



Tweak

At a folk festival recently, a fellow folkster asked me if I could help him out. He said he was good at writing parodies, but couldn't figure out how to write an original song. Here are my two cents on the subject, with apologies to those not interested in songwriting.

My folkster's question is one we hear quite a bit, and it's not hard to figure out why. Staring at a blank paper or screen is daunting. It's less overwhelming to begin with a completed song and tweak it. Musically, the melody is written already; the time signature is set and so is the meter. Lyrically, the meter is established; the rhyme scheme has been decided upon; the fundamental "device" or angle of the song has been invented; many of the minor internal rhymes and metaphors are in existence. The gender, the tense, all those grammatical components have been figured out. Writing a parody is actually an act of editing; if you want to move beyond parody, one way is to intensify this tweaking.

(Incidentally, for a song to be a parody, it has to poke fun at the original song. A song using the form of an original song to poke fun at, say, a political party, is not technically a parody, but is more accurately called a "takeoff". Takeoffs are MUCH more common than parodies, which they are often mistakenly called.)

Fortunately, for those good at writing takeoffs, beginning with one is a good way to start an original song, because this eliminates the blank page monster. The secret is to continue with the editing process, both musical and lyrical, way beyond where you would have stopped previously. Using an existing work as a beginning template is perfectly ethical; it is used by writers and artists everywhere.

So. As an example, I'll use the first verse of **Amazing Grace**:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Here's a (not very good, I know!) takeoff of this verse:

*Amazing pie, how sweet and hot
That caused my girth to grow
I once was thin, but now I'm not
Was fast but now I'm slow*

There you have a takeoff. Now, what's the most obvious way to begin to turn this into an original? First, change the melody. Since the meter of the lyric has already been decided by the duration of the notes, you should start by not changing the time signature or the durations of the notes. In other words, looking at the notation of the song, move the notes UP or DOWN only. A quarter note shouldn't be changed to a dotted quarter note, for example. Goof around with this for awhile. You don't have to be able to write notation; just sing the song with notes going down where they used to go up, and other such manipulations (it might even be best to sing the original lyrics for this, and not your takeoff lyrics, to keep the meter right).

That may be enough in itself to erase the link from the original song to the takeoff, but probably not. At the risk of making the lyrics sound strained, you CAN try changing the melody further by changing the time signature. **Amazing Grace** is a waltz (3/4 time) but as has been shown thousands of times on the web, it can be sung to the theme song from **Gilligan's Island**, which is in 4/4 time. Also you can sing it to the first lines of **God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen**, then change THAT melody. You can even try a syncopated melody as an idea (one that goes taDUM, taDUM instead of DUM DUM DUM DUM) such as **Sink the Bismarck**, though this may sound unnatural, if the original lyrics aren't syncopated.

Now, about the words. This first verse of **Amazing Grace** has a few identifying lyric characteristics. The first word, "amazing", is such a unique word with which to begin a song, it's the obvious first choice for replacement, if you want

your song to be your own. You could use another similar adjective, like "astounding", or even better, take a different tack and, for example, substitute "a pound of" or maybe "persimmon." "Persimmon Pie, how sweet and hot." But don't stop there. The secret to all this is to keep editing. "How sweet" is still left over from the original song. Try "Persimmon Pie, so rich and hot." Note the word "how" is changed to "so", which changes the line's structure a bit.

Keep going! Edit! Edit! Look in a grammar book and find out all the things you can change. How about putting it in the past? How about changing it from a first person singular song to something else?:

*Persimmon Pie, so rich and hot
Did wreak its wrath on us
We both were quick but now we're not
That's why we missed the bus*

Sing THAT to **God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen**, and it won't sound much like **Amazing Grace** any more. Not only are the words changed but the structure is too, in a few cases. The original song had its third and fourth lines with the structure of "We once were this but now we're that", and the fourth line now does not have this structure. The third line could be changed more, too, in this regard. Maybe to "We're slow because we ate a lot", getting rid of that "but now", which still echoes the original.

So now you have a song with a new melody, new words, and a new structure. In other words, you have a new song! Sing it to a few people and ask them if it reminds them of any other song. If someone says "**Amazing Grace**", you might want to go back and do yet more editing.

Once you get the hang of this, I think you'll find yourself writing initial "takeoffs" that are more conducive to eventual editing, and less dependent on the original song's idea.

There are many ways to overcome the blank page problem, of course, but if you're good at writing takeoffs, this may work well for you. Happy tweaking!