

A “Walk” Through The Creative Process

Whether you are composing a musical masterpiece or a miniature, or writing, painting, or designing, you will pass through the stages of the creative process. Each stage is necessary and should be completed before moving to the next. Skipping or skimming a stage could stall the creative “flow” and/or lead to writer’s “block”. So I would like to provide an example of this process: we are going to “walk” through these stages now, to familiarize you with the journey from idea to end product. This example pertains to setting text to music, but the principles would be true for any creative project.

Stage 1: Challenging and Inspiring

Brainstorming I: Develop an initial Idea. The idea comes from an impulse, perhaps to express a feeling or thought, or it may be a problem or challenge that you want to solve. No impulse yet? Brainstorm about what you would like to do and/or create word webs that will assist you in recording your apparently “random” ideas. Be open-minded, impulsive, and even “illogical.” The intuitive, “unconscious” mind often sees connections and solutions immediately, bypassing the linear steps of sequential logic. You will know when you have exhausted a web, because new ideas and connections will just stop, and you may sense an eagerness to move to the next step. Look for patterns in your web and images or concepts that recur under different guises. Is there another idea or concept in your web that seems worth exploring in a new web? Then start another web on a fresh sheet of paper, and make new connections. Once you have narrowed down your ideas to one or two central concepts that capture the energy of your initial impulse, you are ready to move on.

In my example, I began with the word “nature” in the centre of the page and webbed words that lead me to “a walk by the ocean.” Since I am setting text, I looked through my poetry and found a poem, *Sky, Sea, Shore* by James Reeves. Now I am ready for Stage 2.

Stage 2: Imagining and Generating

Gathering materials and resources related to your central concept is your next step. Imagine a giant basket that you are going to fill with all the sights, sounds, ideas and sensations that you think might be useful and inspiring for your composition. This is a highly receptive phase of the creative process: suspend judgment, defer criticism and editing.

The Text

For this “walk” through the creative process, I am working with text, so I will explore the poem that I have chosen to set to music:

Sky, Sea, Shore James Reeves

Stars in a frosty sky
Crackle and blaze;
Streams in the lowland meadows
Linger and laze;
Shells on the seashore gleam,
Washed by the tide;
Seagulls over the harbour
Circle and glide.

Blue smoke and prancing steed,
Swallow and snake and swan—
How many more
Curving, glistening S-things
In sky, sea and shore?

The Framework

In this stage, you are “imagining and generating” your composition. What sounds, colours, gestures would you like to have? What instruments would you like to use?

Imagine the best result for your completed piece: how long is it? What happens in it?

Are there loud, fast, melodic, rhythmic, colourful passages? Is there accent, dissonance, melody, etc.?

Composers working on a commission usually know who they are creating a new piece for, how many instruments they will use, who has special abilities with certain instruments, how long the piece should be, and so on. I call this the “framework” of your composition, it sets certain practical limits within which your imagination can focus. If there are not limits set for you, then set your own, now. What instruments or voices do you want to compose your piece for? This can change later, but make some decisions now, even if they feel arbitrary.

Images and Sounds

I'm going to begin by looking at the colourful words in the poem and Brainstorm ways that my instruments could express these sounds. You may use the [word web](#) BLM for this purpose, or simply place the starting point word in the centre of the page and spoke outwards in different directions. If a word sparks another word, spoke out from it rather than the central word. This leaves a visible record of your thought/association process.

Some things to look for in the text:

- colourful action words, Words such as “frosty, gleam, washed, curving, glide, prancing, and glistening.” These can suggest musical movement, such as rhythms, skips and other motivic ideas.
[Example of generating instrumental ideas from the text: I am going to allow these action words to suggest musical gestures, which I can give to any instruments. I will also record any ideas I have for particular instruments. For frosty, a mid-register flute flutter tongue, and/or a mid-register cello tremolo. For “gleam” I will use a held clarinet note in the upper register together with a cello harmonic and a tap on the suspended cymbal. For curving, I will have instruments moving in narrow intervals, and so on.]
- colourful descriptive words, such as “crackle, blaze, linger, laze, circle and glide, These words can suggest instrumental timbres, instrumental combinations and/or harmonies. Again, generate instrumental ideas that suggest “crackle, blaze, and glide, etc. to you.]
- Words that have their own sound that instruments might imitate, such as the “s” words, such as “stars, streams, shells, seagulls, swallow, snake, swan” and, of course, “sky, sea and shore”.

Vocal

If I am setting this poem to music, I want to enter the spirit of the poem and inhabit the voice of the poem itself. What vocal colours do you hear in the text? What instrument(s) do you want to have accompany the voice? If it is piano, then what piano harmonies and textures do you imagine? My vocal setting will be for medium voice and piano.

Instrumental

If I am creating an instrumental work, I do not need a voice or anyone to say/sing the text. The text is simply inspiring my musical ideas. The class is divided into groups of five, so I will pick five instruments: flute, clarinet, trumpet, cello and percussion.

Stage 3: Planning and Focusing Selection

In this stage you look for patterns in the ideas and possibilities that you have generated and develop a “compositional plan.” This plan places your musical gestures on a timeline, so that you can begin to see your composition as a whole before you get immersed in the moment-to-moment details. Your plan should contain a “beginning, middle and end”. Always having a sense of where the piece is “going” will help tremendously to help you see where ideas connect and where there are gaps, or what is needed and not needed, where there is “too much’ or not enough.

Vocal

Composers usually set the actual words of the poem in the original order, so you must be sensitive to mood, subject, choices of words, etc. to guide you in your interpretation of the poem. [Example: My setting of this song will be in three sections. The first section will move from staccato gestures to sustained notes as the text moves from the first four lines, from “Stars...to...laze.” The second section will introduce continuous undulating movement in the piano, as suggested by the seashore and seagulls. The final section will introduce an angular motive as well as a serpentine melodic line, as suggested by the “prancing” and “curving” words in the final verse.

Instrumental

You do not need to follow the structure of your poem. Remember, you are not reproducing the poem, you are creating an entirely new work inspired by the poem. You can rearrange the images to create a more satisfactory musical form.

Stage 4: Exploring and Experimenting

In Stage 3, we developed a compositional plan, placing you many ideas within a musical structure with a beginning, middle and end. In Stage 4, we are going to develop these ideas. It is not enough to state a gesture once, or simply repeat it. Musical ideas, once expressed, must transform in order to remain interesting. Even in a simple melody like “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”, the pitch patterns change before they return. And when the phrases repeat, the context for the music has changed.

Here is a short list of compositional devices you can use to develop or vary your melody. Experiment with each one. Only some will yield useful results. Keep these and build up the content of your composition.

Repetition	Add non-harmonic tones	Simplification
Transposed repetition	Fragmentation	Melodic inversion
Rhythmic alteration (partial repetition)	Re-combination	Other permutation
Change register	Change speed	Change key

Vocal

Imagine how the singer will perform this text by saying it over to yourself with different word rhythms, inflections and speeds. Where should the vocal line begin? Move to? Should it move by steps? By skips? Where are the rhythmic contrasts? High notes? Long notes?

Instrumental

Collect the instrumental ideas/gestures from Stage 2, place them on a timeline in Stage 3, now you are going to develop and vary the musical ideas/gestures. Experiment with your ideas and the techniques mentioned above. Transfer gestures between instruments. An idea may have begun on the flute or the trombone, but how would this gesture sound on the violin or trumpet? Change registers, change speeds, change keys.

Stage 5: Producing Preliminary Work

Stage 5 now requires that you select the best results of your brainstorming, improvising and experimenting and now decide what to include and what to exclude. In Stage 5, you will produce a first draft, which could be a shorthand graphic score, or a melodic/harmonic sketch. Your first draft should be a musical realization of your compositional plan. If you are using a computer program, this might be all the intended bars with the essential music in place, but with many of the details yet to be added.

You then proceed to a full second draft, where more details and decisions have been made. There is still room to expand on some great new possibility you just thought of, or to cut a section you have finally decided does not “work.” You are moving from the creative phase of this composition to the editorial phase now. The time for new ideas and diversions is complete.

Stage 6: Revising and Refining

This necessary stage allows the “critical, analytic” mind back into the creation process. Until now, being overly analytical or critical might have blocked your creativity, but now that the composition is in full draft, a critical eye is welcome. Critical analysis: Is the piece too long, or short? Is there too much or not enough of something? (too repetitive, too busy, too slow, too sparse).

Technical analysis: are there notation errors? Are all the parts correctly written for the performers? Are the dynamics, phrase marks, articulations, vocal texts, etc. written in properly?

Once Stage 6 is successfully completed, the piece is ready for performance.

Stage 7: Presenting, Performing and Sharing

This necessary stage allows you, the composer, to compare your imagined, planned and notated composition with a live performance. If you were using a computer program, comparing the playback file with a live performance can be very instructive. This is also the stage where you hear other's work and comment on any insights you may have.

Stage 8: Reflecting and Evaluating

In the last stage of the creative process, which can also be the first stage, thoughts move inwards to consider the music you have created, the experience creating it and evaluating what went well, where there can be improvements and what you might wish to create next. There is always more to learn, ways to improve, areas to explore. This is what is known as intrinsic motivation: inner, personal desire to create, perform, learn, produce. Without intrinsic motivation, accomplishments can be hollow if they felt imposed or achieved for outer glory or recognition. If you develop intrinsic motivation, personal satisfaction is guaranteed, and recognition will come without effort.