

Song Form Summary

Introduction

Song form or structure is a bit like a skeleton: it isn't the *life* of the song, but it does enable the song to function – to communicate clearly, to engage meaningfully and accessibly with people, to carry its content or message in a way that others can grasp, and to progress coherently with direction rather than just wandering aimlessly.¹ Or think of a song form as being like a handbag/briefcase/man-bag: when you have a lot to pack into a small space *and* need that to be easily accessible throughout the day, it tends to work best if the bag has separate compartments for separate items *and* if we pack methodically.

Just as not every skeleton is exactly the same (either between or within the species), and can carry even more obvious variety in outward appearance, so song form provides a stable core but doesn't have to be absolutely rigid: we can bend and stretch it here and there to allow it to accommodate what the song is trying to say whilst also maintaining “structural integrity”.

How song form fits into the writing process

- Sometimes we either intentionally or unintentionally start out with the best song form for what we are trying to say – wonderful! Other times it's a process of exploring what our song wants to say and then experimenting with which form serves that purpose best. Sometimes it's even experimenting with form that helps us land our concept/message.
- Once we have settled on a form we can write *to* it – the form can actually *help* us to write; as a tool in our song writing toolbox it can help us make editing decisions as we craft our song.

Three Main Song Forms

	AAA	AABA	V-C
Overview	The simplest song form. One section is repeated, with little or no variation; a refrain may be used. Each A is a complete statement musically and lyrically but is conceived to work sequentially as one element in a bigger design. Can have any number of verses.	A beautiful blend and balance of repetition and contrast, of simplicity and subtle complexity. Each A section is the same musically, with one lyrical focus that develops. The B section provides a change of pace and perspective; it is a complete contrast to the A section and yet feels inevitable both in its emergence from and return to A.	Unlike the AAA and AABA forms, the <i>main thing</i> comes second (in the chorus) not first (in the verse). The chorus is the musical peak and lyrical point of the song; it is a separate, often standout (although not necessarily forceful) statement, and carries power in its repetition. It will usually be possible to insert the statement “and that's why I say...” between verse and chorus.

Suitable for	Telling a story, or when you have something to say that needs to continue uninterrupted.	Subject matter that you want to flow seamlessly from start to finish, building to an emotionally satisfying but not overstated conclusion.	Ideal if you want to periodically restate a core, capsulised message.
Title placement	First or last line.	First or last line of the A section.	First line of the chorus, or possibly last.
Payoff	Usually in the last verse.	Towards the end, but often with a degree of subtlety.	Towards the end – ideally each verse will progress in content and develop the song concept so that each subsequent chorus carries increasing impact.
Examples	Hymns and folk songs; <i>Blowin' in the Wind</i>	<i>Yesterday, Jesus All For Jesus</i>	Too many to even begin...!
Variations	Addition of an instrumental, use of an “outside refrain”.	AABABA (the last B and A can be full/partial repeats, variations, or new), ABAB, ABAC, use of intros and/or outros, addition of an instrumental.	Use of intros, outros, tags, instrumentals, pre-choruses, bridges.
Notes	A refrain is where the last 1-2 lines of every verse is the same. An outside refrain sits <i>outside</i> the verse, making it similar to a chorus but different in function in that it doesn't carry the <i>main</i> message of the song (the As do).	ABAB and ABAC forms can also themselves be varied.	Verses: reasons, feelings, lists, details, explanations, story Chorus: big idea, title, answer to the verses Bridge: contrast in lyric, melody and pace, often adding dimension by expanding or giving new insight (a twist/deeper dive on the chorus) Pre-Chorus: connecting section (not conclusive or standalone), smooths the transition and/or builds between verse and chorus musically and/or lyrically.

How Form Frees Us

As creatives we can kick against having form or structure imposed on us, protesting that it stifles our creativity, but as the illustration goes a game of football would be chaos without rules and ultimately no fun for anyone. These song forms have stood the test of time and can be seen in the majority of lastingly successful songs, which is why they are taught wherever song writing is taken seriously (for balance, one classic example of an epic song that doesn't fit into any standard form but nonetheless is expertly crafted is Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*; in Christian music you also find quite a number of "channel songs" – where there are multiple "evenly weighted" sections that can be repeated as desired e.g. Will Regan's writing).

The brilliant thinker Edward DeBono (who "created" lateral thinking) described creativity as simply forcing ourselves to think of alternatives. That's where these song-crafting tools, that sometimes feel like stifling "rules," come in: by placing some restrictions on us they put us in a place where we are *forced* to think of alternatives, thereby actually *enhancing* rather than stifling our creativity. Creativity thrives under limitations. So even if it seems like hassle and hard work, embracing the challenges of using form in the process of song writing will strengthen our skill as a song writer and add length, height, depth and breadth to our writing... plus, it goes without saying that in order to be able to break the rules in a purposeful and influential way, we first need to be able to keep them!

¹ Thanks to Brian Doerksen for this illustration, shared at the Vineyard Worship Irish Song Writers Retreat, September 2019.