How to Write a Rap Song

Though every artist can come at the same project with a completely different process, having a foundation to work from is useful if you're struggling to write your music. To write a rap song, follow these instructions.

Part 1 Writing Lyrics

1 Brainstorm While listening to a beat on repeat, allow yourself to free-associate or even freestyle out loud to get your creative juices flowing. Do this for a while without setting pen to paper. When you're ready, make a list of every concept, unique perspective, or potential lyric that popped into your head. Allow these to guide and inspire the content of your song as you move forward.
   - Let your ideas brew for a while. Carry a notepad around with you so that if you get a flash of inspiration while you're on a bus, working out, or buying groceries, you can capture the moment and hopefully expand on it.

2 Write the hook If you were writing a term paper, you'd start with a thesis. But this is a rap song so start with a hook (a.k.a. chorus). The hook should not only capture the theme of the song, but, more importantly, be catchy and unique as well. A great hook will often inspire other elements of the song such as the beat or other lyrics, so don’t settle for something that doesn’t prompt any other ideas.
   - If you’re having trouble coming up with something out of the blue, riff off of or respond to a line you love from another rap song. Just don’t copy anything outright or you may find yourself in legal trouble. "Drop it like it's hot" was originally a throw-off line from a Hot Boys single in the early 2000s, but Snoop Dogg turned it into a huge hit several years later.

3 Follow the words Choose points from your brainstorm list that inspire you and flesh them out. Of course, this is where your skills as a lyricist and as a rhymer will show through. If you're an experienced rapper, play to your strengths. If metaphor is your game, let yourself move on the strength of your metaphors. If you're a natural storyteller, let a narrative emerge from the words.
   - Stay out of your own way. The biggest mistake you can make when you first get started writing lyrics is that you want to "say" something, and force abstract concepts into your lyrics. Be specific. Use concrete words, phrases, and images in your words to keep your idea in the background.

4 Be believable While some people might take a "I can rap about anything I want to!"
attitude, it's best to avoid rapping about your global cocaine trafficking empire if you're a teenager from the suburbs. Also, keep in mind that just because popular rappers write about certain things, it doesn't make your raps any more or less rap. The Beastie Boys rapped about partying and skateboarding in a talented, unique, and creative way, even though they didn't necessarily rap about traditional topics or fit into the traditional image of what a rapper should be.

- If you really want to write a rap about something you don't do, make sure you make them as ridiculous as possible. Buff up the braggadocio; exaggerate to insane levels. Don't do it often, and not in serious songs, but have fun with it. Be creative.

5 Revise, revise, revise  
Unless you're a world-class rapper who makes magic every time straight off the dome, your first draft of a song won't necessarily be the best. That's okay. Bob Dylan's first draft of "Like a Rolling Stone" was as 20 pages long and terrible. As you're writing, let everything that wants to come out come out, but then you'll need to scale it back to a workable and efficient set of lyrics.

- Focus on the most memorable lines and images, and cut out everything that doesn't match that theme, that tone, or that story. If you're having trouble figuring out what works and what doesn't, try to rewrite the song from memory, without looking at it. This will act as a kind of strainer--you won't be able to remember the less effective bits, and you'll have to fill in stronger material for what you can't remember.
- The average song will have 2-3 verses of 16-20 bars each, and 3-4 chorus sections of a variable number of lines. Try to aim for trimming down your output to that amount.

Part 2 Picking Beats

1 Pick a pre-made beat  
In almost all kinds of songwriting, the melody happens before the lyrics. Most of the time, rappers will similarly develop the beat and become familiar with the music before attempting to write any lyrics. While a rapper might have a stockpile of rhymes built up in notebooks to jump off from, crafting a song requires a beat to rhyme to. Doing this will ensure that the song feels unforced and the music matches the words.

- Find a producer online who makes beats and listen to several of them until you find some you like. Commission particular sounds or styles from the producer to get an original track. If you like samurai samples and old-school comic book references like the Wu-Tang Clan, send the beatmaker some examples.
- Even if you have a kind of idea forming for a kind of song or topic you'd like, try to come up with at least three possible beats before settling on one. Matching content, words, and music is a complicated process. Don't rush it.

2 Consider making your own beats  
You can do this on your own computer or sound equipment, or even just by recording yourself beatboxing for inspiration.

- Start by sampling the break from an R&B or soul song you really like. The Meters were a
relatively obscure New Orleans funk band from the late 60s, who became famous after being heavily sampled as the tracks for great rap songs. Chop the beat using GarageBand or other free software on your computer.

- Create beats with a programmable drum machine. The Roland TR-808 is the most iconic drum machine, used in many classic hip-hop and rap tracks. It features a wide variety of bass kicks, hi-hats, hand claps, and other percussive sounds that you can program in different patterns. You can also process and manipulate these beats on your computer.

3 **Find the melody in the beat** Add the melody using bass tones on a synth or keyboard, or by sampling a melodic line from a pre-existing song. Listen to the song repeatedly until the melody starts to reveal itself. Listen to it from different angles and come up with different melodic possibilities. This will help you to find the hook as you begin composing the lyrics and the chorus to the song.

- Record a "scratch track" of yourself singing nonsense words on top of the beat to help find and remember the melody. It doesn't matter if you're a good singer, because this won't stay on the song. Just allow yourself to explore the beat and find a melody in it by free-singing, humming, or vocalizing.

4 **Listen to lots of beats before settling on one** Some beats are upbeat and make you want to dance and may lead to party-rap songs, while some dark beats will lead to serious or political material. Just because a beat is good doesn't necessarily mean it's the right beat for the song you want to make. As you listen, imagine the possible songs that could come from each beat and pick one that matches your desires for the song.

- You may not have any clue where the song is going as you listen, and that's ok. Go with your gut. If a beat "speaks" to you--it's time to start making music.

**Part 3 Putting it Together**

1 **Structure the song** Now that you have a good idea of the sound your completed song will have, arrange your rhyme into verses (16 bars apiece). You can start each verse with nearly any rhyme, but it's a good practice to end with a rhyme that makes a point.[1] This way your verse doesn't seem to be left hanging. A popular song structure would be:

- Intro
- Verse
- Chorus
- Verse
- Chorus
- Verse
- Middle 8 (a.k.a. breakdown)
- Chorus
- Outro
2 **Rap and refine**  Practice rapping your song on your chosen beat to work out the bugs and optimize your written verses. Cut out as many words as possible and then cut out some more. Remember, a rap song is not an English paper; only use the words that are needed to make your point, nothing more. Don't be afraid to add a pause or two, which can help to enhance a certain point in the song.

3 **Memorize your song**  Rap your lyrics over your beat until you have memorized every breath and you are sick of hearing them. Only then will you be ready to produce your song.

4 **Produce the song**  Either hook up with a producer to get the recordings and mastering completed or self-produce the song.
   - Put it on SoundCloud. Create a SoundCloud account. Edit your profile, then upload your track. Remember to use hash tags. Be online every day to get people's attention and reply to every question you get from anyone.

**Sources and Citations**