

Writing a melody

A tune is not a stream of notes — it is one small idea, repeated and changed until it has been somewhere and come back. Start with three or four notes.

START WITH A MOTIF, THEN CHANGE IT

TECHNIQUE	WHAT YOU CHANGE	WHY IT WORKS
Repetition	nothing	Says the idea again so the listener catches it. Almost every famous tune opens this way.
Sequence	pitch — same shape higher or lower	The strongest tool you have. Two steps of a sequence build; three is one too many.
Inversion	direction — upside down	Related but fresh. Rising thirds become falling; the rhythm keeps it recognisable.
Augmentation	rhythm — twice as slow	Turns a busy figure into a broad statement. Good for endings and for the bass.
Diminution	rhythm — twice as fast	Adds urgency without new material. The engine of most development sections.
Fragmentation	length — keep only part	Use the last three notes on their own. Intensifies as the phrase gets shorter.

THE SHAPE OF A PHRASE

Arch



Rise to one high point, then fall

The most natural shape there is — it follows the breath. One climax per phrase, about two-thirds through the line.

Falling



Begin high, settle downwards

Calming and conclusive. It starts with the answer rather than the question, so it suits endings.

Wave



Up and down, climbing overall

Restless and energetic. Keep an overall direction or it wanders rather than travels.

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Antecedent the question	Four bars ending unfinished — usually on chord V. It leans forward and the ear waits.
Consequent the answer	Four bars beginning the same way but ending on chord I. Same opening, different ending — that is what makes it an answer.

Eight bars, in two fours, in four twos. Regular lengths are what let a listener notice when you break one.

STEPS, LEAPS AND THE SINGING TEST

Mostly steps, with a few leaps for interest. After a leap larger than a fourth, turn back the other way by step — the ear expects it, and singers need it.

Keep the tune inside about an octave and a half. Give the highest note to one moment only — three times and it stops being a climax.

Then sing it. If you cannot sing it in one breath per phrase, it is not a melody yet — it is a pattern.

RHYTHM FIRST

Tap the tune before you pitch it. A memorable rhythm with dull notes still works; good notes in a shapeless rhythm never do.

LEAVE GAPS

Rests are part of the tune. A phrase needs somewhere to end, and the silence after a good idea is what makes it land.

TWO IDEAS, NO MORE

A whole piece can live on one motif and one contrast. New material every eight bars gives you a list, not a melody.