. **It isn't.** The vocals (melody and lyrics) are the distinguishing feature of your song and if you don't get this right, you won't have a song that touches your audience.

My uneducated guess is: The power of a song lays 30% in harmony and rhythm and 70% in vocals.

We will start with the melody first and then think about the lyrics.

Here's another big pitfall, I have heard it so many times and don't want you guys to tap into it: do not overload your vocal melody. Try to make it simple and give your melody a rest (or two). If your vocal melody is a constant flow of notes, it WILL lose its power. A melody needs rests in order to have room to breathe.

How do you come up with your melody? Play your chord progression repeatedly and hum some notes over it. This is how I always do it. I will admit that this is really tricky part and will need some time to come naturally, but eventually, it will.

Once you have a melody (or a fragment of a melody) that you feel is fit for your song, repeat it immediately and start playing this fragment in a loop. While doing so, try to come up with some dummy words first. Or if no dummy words come to your head, just sing *la la la* at the beginning. The important step here is to fix the melody line. Record it somewhere (I will usually use my mobile phone for that).

Move on to the next part of the melody that you want to create. Don't forget to put a rest into your melody.

Repeat until you have your full melody.

Now that the melody is composed, you know how many words and syllables you will need to fit into your melody. It might feel like a constraint, but it isn't. It will force you to focus on the essential in your lyrics. Again, less is more.

# Chapter 8

## More on harmony

I suggested above a way to create your harmony and chord progression for your song from a standard chord progression.

There is a really cool way to do this with an app, which I'm going to show you here.

I use a tool called **Chord!** that is available for both Android and iOS. And I use a specific feature of that app: Scales and Scale harmonization.

So what does this app do? It will show all chords that work with the key you wrote your song in without the need to know anything about music theory. It even plays them back to you and shows you different ways to play the chord.

This app has been extremely helpful for me when I'm writing songs on my guitar. And that's exactly what we need here, right?

I really love this app and there is a free version available. I used it a lot in my songwriting sessions and if you guys find it as useful as I did, give the creator a hand and buy the premium one which has even more features in it.

If you have followed the steps above, chances are that you have a song written by now. The best way to progress on this, add instrumentation and arrange it is to play it together with other musicians.

In my case I met a great keyboarder from Germany on sofasession and worked on this song in a couple of online sessions with him. We came up together with a great arrangement and cool instrumentation. It was a great way to play my song to a professional audience and get their feedback.

# Chapter 9

## Thank you

I really hope that this ebook was helpful to you and that it will help you to write a song on the guitar.

If you think this tutorial can be helpful for any musician friend of yours, of course you are welcome to share it.

There is an online version of this article available, which features video and sound recordings so that you can listen to the outcome of the techniques described herein. It is available for free here:

<http://blog.sofasession.com/how-to-write-a-song-on-the-guitar-hands-on-tutorial/>



# Chapter 10

## Helpful free resources

**Autochords** will generate different standard chord progressions based on a key and a mood you enter. That's pretty nifty... less creative, but more choice. It's up to you.

**StrumPatterns** is an online library of different strumming patterns for different time signatures. It's great to get some inspiration. The site might not work on mobile devices because they are using flash, though.

**Chord!** is a great app for Android and iOS that will help you with generating variations of chords as described in chapter 8.

**Hi-Q MP3 Rec (Free)** lets you record your song ideas for free on your mobile phone. I always use it to capture my ideas and to loop them in order to create the lyrics.

**sofession** helps you to collaborate on your song ideas with other musicians online.

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