

GETTING STARTED WITH COMPOSING

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One fine day Pooh had stumped up to the top of the Forest to see if his friend Christopher Robin was interested in Bears at all. At breakfast that morning (a simple meal of marmalade spread lightly over a honeycomb or two) he had suddenly thought of a new song. It began like this:

Sing Ho! For the life of a Bear.

When he had got as far as this, he scratched his head, and thought to himself “That’s a very good start for a song, but what about the second line?” He tried singing “Ho,” two or three times, but it didn’t seem to help. “Perhaps it would be better,” he thought, “if I sang Hi for the life of a Bear.” So he sang it... but it wasn’t. “Very well, then,” he said, “I shall sing that first line twice, and perhaps if I sing it very quickly, I shall find myself singing the third and fourth lines before I have time to think of them, and that will be a Good Song. Now then:

Sing Ho! for the life of a Bear!
Sing Ho! for the life of a Bear!
I don't much mind if it rains or snows,
'Cos I've got a lot of honey on my nice new nose!
I don't much care if it snows or thaws,
'Cos I've got a lot of honey on my nice clean paws!
Sing Ho! for a Bear!
Sing Ho! for a Pooh!
And I'll have a little something in an hour or two!

He was so pleased with this song that he sang it all the way to the top of the Forest, “and if I go on singing it much longer,” he thought, “it will be time for the little something, and then the last line won’t be true.” So he turned it into a hum instead.

This passage illustrates several useful tips about composing:

1. For now, don’t think of yourself as Beethoven, struggling on a mountaintop with the innermost secrets of your soul. Think of yourself as Pooh, amusing himself by making up songs.
2. If you have a good idea that interests you, seize it! Sometimes interesting little melodies just pop into your head; grab them and your homework will be done in no time.
3. The best way to compose is to sing what you already have and try to go on, even just a note or two. (Pooh says to sing quickly but I find that any tempo works.)
4. Try different things out; sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. Don’t get too hung up on evaluation at first; be open-minded and experiment with your ideas. Creating anything requires learning to like yourself and your creations. So, spend 30 minutes working out an idea and making it the best you can make it, then sleep on it and evaluate it objectively in the cold light of the morning.¹
5. Repetition (or near-repetition) is often a promising strategy. If you can’t think of what to do next, try repeating (or varying) what you’ve just done. (Note how in Pooh’s song, line 2 is the same as line 1; lines 5–6 are variations of lines 3–4; line 7 echoes and shortens line 1; and line 8 is a variant of line 7.)

¹ Note that this is only possible if you don’t wait until the last minute to do your homework.