



# 11 RULES for COMPOSING SUCCESS

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**By Oscar Osicki**  
Inside the Score



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I've been on the journey of “**becoming a composer**” for some time now, learning my craft and writing music regularly.

I've also had the opportunity to study other great composers and artists of the past; how they lived, their habits, and their attitudes towards writing music.

This year I've managed to write more music than ever, and I wanted to share with you some of the most valuable things I've learned, discovered, or 'figured out' – tips, skills, and ideas that have helped me to write more music, and write *better* music.

There are never any rock-solid “rules” for creativity. Everyone's a little different. But it is my hope that some of these rules might resonate with you, and change the way you work or the way you think about creativity and composing.



## Just Do It: Don't Wait for Inspiration

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Thomas Edison once said “Genius Is 1% inspiration, and 99% perspiration”.

Almost every great artist, writer, and creative had regular daily routines which involved them sitting down to create, whether they felt ‘inspired’ or not. They carved out regular hours to sit down and write. Even today, many of the successful composers I know schedule their composing time. They don't wait for lightning to strike – they sit down for a few hours every day, and write.

The crazy thing is that when you start doing this, you'll find you have far more of those “lightning bolt” moments than if you sit around, hoping for inspiration.

The best way to have those amazing moments of inspiration is: don't wait around. Sit down and start writing. Seriously: sit down and write, often, even if you don't know what you're going to write. If you begin to make this a habit, you'll be amazed and inspired by the results.



# The Creative Period

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In my experience, the best way to begin a new project is to treat the first 20% of your working time as a “Creative Period”.

For example, if you need to compose something in five days, treat Day One as a Creative Period. Facing the blank sheet can be hard, and it can be daunting to commit something to paper before you know where you’re actually going. So, my answer to that is: don’t!

Don’t commit anything to paper in the initial “creative period”. Instead, explore, sketch, invent, go on walks, and let yourself think outside the box. Allow yourself to be creative. This is such a freeing process, and feels so much better than trying to force something onto paper before you’re ready. Once you’ve been through the creative period, you’ll be in a far better place to begin writing something that will make you happy.



## Apprenticeship Comes Before Mastery

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Historically, great artists and craftsmen began as apprentices. Da Vinci started as an Apprentice Painter; Van Gogh was an Apprentice Art Dealer; Henry Ford was an Apprentice Machinist. Beethoven and Mozart both mimicked the works of Haydn before writing their most original music.

Wagner mimicked Beethoven; Mahler mimicked Wagner; Shostakovich mimicked Mahler, and so on... (This is a simplification, but I hope you see my point!).

Nowadays, people are so anxious to sound original before they're ready; but before you can become a master, you need to learn your craft. And who better to learn it from, than your favourite composers?



# It's Okay to Copy (but not to "Steal")

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Following on from "Apprenticeship Comes Before Mastery"...


If you hear an amazing key change, or a beautiful bit of orchestration, or something that you absolutely love and want to learn how to do, then... it's okay to copy. It's okay to learn how they're doing it, and try copying that process yourself.

When you're in the learning phase of your lives, *it's okay to copy the greats*. This is a great way to learn!

Now, I don't mean you should be stealing entire melodies or pieces of music. But if you hear some amazing orchestration, or some incredible harmonies, then I'd actually encourage you to look at the score, figure out what they're doing, and try writing a piece of music which uses the same techniques.

It's not "stealing" – it's learning how to do something. After all, this is how many of the great apprentices learnt. Da Vinci would spend hours copying his master's paintings.

If you spend enough time learning from the greats, you will eventually absorb their techniques, and be able to use them intuitively. And that is a tried and tested path to mastery.



# The Importance of Form

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Form, or structure, is essential to think about when writing a piece of music.

Think of it this way: when people are listening to music, they want something they can 'hold on to'. They want a theme, or some kind of clearly presented idea which they can latch onto; and then they can follow this idea as it develops, mutates, and transforms over time.

If your music is formless or incredibly hard to make sense of, don't expect many people to enjoy it. Form is how we make sense of the world, and form is how people will make sense of your music.

There are some tried and tested forms, used by composers for centuries (and with good reason!). For example: A-B-A' form, where we have a contrasting middle section, followed by a return of the A section which has been transformed into something new by the journey.

Or, if you want something a little more challenging, composers love writing in Sonata Form. (If you want to learn more about musical form, check out my YouTube series on [\*How to Listen to Classical Music\*](#).)



## Take Us On A Journey

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The wonderful thing about Western Art Music is how it can take you on an expressive, emotional, and sometimes logical journey.

We are presented with a musical idea – perhaps a theme. That idea is then expressed, explored, developed, mutated, distorted, and taken through all kinds of moods, until finally, it is brought back to rest, either back at home, or in a new home. Some composers like to take us on a journey from darkness to light... Others from light to darkness... And some like to start at home, take us through darkness, light, and everything in between, before bringing us back home again.

In any case, the best composers take us on a journey with their musical ideas. And in the very best cases, their ideas are so clearly presented, and their form is so well executed, that this “journey” grabs the listeners right from the start, and doesn’t let go until the end.

Think about this idea of a journey, or narrative ‘arc’, next time you write a piece of music.





## 7 Get A Lot Out Of A Little

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This is a lesson I learnt early on in composing: The best chefs can make a few simple ingredients taste delicious.

Rather than chucking 20 ideas into your music and hoping that will make it better, try just working with 1-3 ideas.

See how much you can squeeze out of the smallest number of ripe ideas. Beethoven is often cited as a master of this (his 5th Symphony is extremely famous for its 4-note motif, which is developed for 8 minutes or more). You can do it too.

Your idea can be longer than 4 notes, of course; but once you have an idea, see how far you can run with it, before having to introduce a different idea. The best composers can fill out an entire piece of music with a small number of good ideas.



# Impose Your Own Limitations

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The reason we often get stuck when composing is because of “decision overwhelm”. When we’re writing, there are too many infinite possibilities – it’s hard to know what direction to go next, when there are infinite directions to choose from.

That’s why you should actually impose your own limitations on your music.

Shakespeare wrote his love poems in sonnet form – all of them are 14 lines, with 10 syllables in each line, following a certain stress pattern. If he had written these poems in free prose, do you think they would be anywhere near as powerful? By restricting himself to 14 lines, and 10 syllables per line, it forced him to be concise, creative, and direct with his language. Having limitations actually made him write better poetry.

In the same way, you could limit yourself to only a certain set of instruments, or to using only a particular scale, or to working within a particular form (why do you think so many composers work in sonata form?). If you impose good limitations, you'll actually often find yourself getting straight to work, instead of pondering over what to do next.

On a similar note, if you're a digital composer, don't buy loads of sound libraries. Instead, see what you can get out of what you have. Immense creativity to be found in manipulating things you already have at your disposal.

To end this point, here's a quote from Stravinsky:

*"My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit."*



# Prioritise Deep Work

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Cal Newport coined this term in his famous book, “Deep Work”.

It's the kind of work where you sit down for several hours at a time (or at least one hour), and focus absolutely on one complex task, without any distraction. No phones, no internet, just you and your task.

Once you've been working on a complex task (such as composing) for around 30 minutes straight, your brain starts to go into a different mode. You start to go “deep”. It's as if the world around you disappears, and you're just purely focused on the task in front of you; you start to lose track of time, and you begin to make amazing progress on your work. Some people call this a “flow state” – everything in your work just begins to flow.

This flow state can only happen if we allow ourselves to focus purely on one “deep task” for a prolonged period of time.

Most of us live in a distracted state, so Deep Work can take some practice to get used to. But try it – once you experience that flow, you'll never look back!

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## Baby Steps

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Your first piece of music may suck, that's OK.

Your tenth piece of music may suck, and that's still OK. The important thing is to keep moving forwards – one step at a time.

Be gentle with yourself, forgive your mistakes, and never expect to be perfect – just get moving, and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Rome was not built in a day, but it was built, step by step. Keep taking baby steps, and focusing on your progress.

Remember that EVERYBODY started at the beginning; and instead of focusing on them, focus on your own progress.

Don't try to conquer everything in a day... Focus on what's in front of you, today, and take those "baby steps", which in turn will lead you to the next steps in your journey. Just write that next bar of music!



# Finish It

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With almost everything I've ever written, there's come a point where I've thought "this is crap, this is rubbish, I should stop". I used to follow that instinct – consequently, there is so much music that I've left unfinished.

However, you will learn *so much more* if you force yourself to finish what you started. Instead of giving up when you begin to feel those twinges of doubt, push through! Finish what you started! In finishing, you will learn so much, even if that piece never makes it to your portfolio.

I'll say it again: almost *every single time* I've composed something, there's been a point where I've wanted to throw it in the trash and give up on it.

However, whenever I've forced myself to finish, I've almost always been pleased with the results, and I've learnt how to solve new problems, and therefore I've grown as a composer. Make a rule for yourself: I will always strive to finish what I've started. Even if I feel that resistance, even if I have to push through feeling like my work is crap, I will strive to finish what I started, because I know how much I will learn from that experience.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Oscar Osicki is a composer, conductor, and founder of Inside the Score, a music-loving community with thousands of dedicated members.

Oscar's mission is to strengthen people's understanding and appreciation of music - to help them become better composers, better performers, and better listeners. He wants to spread a love for Western Art Music as far as possible, and teach the skills and techniques necessary to become stronger musicians.

His online courses are designed to push people to new horizons, and to develop and train their musicianship and musical ability. His popular Musicality course is an intensive program which gives a thorough training in sight-reading, ear skills, writing, and music theory - all the foundations you need to become a better musician.

To learn more about his courses, you can visit:  
[www.insidethescore.com/programs](http://www.insidethescore.com/programs)