

# The Songwriter's Checklist

A photograph of a person with a beard playing an acoustic guitar. The person is wearing a dark t-shirt and blue jeans. The background is bright and slightly blurred, showing a window and some greenery. The image is partially obscured by a large yellow magnifying glass graphic in the foreground.

Put the magnifying glass on your melodies, chords, lyrics and more!

by Gary Ewer

# **The Songwriter's Checklist, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition**

Gary Ewer

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# How to Use This Checklist



The Songwriter's Checklist is meant to help you when you feel that your songs are failing in some way. **Don't** use it if your songs are working. Why? Some songs work really well despite perhaps violating conventional wisdom (e.g., they might have a chorus melody that's lower than the verse). In those cases, you might inadvertently damage an otherwise great song.

But if you're feeling that the song you're working on just seems to be missing the mark, see which items on the Checklist are present, and which ones might be missing. Remember that songwriting is a process of creation that involves spontaneous assembling of ideas, and improvisation. A checklist as a means for checking that kind of work might seem counterintuitive, but in fact it allows you to slow down the creative process and look at what you've written from a more objective standpoint.

Here's the best way to use the checklist:

1. **Make a simple recording of your latest song.** Get it as close to how you think it should sound as possible.
2. **Listen several times**, and try to focus each time on your song's various elements: melodies, chords, lyrics, rhythms, etc.
3. **Try to identify *where* you feel there are problems**, even if you can't identify what the problem is. Where is the spot (or spots) where you think weaknesses lie?
4. **Slowly go through the checklist.** Don't expect everything in the checklist to be present in your song. That would be

unreasonable. But the majority of good songs do tend to demonstrate most of the items on this list.

5. **Make a determination** as to which checklist items you think you should apply to your song.

I'll say again that it's important to remember that **no song ever written includes everything on the Checklist**. So what you're looking for is a majority of items, not all of them. The Songwriter's Checklist is meant to focus your attention, and give you something to think about.

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To learn everything you need to know about good songwriting, check out:  
**“The Essential Secrets of Songwriting” 10-eBook Deluxe Bundle**  
**Get today’s special deal: a FREE copy of “Use Your Words! Developing a Lyrics-First Songwriting Process”.**



The 10-eBook Bundle includes:

- The Essential Secrets of Songwriting, 4th edition
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- Writing a Song From a Chord Progression
- PLUS a **FREE COPY** of "Use Your Words! Developing a Lyrics-First Songwriting Process"

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# MELODY/RHYTHM

*To read more about melody, rhythm and hooks, and how they contribute to the strength of a song's musical structure, read Chapter 5 of "The Essential Secrets of Songwriting, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition", and "Hooks and Riffs"*

- My melody shows **good contour**, with a **distinctive shape**.
- I can identify a moment in the **verse** that would serve as a **climactic point** for that melody.
- I can identify a moment in the **chorus** that would serve as a climactic point for the song.
- The **climactic moment** in my **chorus** takes precedence over the **climactic moment** of the **verse**.
- Repetition** serves as an **important organizing feature** in my song, and is an important part of my song's chorus hook.
- My **verse melody works its way upward**, and connects somewhat seamlessly to the chorus. (If it doesn't, it uses a **pre-chorus** to make the

connection)

- My **chorus melody** resides a bit higher than the verse melody, and features the tonic (key) note more than in the verse.
- My **bridge** brings in a **third melody**, accompanied by both diatonic and altered chords, or explores the **opposite mode** (e.g., major key songs move into the minor).
- The **rhythms** of the **verse melody** are mainly quicker and possibly more complex than the **chorus rhythms**.
- Chorus rhythms** tend to **simplify**.

# CHORDS/HARMONY

*To read more about chords and harmony, read Chapter 4 of "The Essential Secrets of Songwriting, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition", and read also: "How to Harmonize a Melody", "Chord Progression Formulas", and "Writing a Song From a Chord Progression"*

- I use more tonally **strong progressions** in the chorus, with more interesting **"fragile" progressions** in the verse.
- I use more **vocal harmonies** in the **chorus** than I do in the **verse**.
- I start the **bridge**, or any other **"miscellaneous" section** of my song on a chord other than the **tonic chord**.
- The majority of **progressions** throughout the song feel like a **complete musical journey**, and any **complex** progressions eventually feel **resolved** by progressions in the **chorus**.
- Most of my song's **progressions** target the **tonic chord**.



- There is a pleasant sense of **predictability** in my song's chord progressions, particularly in the **chorus**.
- There is also a sense of **predictability** with regard to the **frequency of chord changes**, called the **harmonic rhythm**. (e.g., every bar, or every two bars).
- The **chords** support **the notes of the melodies** at any given time.
- I use **inversions** to either smooth out the **bass line**, or to add a **sense of variety** to the **chord choices**.

# LYRICS

*To read more about lyrics, read Chapter 5 of "The Essential Secrets of Songwriting, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition", as well as "Use Your Words! Developing a Lyrics-First Songwriting Process"*

- I use **relatively plain, everyday language** that connects with average people.
- Despite my use of plain language, I find opportunities to say or describe things, events, people, etc., with an **occasionally clever turn of phrase**.
- Imagery** plays an important part in my lyrics.
- I ensure that my **verse lyrics** primarily **describe events, people and situations**, while my **chorus lyrics** primarily describe **reactions** and **emotions**.
- I try to find **concise** ways to say things, and avoid being **unnecessarily wordy**.
- The song **title**, when sung, uses **longer note values** than other lyrics.

- I make good use of **rhymes** and **close rhymes**, being mindful not to allow rhyming to feel **forced** or **artificial**.
  
- The **natural pulse** of my **lyrics** matches (at least most of the time) the **natural pulse** of my **melodies** as determined by the time signature.

# MISCELLANEOUS

*To read more about the formal design of songs, inspiration, and copyright issues, read "The Essential Secrets of Songwriting," 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Chapters 1-3, 6 and 7.*

- My song shows, even in a small degree, something **innovative** that sets it apart from other songs I've written, and other songs of the same genre that listeners would know.
- My song gets to the **chorus** before the **1-minute mark**.
- My song is **not needlessly long**.
- I've tried to incorporate something **unique** regarding **instrumentation** (fiddle, acoustic guitar, acoustic orchestral instrument, etc.).
- The song's **intro** is, even in just some small measure, **interesting**, and is likely to pull a listener into the rest of the song.
- I've varied the **overall loudness** of the song so that the basic **dynamic level** shows an interesting and compelling **contour**.

This song **differs** in significant ways from the last few songs I've written.

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Practice makes perfect, but you may simply be reinforcing errors that you've been making for years. If you can't seem to take your songwriting to the next level, I'm hoping that you may find my songwriting eBooks will be just what you need to get on the right path.

I'd love for you to [read more about those ten songwriting eBooks](#). They've been helping thousands of songwriters take their technique to the next level.

Right now, purchasing "The Essential Secrets of Songwriting 10-eBook Bundle" gives you a **free copy** of "**Use Your Words – Developing a Lyrics-First Songwriting Process**". It's an eBook that shows you how to make lyric writing an important point of focus in your writing technique.

All the best with your songwriting projects!

-Gary Ewer

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