



# COMPOSITION



# COMPOSITION

Composing music is something that can be done by children or adults who have just started playing an instrument. In fact, playing an instrument and reading and writing music aren't prerequisites for composing music. Consider this passage from A.A. Milne's classic children's book, "Winnie The Pooh,":

"Pooh ... had made up a little hum that very morning, as he was doing his Stoutness Exercises in front of the glass: Tra- la-la, tra-la-la, as he stretched up as high as he could go, and then Tra-la-la, tra-la--oh, help!--la, as he tried to reach his toes. After breakfast he had said it over and over to himself until he had learnt it off by heart, and now he was humming it right through, properly. It went like this:

"Tra-la-la, tra-la-la,  
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la,  
Rum-tum-tiddle-um-tum.  
Tiddle-iddle, tiddle-iddle,  
Tiddle-iddle, tiddle-iddle  
Rum-tum-tum-tiddle-um."



This example comes from the world of make believe. Truth, however, can be stranger than fiction. Let's take a look at two very real and very well known composers: Paul McCartney and John Lennon. During a TV show, an interviewer asked Paul how it was possible that an enormously successful songwriter such as he couldn't even read or write music. Sir Paul's response was interesting:

"No, and as long as the two of us [John and I] know what we're doing, you know, what chords we're playing, and we remember the melody, we don't actually ever have the need to write it down or to read it."

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In both the Pooh and Paul examples, the composers don't actually "write" their music down. They simply make it up. It's fairly safe to assume that Pooh couldn't read or write music given that his head was full of fluff and from the rest of the story we learn that he couldn't even read or write English. But what about the Beatles? Surely their approach to songwriting had to be more sophisticated than a stuffed bear, right?

Not really.

For the uninitiated, those who have never written a song before, or for those who do not play music themselves, this may seem perplexing. How is it possible to compose a song, to write music, if you don't know how to read or write it? Wouldn't that be almost an oxymoron? Yet those who are familiar with the world of pop music know that there is a near endless number of pop musicians, from globally known super stars to local folks busking on street corners, who "write" their own music despite the fact that they don't know how to read or write music.

It is helpful to look at the question of how people who can't read music can write it through the "Music As a Second Language" lens. People acquire their first language before they can read or write it. Linguists who study second language learning have found that this same sequence should be employed as we acquire a second language.

Pop musicians who compose without the aid of notation (and here we can safely say that we are speaking of the majority of pop musicians who compose) may be likened to people who have mastered the spoken form of their native tongue, but lack the formal schooling on reading and writing.

What can be especially confusing is that pop artists will often write down the lyrics and/or the chord progression to a song (see Figure A at right). However, this is very different from writing down music. Usually, no melodies, harmonies or rhythms are actually written out. Lyrics are often scrawled out in a hurry so that the composer won't forget the words. The actual music resides in the composers mind.

For example, the melody or harmony of a new composition are things that the pop composer feels confident that they will remember. If they feel that these things are also at risk of being forgotten, a pop musician will be more likely to record a rough take to revive their memory in the future than to write the information out in standard notation.

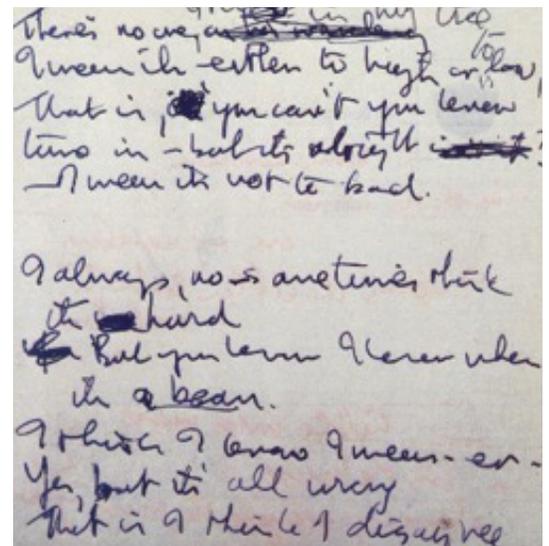


Fig. A - John Lennon wrote down the lyrics to "Strawberry Fields" [above] but he never wrote down the music for this or any other of his hundreds of compositions.

## Empowering Your Students to Compose

Remember all the while how important it is to create a safe space in your classroom; one where your students feel comfortable to express themselves musically without judgment, and one where their anxiety levels or “Affective Filters” will be low. This will enable them to generate musical ideas that will quickly morph into music and songs. In some ways, this could be viewed as the musical equivalent of what linguists refer to as Speech Emergence.

Empowering your students to compose is simple and will help ensure that your kids can experience the thrills of songwriting. Here are three easy steps that make composition highly accessible.

### STEP

1

**Using chords and spontaneously generated lyrics and melodies, compose songs for them. You compose a song, they watch. (The song writing exercises in composition consumables are helpful)**

### STEP

2

**Compose songs with them. Make it a team effort.**

### STEP

3

**Facilitate improvisation and composition. Give students time and space to compose alone or in groups.**

### How Do I Use Chords to Write Songs?

By starting with a chord progression, students can use the notes within the chords to compose their melody. As students become comfortable with composition and improvisation, they will begin to hear the notes that work automatically.

### What Comes First, the Lyrics, the Chords, the Idea?

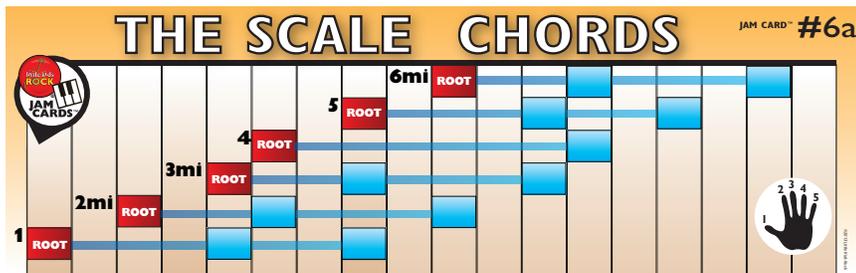
This is a great question and there is no correct answer. All of these are possible entry points and there are no true rules to follow. However, there are some very helpful building blocks that you can provide your students with.

## Composing On a Keyboard

Writing a song on keyboard is really easy to do especially when you have an idea of which chords sound good together. This information is easy to see instantly with the help of Jam Card 6a.

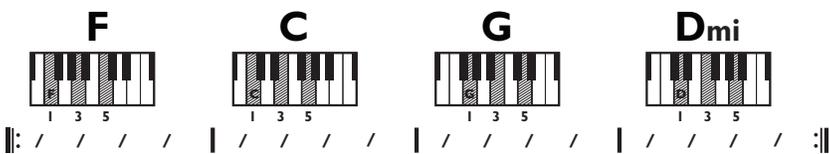
This Jam Card shows all the chords that are related to each other in a key at a glance, even if we have no idea what that means! Simply line the start arrow up to any note (C is the easiest because the shape of all the chords stays the same using only white keys) and try out the various chords. The really great thing about this is that these chords are meant to sound good together! That means you can compose a song by putting some of these chords in any order and the results will sound great. There are only six chords—try it using a six side dice—roll the dice to get any four chords and then write a song using the results! If singing over these chords puts your voice in a register that isn't natural or comfortable, simply move the start arrow of the Jam Card to a new starting note and play the chords there (keep in mind that any starting note beside C is going to involve black keys).

*WRITING DOWN LYRICS OR CHORD PROGRESSIONS IS VERY DIFFERENT THAN WRITING MUSIC USING STANDARD NOTATION."*

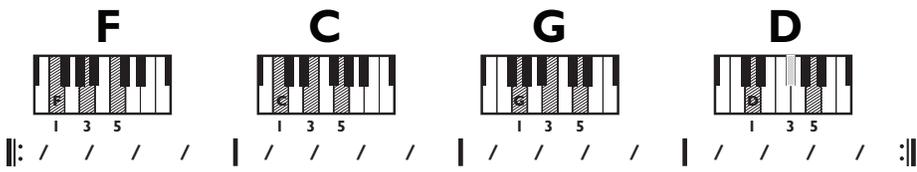


Visit the keyboard section for more info.

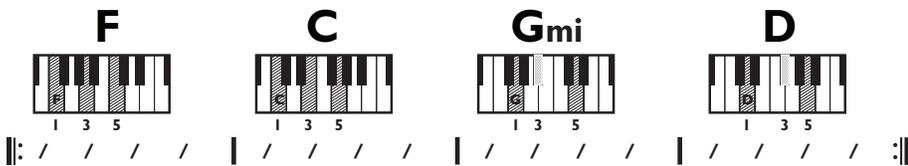
This idea of using chords that all come from the same key with the help of this jam card can be expanded. Changing the quality of one of the chords from major to minor or from minor to major can have a really cool effect. Let's say our randomly selected chords were F, C, G, and D minor. Our chord progression would look like this:



What if we changed the last chord from D minor to D major? Check out how unique and cool the sound of the progression becomes...

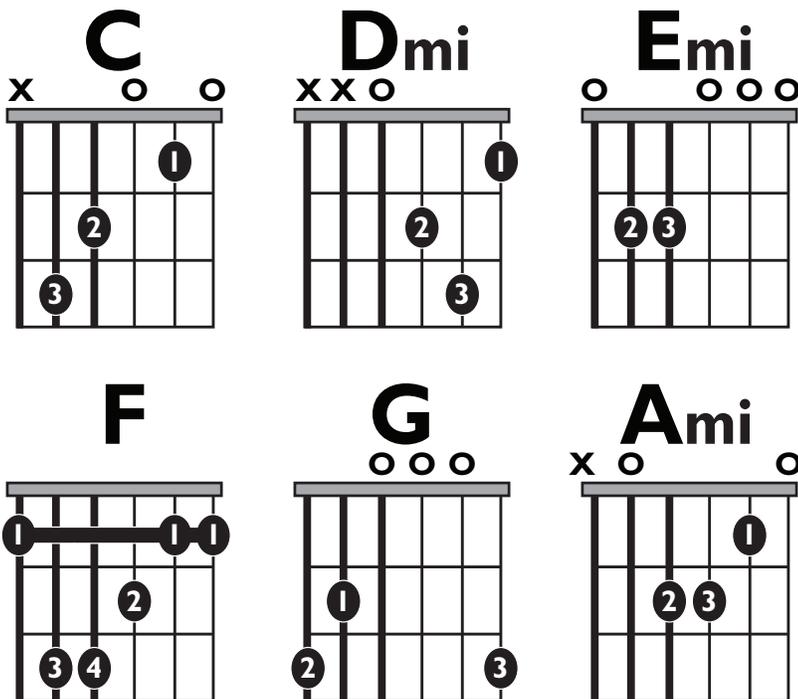


Let's try one more. What if we changed the G major to G minor? Once again we've got a chord progression that has a unique and expressive sound, and creating it was easy!



## Composing On Guitar

COMPOSITION



Visit the guitar section for more info.

The same thing is true about chords that go together on the guitar (or any instrument for that matter). Chords that are in the same key can always be arranged in almost any order to sound great. Again we'll use the key of C for this example because most of the chords can be

played in open positions.

Mixing these chords up into any order results in good sounding music! The funny thing is that music is designed to work this way—by arranging these chords into compositions we're paying attention to it at the language level.

The only difficulty for new guitarists is playing some of these chords because unlike on keyboard each one requires a completely different shape in open position. The most notoriously difficult here is the F chord, which can be easily substituted in this key for FMaj7, which is a lot easier to play and sounds great. Also, chords that haven't been learned yet can be eliminated altogether, and compositions can be built from only the known chords! Think about the simplicity of some of the most loved songs over the decades—"Who Do You Love" by Bo Diddley (or George Thorogood) being entirely made out of an E chord—"Oye Como Va" by Santana being only E minor and A—"I've Got a Feeling" by the Black Eyed Peas being G, E minor, and C the entire song. There are tons of great examples of cool songs that work with simple ingredients.

This brings up a very important point: what makes a song made out of the simplest ingredients work? A great first step into composition is listening to the most basic songs and hearing the way contrast is made using rhythm, lyrics, and song form. How are the chorus and verse different from each other in a one chord song like "Lowrider" or "Land of 1,000 Dances"? What does the band do in a simple song to make one section sound more exciting than another? Are some parts intended for vocals while other parts are instrumentals? Purposely using our ears to dig into our favorite music is often the best composition lesson.

Our own personal taste and love for music is illuminated by writing our own songs. Music becomes a language for us that we're learning to speak; composition has a personal expressive power that is truly unique.





**COMPOSITION  
LESSON  
PLANS**

# LESSON PLAN: Writing a Song: Make it Rhyme

## Objective:

*Students will be able to write by using phonetics (rhyming words)*

### Resources:

Pencil, Paper

### Procedures:

- 1 The words of a song are called lyrics (Fun Fact: Lyric derives from the Greek word lyrikos, meaning “singing to the lyre”. The lyre was a Greek string instrument. To help the students start writing lyrics, start with rhyming words.
- 2 Have the students pick 4 pairs of rhyming words such as (ex. cat, hat)
- 3 Next have the student place each word at the end of a short sentence. (ex. I once saw a cat. It was wearing a hat.) Hint: Write these lyrics down and have the students save them in their own “song book”.
- 4 Now take the lyrics and place them over a simple chord progression. This could be as easy as the one fingered chords or using the Axis of Awesome chord progression.



### Extensions:

- 1 Have the students play the song using one of the strum patterns from the guitar section of the manual. You can have them use the same strum pattern for each chord or mix it up.
- 2 Challenge the students to use their vocabulary words that they are learning in their English class. This will generally be more difficult to rhyme than the words that they would choose.

### Just for FUN!

Have the students record their songs. This can be done via a Smartphone, Computer or another recording device. This way they have reference copy that can serve them in the future to see how they improved or maybe even something they would like to change.

### National Core Arts Standards (Music):

National Core Arts Standards (Music) Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work. Example: Harmonizing Instruments MU:Cr2.1.H.5a (Novice) Select, develop, and use standard notation or audio/video recording to document melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic ideas for drafts of simple melodies (such as two-phrase) and chordal accompaniments for given melodies. (applies for all levels of this strand) Common Core Correlations: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.K.2.a Recognize and produce rhyming words. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.4 Describe how words and phrases (e.g., regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.



# LESSON PLAN: Rewriting a Song

## Objective:

Students will learn how to write a song based on the pattern of a known song

## Resources:

Pencil, Paper, Recording of Selected Song, Lyrics

## Procedures:

- 1 Choose a song that is known to the students. Hint: You can do this ahead of time by choosing several songs and then allowing the students to pick their favorite. Find recordings and lyrics of the song.
- 2 Hand out the lyrics to the students and then play the recording of the song as the students follow along
- 3 Next have the student rewrite the lyrics. What will work best here is if you only change a few words to get the ideas rolling. (Ex: "I want it that way" by the Back Street Boys can easily be changed to "I want it MY way" with a possible reference to a popular fast food chain. This starts the students thinking in a particular direction and will allow them to be creative either in small groups or as a whole class.
- 4 Once the lyrics are written down either by the group leader or by the teacher, sing them along to recording. Hint: Many times karaoke versions of the song are available via YouTube.

## Extensions:

- 1 If you pick a song that has an easy chord progression, I have the students play along with the recording.
- 2 Choose rhythms that work with the song from the teacher manual.

## Just for FUN!

Have the students record their songs. This can be done via a Smartphone, Computer or another recording device. This way they have reference copy that can serve them in the future to see how they improved or maybe even something they would like to change.



## National Core Arts Standards (Music):

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# LESSON PLAN: Ideas from the Class

## Objective:

Students will use information from their history class to write a song

### Resources:

Pencil, Paper and IDEAS!

### Procedures:

- 1 Have the students tell you what topics they are learning about in their History class. Hint: Talk to the History teacher ahead of time to learn what topic they are covering. Ask if there are any terms that relate to the topic.
- 2 Pass out small slips of paper and have the students write down the words they are studying in relationship to the topic. (ex. Moon Landing-rocket, moon, astronauts, etc...) This is one way to get everyone to participate and the lesson is not dominated by one or two students.
- 3 Next have the students call out the terms and write them on the board. Form the words into rhyming words.
- 4 Use the rhyming words to form a poem.

### Extensions:

- 1 If you pick a song that has an easy chord progression, I have the students play along with the rhyming words.
- 2 Choose rhythms that work with the song from from the teacher manual.

### Just for FUN!

Have the students present their poems or songs to the history teacher.



### National Core Arts Standards (Music):

National Core Arts Standards (Music) Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. Example: Harmonizing Instruments MU:Cr1.1.H.5a (Novice) Generate melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic ideas for simple melodies (such as two-phrase) and chordal accompaniments for given melodies. Anchor Standard 11: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art. Example: General Music MU:Cn11.1.(PK-8) Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life. (also applies in other strands at the high school level) Common Core CorrelationCCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.



# LESSON PLAN: Mystery Song?

## Objective:

*Students will learn how to write a song based on the pattern of a known song*

### Resources:

Any Instrument

### Procedures:

- 1 Have the students make a list of songs that they already know. Hint: This would be a great use of “song suggestion box” in front of the room. You will always have ones to choose from and they will love being able to suggest songs.
- 2 Choose (5) songs from the list that the students provided.
- 3 Play the chord progression for the students and see if they can recognize the song from the list. Hint: You can make a game out of it like Bingo.
- 4 Once the students recognize the pattern, have them play it on their instrument.

### Extensions:

- 1 Have one of the student’s play the chord progressions and the others guess which song it is. This can be done in small groups or by even rotating the student demonstrating the song.
- 2 Choose rhythms that work with the song from the teacher manual.

### Just for FUN!

Make a challenge out of it and keep a class leaderboard for the students.



### National Core Arts Standards (Music):

National Core Arts Standards (Music) Anchor Standard 3: Refine and complete artistic work.  
Example: Harmonizing Instruments MU:Cr3.1.H.5a (Novice) Apply teacher-provided criteria to critique, improve, and refine drafts of simple melodies (such as two-phrase) and chordal accompaniments for given melodies. Common Core Correlations: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. Common Core Correlation: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.1.b Build on others’ talk in conversations by responding to the comments of others through multiple exchanges.



# LESSON PLAN: Mix and Match Chords

## Objective:

Students will use information from their history class to write a song

### Resources:

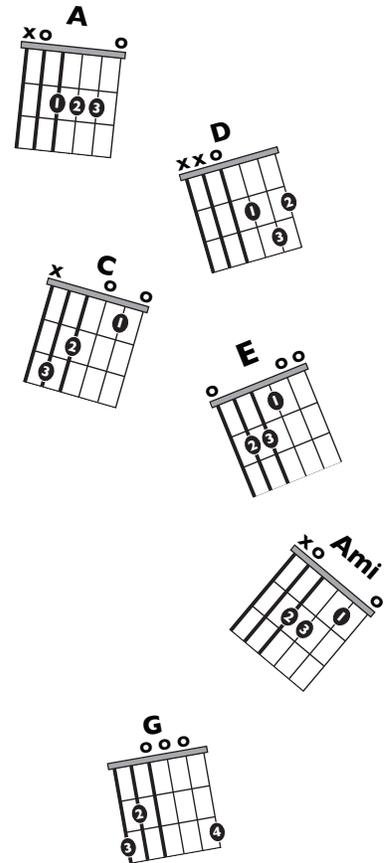
Pencil, Paper and IDEAS!

### Procedures:

- 1 Have the students write down all the chords they know. Hint: You can do this as a class with you writing them on each slip of paper or have the students do it.
- 2 Pick one of the chords and play it using one of the rhythms that the class already knows. Repeat this step until you have (4) chords chosen.
- 3 Once the students are comfortable with the chord pattern. Remove one of the chords and choose a new one.
- 4 Have the students compare the new one to the old one and ask which they liked better. Will it sound better in another part of your song?

### Extensions:

- 1 Record the song using one of the devices available to you (i.e. Smartphone, PC or other recording device)
- 2 Make the rhythms more complex by trying something new like the Reggae rhythm from the teacher manual.



### National Core Arts Standards (Music):

National Core Arts Standards (Music) Anchor Standard 1: Generate and Conceptualize artistic ideas and work. Example: Harmonizing Instruments MU:Cr1.1.H.1a (High School Proficient) Generate melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic ideas for improvisations, compositions (forms such as theme and variation or 12-bar blues), and three-or-more-chord accompaniments in a variety of patterns (such as arpeggio, country and gallop strumming, finger picking patterns).Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work. Example: Harmonizing Instruments MU:Cr2.1.H.5a (Novice) Select, develop, and use standard notation or audio/video recording to document melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic ideas for drafts of simple melodies (such as two-phrase) and chordal accompaniments for given melodies.Common Core Correlation: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.1.b Build on others' talk in conversations by responding to the comments of others through multiple exchanges.



# COMPOSITION CONSUMABLES





# Songwriting Idea #1: Make it Rhyme

The words of a song are called "lyrics". Here are some ideas to help you start writing your own song lyrics.

Pick four pairs of rhyming words and list them below (ex. day, play, fear, hear.... cat, hat... meet, greet etc.)

1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
4	_____	_____

Now put each word at the end of a short sentence. Write the sentences below.

EXAMPLE: "I feel glad at the end of the DAY"  
and "I know a place where we can PLAY"

1	_____
2	_____
3	_____
4	_____

Now play a chord progression you already know.  
Try to sing your rhyming sentences.

Does it sound like a song?



## Songwriting Idea #2: Rewrite a Song

Pick a song that you know how to play and sing. Play it a little to get nice and comfy. Write all new lyrics using the same melody from the original song. Make it funny. Make it sad. Make it any way you like. Try to sing your new song.



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## Songwriting Idea #3: Ideas from Class

Pick something that you learned about in school that you thought was cool. Write a short poem about that topic. Can you set it to music?

**The French Revolution**

**The Great Depression**

**We Reach The Moon**

**Geometric Shapes**

**Dinosaurs**

**Types of Weather**

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# Songwriting Idea # 4: Mystery Song

Pick a favorite progression or song that you already know. Play it for a friend without telling them what song you are playing. Ask them to write words for it. Try playing it while they sing it.

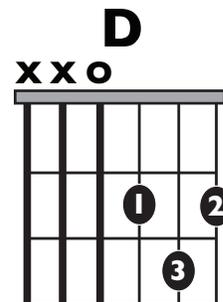
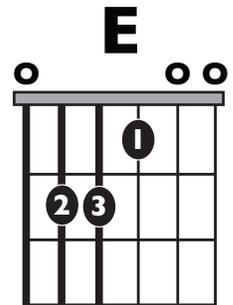
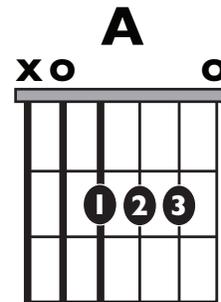




# Songwriting Idea #5: Pick a Rhyme

Pick a nice passage from a rhyming work (maybe something by Shakespeare or even Dr. Seuss).

Next, pick a chord progression. Try playing the progression and singing the passage on top of it.



COMPOSITION



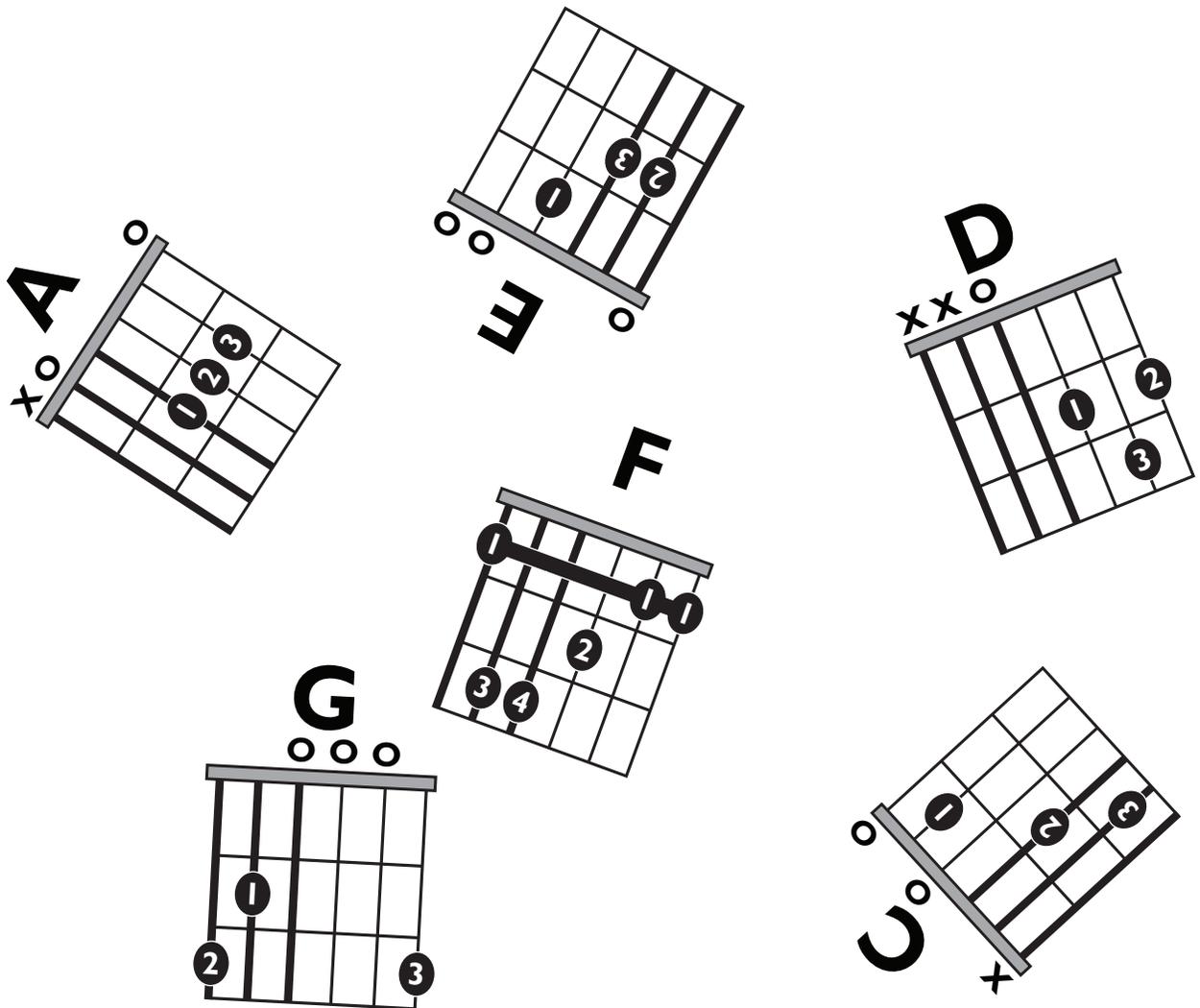
# Songwriting Idea #6: Mixed Up Chords

Pick a song that you know how to play already. Write each chord that appears in the song on a separate piece of paper. Put the chords in a random order in front of you. Try playing the new progression. Rearrange the chords again and repeat the process.

Do you hear anything that sounds good to your ear?

Can you sing any lyrics you have written over one of the new chord progressions?

Can you hum something over the new progression?





# Scrambled Chords... Yum!

When you scramble an egg, you don't worry too much about what part goes where. You just stir it up!

Lots of rock, blues, metal, punk and country songs have just three chords. If you pick the right three chords, it doesn't matter what order you put them in. They will sound good.

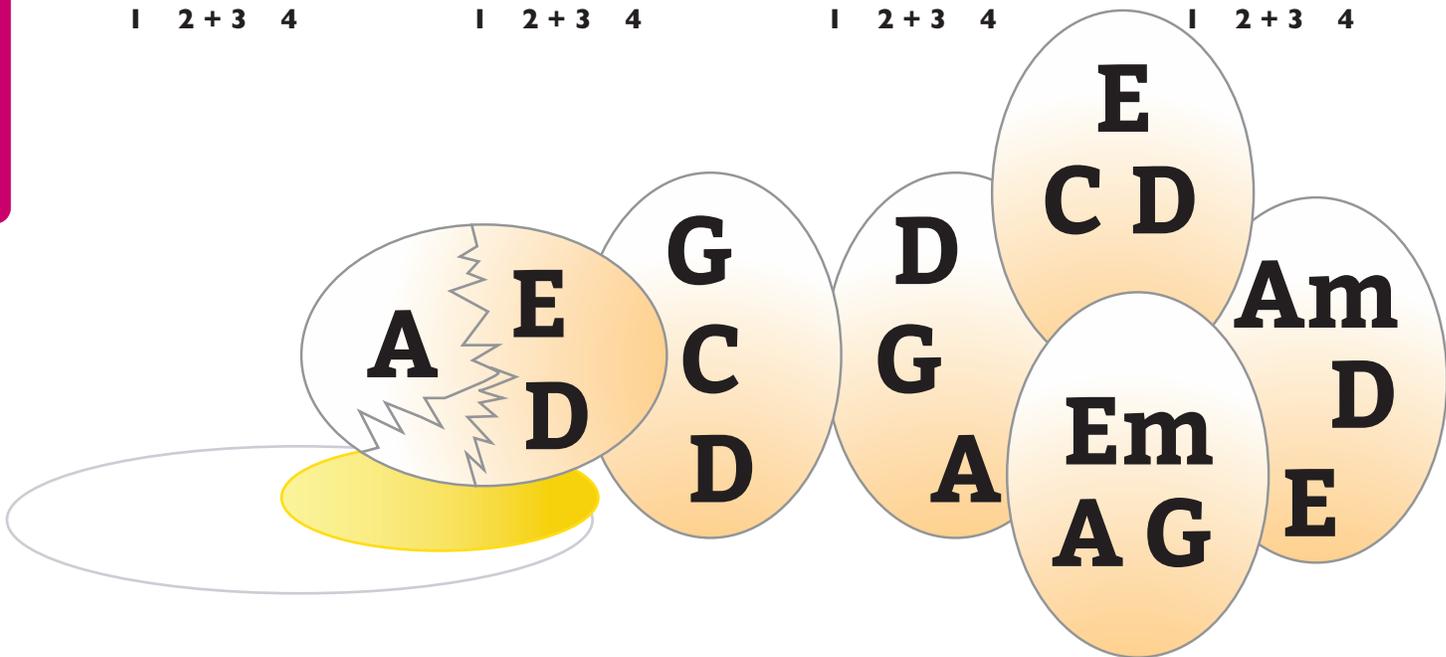
Take a look at the eggs below. Each one has a set of three chords that go great together. Pick one egg and crack it open. Spread the three chords all over the next page in any order you like. Then play it with any rhythm you like. Fill in the blanks for the chords and rhythm. Try to think of 4 and 8 measure patterns.

\_\_\_\_\_ ?      \_\_\_\_\_ ?      \_\_\_\_\_ ?      \_\_\_\_\_ ?

### Example

This Example uses the chords in the cracked egg below.

<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>E</b>
2 + 3 4	2 + 3 4	2 + 3 4	2 + 3 4



COMPOSITION



# Scrambled Chords Worksheet

\_\_\_\_\_ ?

\_\_\_\_\_ ?

\_\_\_\_\_ ?

\_\_\_\_\_ ?

\_\_\_\_\_ ?

\_\_\_\_\_ ?

\_\_\_\_\_ ?

\_\_\_\_\_ ?

\_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?

\_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?    \_\_\_\_\_ ?

## Modern Band Can Get LOUD

When using drum kits and amplified sound, it is important that both musicians and listeners are aware of the risks involved, and how to stay protected from hearing damage. We advise that you make earplugs available for all of your students, and that you also take the necessary steps to protect your hearing.

Below is a message from Kathy Peck, Co-founder and Executive Director of H.E.A.R., a non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness of the dangers of noise exposure that can lead to permanent hearing loss tinnitus.

### Listen Smart

We sometimes take this amazing gift of hearing for granted. As a fellow musician, I unknowingly did just that; unaware of the huge consequences I would suffer. My all-girl rock band, The Contractions, opened for Duran Duran at Oakland Coliseum during their MTV video-shoot concert tour in the '80s. For that particular show, I felt our rock trio needed to have more power, so I borrowed a friend's giant bass cabinet stack, prepared to pump out a wall of sound at the concert.

Little did I know that was the day my whole world would turn upside-down and my hearing damage would become permanent. It was this experience that led me to become a co-founder of H.E.A.R.® (Hearing Education and Awareness for Rockers) with the founding support of Pete Townshend of the Who and the H.E.A.R. board of directors, co-founder Dr. Flash Gordon, The Les Paul Foundation, The Bill Graham Supporting Foundation, NY/ Presbyterian Weill Cornell Medical and other caring people who support our mission.

The ear is not designed for repeated exposure to extremely high sound levels. Its defense mechanism is limited. A middle ear reflex action (a contraction of ear muscles that stiffens the system, reducing energy transmission) can protect against sudden increases in sound, but too slowly to protect against bursts of sounds like gunshots, loud drum hits, or walls of sound intensity that assault our ears and hit us in the chest.

Acoustic Foam Earplugs reduce the risk of hearing damage for many noisy occupations and at noisy venues, such as live music venues, music festivals, band rehearsals, DJ and dance music events, and other noisy public events.

### Knowing the Risks

"It is important that we, whether musicians, technicians, or consumers, make efforts to protect our hearing and preserve our ability to enjoy music throughout the lifespan. Good hearing health is easy and developing the right mindset from childhood will reduce the risk of hearing loss and help preserve the joy of music." (Dr. Joseph Montano, Chief of Audiology and Speech Language



(Photo: Musicians Earplugs by H.E.A.R., (Etymotic, Westone Lab)

Pathology at New York Presbyterian Hospital-Weill Cornell Medical Center and H.E.A.R. Board of Director)

Think of your ears as if they were tiny organic batteries with a charge. The more exposure of the ears to loud noise or music, the more the ears will lose their charge. So if you are over your maximum daily dose of loud sounds, your ears begin to lose their charge. This is why people hear less clearly and/or have ringing in their ears after being exposed to music at a loud concert, band rehearsal or to other loud noises. Even worse, people who suffer with tinnitus (ringing in the ears) may hear just one specific tone that will set off the ringing in their ears. For some, even when things are completely quiet and there is no sound in their environment at all, ears may start to ring.

Exposure to continuous loud sounds can sometimes cause a temporary hearing loss (temporary threshold shift), and the ears may recover in a day or so. However, repeated exposure to harmful sounds eventually diminishes the ability of the sensory hair cells in our inner ear to transmit sound by flattening or disfiguring them, fusing them together, or breaking them off entirely. Sounds louder than 80 decibels are considered potentially hazardous.

The maximum exposure time for unprotected ears per day according to NIOSH- The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health is 8 hours at 85 dB, A-weighted, slow response. For every 3-dB increase in volume, the maximum exposure time is cut in half. (Chucri (Chuck) A. Kardous, MS, PE Senior Research Engineer, Hearing Loss Prevention-National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health)

- 88 dB - 4 hours
- 91 dB - 2 hours
- 97 dB - 30 min
- 103 dB- 7.5 min

### Know the Signs

- Ringing in the ears
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Asking people to repeat themselves
- Difficulty hearing speech with ambient noise
- The need for excessive volume when listening
- Seek advice of an audiologist or ear doctor if you are experiencing any of these warning signs

### Using Caution

- Carry Earplugs with you.
- Have them available for your students.
- Always play at the lowest volume possible.
- Encourage your drummer to use "Thunder Rods" to reduce drumkit volume.
- Take breaks to allow your ears to rest.

Visit [www.hearnet.com](http://www.hearnet.com) for more information.



*“Good hearing health is easy and developing the right mindset from childhood will reduce the risk of hearing loss and help preserve the joy of music.”*

**– Dr. Joseph Montano,  
H.E.A.R. Board of Director**

Danger Zone	
decibels	
150	Jet Take-Off
140	Gun Shot
130	Jack-Hammer, Rock Concert
120	Car Stereo, Band Practice
110	Dance Clubs, Headphones
100	Factory
90	Subway
80	Busy Street
70	Restaurant
60	Conversation

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