

Proposal Guide here.

Today's topic links common principles of songwriting and proposal writing, especially country, folk, and Americana music styles. I'll discuss the similarities in structure, writing, and overall approach to the business.



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In 2005, I began hosting the Country Folk Show on KGLT, a community radio station in Bozeman, Montana. I became intrigued by the similarities between country music and proposal writing, which lead to an entertaining presentation at the 19th APMP International Conference in May 2008. This podcast summarizes that presentation in 10 minutes, without the music. Digital music rights prohibit actually including referenced songs, but you can easily find them on iTunes. My personal lesson from the presentation was to do a sound and video check first, just like a singer-songwriter.

My full title was—I Submitted My Proposal and You Stomped That Sucker Flat: *What Nashville and Songwriters Can Teach Us about Writing Proposals*, a take-off on a country song with a catchy title. Intrigued?

Here's the bottom line—successful proposal writers can identify best practices in the oddest places. If it works in the highly competitive music business, we should consider the potential impact in the proposal business.

First, I'll discuss how songs are structured, and then relate that to how winning proposals are structured. Second, I'll discuss writing lyrics versus writing persuasive proposals. Third, I'll discuss similarities in the business models of songwriting and proposal writing.

Not being a professional songwriter, I've relied on John Braheny's book, *The Craft and Business of Songwriting*, for advice on songwriting. I'm only a DJ and avid music fan.

## STRUCTURING SONGS

I selected country and folk music, because the structure is more predictable than other genres. Pop music is designed to appeal to and engage listeners, much like proposals that must engage evaluators. In contrast, jazz and classical music often introduce a melody followed by multiple variations. Because of the complexity, you have to listen carefully.

Pop music is much less demanding. Here are a couple of quotes from John Braheny from *The Craft and Business of Songwriting*:

*"Familiarity breeds comfort. People have an unconscious desire and need for symmetry. The repetition of rhyme, melody, and form satisfies that need."*

Successful songs “balance ... predictability that breeds comfort, and an occasional exception that creates interest. But the exceptions should be calculated.”

Pop songs contain four key elements: the verse, chorus, bridge, and sometimes a pre-hook.

The **verse** conveys the most information. The melody is essentially the same, to help the listener focus on the changing lyric. The repeated melody promotes continued acceptance of the message.

In a proposal, body text conveys most of the information. Like a repeated melody, if the proposal writers' styles are consistent, they promote continued acceptance of the message.

The **chorus** focuses the message, emotion, meaning, or essence of the song. It's usually simple, succinct, and easily remembered. This message, often called the hook, is the most important statement and warrants repeating. Characteristics of the chorus are that the melody is the same, the title appears in the first or last line, the lyric is the same unless there is a twist revealed in the last line, and the repetition helps the listener quickly learn and remember the song.

In an effective proposal, win themes focus your selling messages and are repeated consistently throughout the proposal. We use theme statements, informative headings, action captions, summaries, and graphics to communicate win themes.

The **bridge** or **break** is a short musical interlude with a different melody, about two-thirds of the way through the song. It relieves boredom, regains interest, adds drama, and helps the listener refocus. The break is optional and usually played once.

Perhaps the closest element to a break in a proposal are the graphical emphasis devices, including graphics, white space, color, display lists, introductions, and type changes (size, style, color, font). All of these elements convey a sense of importance and structure that make the reader more receptive to your message.

The fourth and least common element is the **pre-hook**, directly preceding the chorus. Think of it as a pre-chorus, designed to heighten interest. The length varies, it could change from chorus to chorus, and it has the same melody. Most casual listeners consider it part of the chorus. In a proposal, consider it similar to emphasis devices that signal something important is coming.

Now that you're familiar with the elements in a song, consider the structure, how the elements are assembled. The most common song structure, particularly in country music, is *verse—chorus—verse—chorus—break—verse—chorus*. A variant would be to precede each chorus with a pre-hook, keeping the same structure. In folk music, a common variant is to begin with the chorus, and then follow the same structure. Another folk variant is all verses, with no chorus. Listen to a few of your favorite songs and identify the pattern.

Similarly in proposals, use a common, predictable structure to help readers focus on your message. If readers have no idea where you are taking them, then they remember little of what they read. In addition, an inconsistent structure suggests a disorganized bidder. For example, saying that you will discuss *a*, *b*, and then *c*, but then discussing *a*, *b*, and *c* in a different order, or something else entirely, suggests that you don't keep your word. That's fatal in a proposal. Listen to some of the clear writing tips in Podcast 4.

To maintain a consistent structure, and to save time, use templates when preparing proposals. The single most useful template is the Four-Box organizer, which can be used to structure anything from the response to an individual question, an executive summary, or an entire proposal. Storyboards, success story templates, strategy development tools, capture planners, and proposal planners are all types of templates.

Let's review common advice for songwriters and proposal writers. First, emulate the best. Analyze hits, the best-in-class examples, and map the structure. Second, use repetition to make your message memorable. Repeat your win themes in theme statements, words, headings that mirror introductions, and an organization that matches the bid request instructions. Third, identify, understand, and address the audience. Every audience and every performance is different.

Consider this advice for songwriters, and then relate it to your proposals:

Keep introductions for ballads short to involve the listener sooner. Introductions for dance tunes can be longer because the audience is already involved. How involved is your reader at the beginning of your proposal or presentation?

Identify the voice early. Familiar is positive; an unknown voice requires an identity before deciding if you like the message. If the listener can't hear or understand the message, the reaction is probably negative. Complex messages require more thought—more time to accept. Positioning, pre-selling, consistent messaging, and repetition are vital. The reaction to unfamiliar messages is more likely to be negative.

That's enough about components and structure. Let's examine writing lyrics. Again, from John Braheny in *The Craft and Business of Songwriting*, the key elements are simplicity, focus, the title, the opening line or phrase, and rhymes. Regarding simplicity, Jack Keller, a songwriter, producer, and publisher said, "Focus on one idea and build your song around it." Jack noted two problems, saying more than you need and not saying it clearly. That's equally good advice for a proposal.

One of my favorite examples of a simple yet effective lyric is Paul Simon's *April Come She Will*. Check it out. Told in six, rhyming couplets, the love affair begins in April and is over by September.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, one of the most quoted speeches in history, comprised 278 words, 203 of which were one syllable.

More advice for songwriters: Describe in one word the emotion or mental state that the song expresses. If you write about a feeling, make it just one.

What is your proposal about? Slashing costs? Reducing operating room errors? Preventing HIV transmission? Increasing profits? Make it about too many things, and evaluators remember little.

We decide from the opening line of a song whether to keep listening, tune out, or turn off. Did you engage your reader or listener in the first line? By the end of the first verse, you should establish *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*. Apply the same advice to the first half-page of your executive summary.

Check out Mary Gauthier's *Drag Queens in Limousines* for a fine example. While listening to the song is most effective, here are the opening lines:

*"I hated high school, I prayed it would end.  
The jocks and their girls, it was their world, I didn't fit in.  
Mama said, "Baby, it's the best school that money can buy,  
Hold your head up, be strong, c'mon Mary, try."*

Are you engaged? Can you establish *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*?

Rhymes seldom apply to proposals, but other poetic devices do. Note the use of alliteration in these two proposal headings:

*Reduce Start-up Fees by Extending the Contract*, versus,  
*Cut Start-up Fees by Continuing the Current Contract*

Which is more memorable?

After looking at structure and lyrics, let's consider contrasting approaches to the music business, the Nashville model versus the singer-songwriter model.

The Nashville model is an outsourcing model. A manager selects, organizes, and manages the best available talent for each task, essentially forming an Integrated Product Team. The advantages are that you get better overall talent, individuals need fewer skills, the hit rate is higher, and not all talent needs to tour, reducing touring cost. The disadvantage is that the result is often less creative. Everything sounds similar. You have greater reliance on management and process, participants are less motivated, and recording is more expensive.

The *singer-songwriter model* relies on a leader or primary talent that multitasks. The result is often seen as more creative, fresher, and unique. The disadvantages are that it is riskier to rely on the key talent, the hit rate is lower, the potentially opaque form and process is more difficult to repeat, and the key talent is easily sidetracked. The tabloids are filled with tales of troubled talent.

Both models have lessons for business development and proposal writers. Blend the best of both. Hire the best available talent, but you still own the product. Build sufficient infrastructure for base-level work, but augment your resources when demand is high. Develop a cadre of proven talent that you can rely on. Define a framework process, and then innovate intelligently within that process. And lastly,

star talent matters. In an era when products are quickly copied and surpassed, individuals are lasting discriminators that cannot be matched until human cloning is perfected. Rely on your stars, whether direct employees or consultants, to sell your service delivery stars.

In summary, structure matters. Study form and learn best practice. Use templates to improve consistency, effectiveness, and to save time.

Writing matters. Study writing, especially persuasive business writing. Use style guides, tools, and reviews to improve your writing.

Blend in-house and outsourced talent within a defined, consistent, framework process. Define your process, train the participants, follow your process consistently, review the right things at the right time, and repeatedly make improvements. If you're not improving, you're probably falling behind.

## CREDITS

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That's all. Thanks for listening.

## REFERENCES

1. *The Craft and Business of Songwriting*, John Braheny, Writer's Digest Book, Cincinnati, OH, 1988.
2. *Franklin Covey Style Guide for Business and Technical Communication*, Franklin Covey, 2000. This style guide was the primary inspiration for my book. Dr. Larry Freeman is the primary author of this excellent guide.
3. KGLT 91.9 FM Bozeman; streaming at [www.kglt.net](http://www.kglt.net), Larry Newman, Host, Country Folk Show, Saturday 3-6 pm (but not the Summer of 2008)
4. *Proposal Guide for Business and Technical Professionals*, Larry Newman, Shipley Associates, 3rd Edition, 2006.