

THE PRO SONGWRITER'S TOP TEN TIP SHEET

BY JOHN CHISUM

I've worked with a lot of great songwriters and all of them used these **TEN** pro songwriting tips as they developed their songs. Now you can use them, too!



- 1 Always start with a strong hook and title.** The primary “hook” of a song is almost always the title and must be the most memorable part of the song - that’s why they call it a hook. One notable exception is Redman/Silas’ *10,000 Reasons* where the hook is actually “Bless the Lord, O my soul” and not the title, but you get the point. If you start writing a song and the hook is weak, the rest of the song just won’t gel and come together the way you want it to.
- 2 Think through the song’s FORM.** What kind of song are you writing? What popular songs would compare to yours and what form did they use? How can you use that form to make yours great? Even worship songs for congregations rarely have only one verse, so yours should probably have two, as well, along with a chorus (of course) and maybe even a pre-chorus and a bridge. Think about the FORM as the blueprint for where you want to go, then start laying in the building blocks.
- 3 Don’t throw any idea out.** No professional writer throws anything out. They always keep snippets in their phones, on their laptops or tablets, and when writing they NEVER throw away any great lines, even if they don’t seem to be working in the present song project. You never know when it could fit in and be the perfect line! As you write, jot down extraneous lines at the bottom of the page. If you don’t use them, transfer them to an idea file you can come back to later.
- 4 Write with and keep a notebook of your song ideas, titles, and snippets.** I know I just said to keep random lines on your phone or other handy electronic gadget, and you should, but there’s nothing like an old fashioned spiral notebook for jotting down your ideas and finishing out those songs. In some ways, it’s easier to play with the lines on a page with your pen or pencil than to erase and cut and paste. I’ve done it both ways, but I love the feel of a pencil and there are times the phone or tablet or laptop aren’t handy. I always transfer a lyric and rough demo recordings to my digital file when finished and I’m ready to move to the next phase of making the song come to life.



- 5 **Make sure your verses match in word count and length.** There are exceptions to every rule, but the overwhelming vast majority of popular songs have verses that match. Watch out for extra words or syllables and don't settle for adding an extra one here or there or leaving one out. Listeners pick up on those things and notice the clunkiness that happens when you cheap out and don't do the hard work.
- 6 **Make sure that everything in the song points to and delivers the primary hook.** The hook is the star of the show that the entire cast and crew support and make look beautiful. If you wander around in a verse or pre-chorus, your hook will be weakened. Every last syllable of every line has to be tailored to make that one hook line so powerful and "pay off" when you get to it that the listener pays attention and maybe even gets excited somehow. Go study your favorite song and see if the writer didn't do that. Bet you they did!
- 7 **Think about the end-user as you write.** If you're a singer-songwriter, ask yourself, "Would I want to get up and sing this song night after night?" If you wouldn't, no one else probably will either. You have to think about who's going to use the song. Are you pitching it for an artist? What have they sung like this before? Is it a worship song? What makes for a great worship song and how can I work that into mine? If you don't think about who would sing it, you'll flail and fail. Try to come up with examples of end users and pattern your song to their style and needs.
- 8 **Resist tired and over-worn phrases.** This is a trap for every songwriter, but the best ones know better and avoid using anything that is so tired it can't get out of bed. For Christian writers this is especially true, I think, because there are certain "buzz" words and phrases that we've all used for so long they've lost their meaning entirely. The trick is to rethink the things that are most familiar, then put a slight twist on them that make people sit up and pay attention. Another thing to avoid is using kitschy phrases as hooks that can come off as corny.
- 9 **Never force a rhyme.** Forcing rhyme is a cardinal sin. You don't want to do this. Rhyming should be as natural as breathing and never stand out. That's the mark of true rhyme - it falls naturally off the tongue and never feels like you're having to cram it into a place it doesn't belong. The key to good rhyme is to know what good rhyme is by studying something other than your rhyming dictionary. Sometimes a word rhymes with another word, but its "beat" doesn't fall in the right place and it comes out left-footed and clunky. No offense to left-footed people, but the rhyme needs to be smooth, natural, and call no attention to itself.



10 Learn to cull through your lines and shorten them. Great writers know the economy of words and can say more in four than twenty-five. Developing writers often add fluffy and useless words like “and” or “that” in lines that don’t need them. Look through each line and see if you can cut any words out and still maintain the meaning. If so, do it. That means you’ll have to adjust other lines (think second verses). It can be a lot like moving furniture in your house. You move one chair and the whole room has to be reorganized. But the end result is a concise lyric that connects rather than bores. It’s a sin to bore people. Don’t do it.

If you’d like to read more, be sure to download my new ebook *Seven Strategies for Writing Better Songs and Standing Out in a Crowded Songwriting Marketplace* by [clicking this link](#) or by visiting me at nashvillechristiansongwriters.com. I’d love to connect with you and help you become the songwriter you know you want to be.

ABOUT JOHN



John Chisum is a pioneer in the Christian music industry and currently serves as Managing Partner of Nashville Christian Songwriters. As a songwriter, arranger, producer, music publisher, and recording artist, he has served alongside some of the world’s greatest and best-loved artists. John is an internationally appreciated worship leader and speaker, known for his passion for Jesus, his creativity, and his sense of humor. He has recorded over ten music albums and has had over 400 songs professionally published.









ABOUT NASHVILLE CHRISTIAN SONGWRITERS

Nashville Christian Songwriters exists to empower Christian songwriters worldwide. Bringing together decades of professional songwriting, publishing, and production experience, NCS strives to provide the best of songwriting resources and connections to help you become the best songwriter you can be.

If you're looking for a place to belong, grow, and be inspired the blogs, videos, and loads of FREE content we provide will keep you on track to writing your best songs ever. Committed to becoming the world's premier Christian songwriting association and content provider, NCS will be your constant source of help and growth opportunities.

Kicking off in 2016 under the direction of Managing Partner, John Chisum, NCS will be offering online resources, webinars (both free and paid), and LIVE masterclass opportunities you won't want to miss. And all aimed at helping you fulfill your call to write better songs!

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