

EPISODE 026

# Development Engine: Pattinson's 3 Boxes - ADVANCED: 5 Commandments of Storytelling

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**[00:00:00]** Hey, this is Melanie Naumann, and Herzlich Willkommen - welcome to the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Today we continue with another bite-sized episode to talk about how you can actually develop your lyric idea into an outline. That means no more struggles with what to put in the first verse or the dreaded second verse!

You might already be familiar with Pat Pattison's approach. He's calling it "Your Development Engine" by using boxes that are different in size. Even if you haven't heard of his approach yet, and you'll wonder what I mean by boxes in various sizes, I'll give you a quick introduction to that concept in a couple of minutes.

And then, after learning about Pat's approach, we'll then expand that established concept with another storytelling concept to help you better flesh out the idea you have for your lyrics.

So if you struggle with not knowing how to put your idea into an outline, this episode is for you.

## TEASER

### Why Storytelling Matters in Songwriting

**[00:01:32]** Let's start today with the question: Why do you need to use the power of storytelling at all in your lyrics?



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We could talk for hours and hours about this matter, but the fact is: We're all humans. And humans could not have survived without stories. We need stories to survive and thrive. Why else are there stories all around us? Not just books and on TV, but in commercials and advertising, when you're at work, sharing and listening to experiences – stories are all around us. So when we listen to songs, we can't just switch off our need to hear a story.

As soon as we hear the first lines of the song, we're introduced to a character – be it a first-person character, a narrator, or an observer. But someone is speaking and telling us something. So we decide right when we listen to the first lines of the song, will we continue to pay attention to the lyrics because they might possibly help us survive or thrive by telling us a story, or will they not offer us that experience.

If the lyrics don't start with a problem that interests us and that we need to hear how it's solved, or in storytelling terms speaking, there's no narrative gap that opens and that we need closed to release the tension, then our attention suffers. We might not listen to the lyrics because why should we care? If there's no story, there's no takeaway from the song or story. And if the song doesn't have a message, it can't help us survive or thrive.

So whenever you think about storytelling in songwriting, it's nothing new. It's already been done a million times, and it can make a huge impact — on your listeners, on your sales, and on your career.

But maybe you might have never considered the undeniable connection between lyrics and story.

So let's look at the so-called Development Engine of songwriting instructor Pat Pattison and then we'll expand that concept.

## Introduction to Pattison's Boxes

**[00:03:34]** Pat Pattison says that a “perfectly developed song changes our way of looking at our lives and our surroundings.” He refers to the message of a song – or the impact it has on the audience. And again, if there's no story told, there's no message. So when he says “perfectly developed”, he talks about the power of storytelling.

So we need to look at storytelling to get to that desired outcome – a song that carries a meaningful message.



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## Productive Repetition

**[00:04:03]** The way we do that is by productive repetition.

So we have to let the verses, the chorus, and the bridge do their different jobs.

Just a quick recap:

The **verses** storytelling job is to

- introduce ideas
- set up the central idea
- develop or continue ideas
- lead back to the chorus

The job of the **chorus** or refrain is:

- to complete, comment, or summarize ideas
- to contain the central idea
- It's important that that chorus is able to grow. That chorus states the central idea of your song. And that it is able to take on whatever information your verses are giving it.

And the **bridge** moves to a different level of reality. Its job is to bring you from one place to another. The bridge is often called a “release” or “boredom breaker” – the place where you try to get away from the ideas and structures the lyric had already established, so it develops a new perspective or contrasting idea.

Productive Repetition means the following: In a song, you naturally have to repeat a line or the chorus two or three times. So this bears the danger that because the listeners have heard something before, it makes it less interesting the second time hearing about it. That's why you have to make your repetition interesting and productive so that the same words deliver more each time you hear them.

That's where Pattinson's boxes come into play.

## Development Engine – BOXES

**[00:05:36]** As we've learned from [episode 20](#) as we analyzed the lyrics of “Kiss Me Slowly” by Parachute, the repetition of the same idea over and over throughout your song is not




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moving the story forward. It's just repetition, and therefore not interesting. And it's definitely no story, and consequently, the listener doesn't receive a meaningful message that helps them survive or thrive in their life.

The Development Engine helps you to develop your song's outline and to create a journey for your listener.

So Pat Pattison says that you need to think about a song as a stack of boxes that are connected to each other. And each one is getting progressively larger. They gain weight. So at the top, you have the smallest box, and at the bottom, the largest and heaviest box.

Now, what does that mean for the outline of our idea?

- the 1st box begins the flow of ideas, introducing us to the song's world
- the 2nd box continues the idea, but from a different angle, combining the weight of the first box with the weight of the second box
- the last box builds from the first two, introducing its own angle and combining its ideas with the first two, resulting in the heaviest box

The last box combines and RESOLVES all the information and delivers the point of the song. It's often the WHY of the song. It weighs the most.

And the WHY of the song is the place you want to arrive at the song's end because the WHY refers to your song's message. If you look at it like this, you can also see why adding things to the idea results in a climax. So don't try to say everything in the first verse.

When you're developing your idea, take it through the boxes. How can this develop? How can this move forward?

And the great thing about thinking of your evolving idea in the form of different-sized boxes is that they are form-neutral – which means a series of boxes can represent any formal movement of your lyric's structure.

## VERSE DEVELOPMENT

**[00:07:51]** So what does that concept of the boxes mean for the development of our verses?

Verses keep listeners interested because they develop your idea and advance your concept, plot, or call it a story. And they get us ready to hear each chorus or refrain by controlling the angle of entry and the way we see the repeated elements.



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So each of the verses should focus on another aspect of your idea or, better – show how your story’s plot progresses.

But if you only repeat yourself in the verses, then the story does not progress – that means the boxes are the same size and weight and don’t fit into each other – the result is boredom because it’s the same box again and again.

So each verse should move the story forward.

Here’s an example of what that outline could look like. The song’s title is “The Good Old Days”. If you’ve done Pat Pattison’s lyric writing course on Coursera, then that example song title might be familiar to you. I’ll include a link to that course in the show notes.

Anyway, here’s what I’ve come up with:

1. **Box 1:** 1st person narrator refers back to when they were kids, running along, making mischief in the afternoon after school, and getting in trouble but laughing it all off. So it would go like: Remember all our mischief as kids? The Good Old Days.
2. **Box 2:** The 1st person Narrator still talks in the past tense. But this time, he had switched to when they were young men, robbing places for money in the summer heat just for the thrill of it. It becomes evident now that their kids' behavior has clearly escalated, but he also shows signs of remorse. Still, he refers to that time as The Good Old Days.
3. **Box 3:** The narrator is now in the present moment. It’s revealed to the audience that he sits in his jail cell. He has a letter in his hand with a death notice of his buddy and a dried spring flower. His friend was killed in a car chase running from the cops. The big payoff/resolution is that the 1st person Narrator now reminds himself that sometimes the good old days are just what they are: The Good Old Days, making it clear to the audience that you gotta move on in life.

So when we summarize those boxes, you have an outline like this:

- **Box 1:** Remember all our mischief as kids? The Good Old Days.
- **Box 2:** We kept being boys as we were older? Was that okay? The Good Old Days.
- **Box 3:** Dried spring flowers never bloom again. The Good Old Days.

So you can clearly see how the title “The Good Old Days” gains more weight every time we hear it. You can almost feel how that memory gets heavier each time you hear it. Or you can see how the shoulders of our character sink down more and more by having to carry that burden.



Okay, that's a great starting point for creating an outline for a lyric idea. But can we also make that outlining process a little easier?

Yes, we can.

## The Story Grid's 5 Commandments of Storytelling

**[00:11:22]** In Story Grid, we have a tool we call the Story Grid's 5 Commandments of Storytelling.

I'll introduce that tool to you today, but keep an eye out for future episodes when we talk about each commandment in great detail because each one of them is worth looking at in more detail.

So what are those commandments?

The five commandments provide the basic structure for our story – no matter what kind of story is presented in whatever kind of medium. Novels, movies, big idea books – those five commandments are the basic structure for every unit of story – no matter if we look at the story as a whole or at a single scene or act. Of course, in songwriting, you are mostly concerned about that one song you're trying to write. But some of you might aim to write a concept album one day, and then again, the five commandments will come into play.

The five elements that you can also use for your song's story are:

1. the inciting incident (either causal or coincidental),
2. progressive complications expressed through active or revelatory turning points,
3. a crisis question that requires a choice between at least two negative alternatives or at least two irreconcilable goods,
4. the choice or the decision which makes the climax
5. and the resolution.

If you are a regular listener of the Stories in Songs podcast, you have seen those five commandments applied in our lyric studies. They form a big part of the S.O.N.G. framework to figure out the change that needs to happen in the song's story or plot.

Even if you are already familiar with them, or if you're just hearing about them for the first time, let's try to figure out how you can use those five commandments to actually help you develop your verses when you're having the three boxes of Pat Pattison's Development Engine in mind.



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As we know, each box needs to gain in weight and gain in size so that all of the boxes you create fit neatly together. The purpose of growing bigger is to give the song’s message – that’s probably hammered home in the chorus – more meaning each time the audience hears it without being bored by the repetition.

## 5 Commandments in a chronologically told story in a song

**[00:13:41]** So, let’s start with an example that uses chronological storytelling. That means we tell the story in the order of how the events happen. Of course, you can shake it up, but for the purpose of better understanding the five commandments, let’s start with the correct chronological order.

So when we want to start, we need to know what we want to write about. If you need help figuring out what possibilities there are to write about, listen to [episode 23](#) of the Stories in Songs podcast, which helps you find interesting topics for your lyrics.

For now, let’s say we stay with our example of “The Good Old Days” that we have used in the boxes earlier.

So the main idea, according to the 3 boxes, goes like this:

- **Box 1:** Remember all our mischief as kids? The Good Old Days.
- **Box 2:** We kept being boys as we were older? Was that okay? The Good Old Days.
- **Box 3:** Dried springer flowers never bloom again. The Good Old Days.

So now we look at the Story Grid tool of the 5 Commandments.

### Commandment #1: Inciting Incident

**[00:14:42]** The first commandment is the inciting incident.

An inciting incident is an event that throws the central character of your song out of homeostasis. It can be either causal which refers to an action by a character, or it can be coincidental which means it’s an event out of the control of the characters, e.g., the weather.

The job of the inciting incident is not only to throw the character’s life out of balance but also to raise a question in the audience’s mind that must be resolved. The key to writing an inciting incident is to make that event invisible in some way. That means the character will ignore it, or they will not understand the true nature of that event, so they won’t be able to deal with it accordingly.




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So when we look at our example of the boys who grow up to be criminals, then the inciting incident of our song's story is when they were boys. For example, we have our song's character in a candy shop. A causal inciting incident could be another boy who animates our song's character to steal some chocolate. A coincidental inciting incident would be that the song's character had something in his hand he wanted to pay for but left the shop without paying and noticed he got away with it. Those two examples could work as an inciting incident to the life of crime of our song's character.

## Commandment #2: The Turning Point Progressive Complication

**[00:16:26]** Now, after the inciting incident, we'll have the second commandment: the turning point progressive complication. Now this commandment is very important when you take your idea through your boxes. Since you want your boxes to gain weight, there's a way of doing that by progressively complicating the situation for your song's main character until they hit a turning point.

So all that means is that there's a conflict that makes life more and more complicated for the character until something irrevocably changes.

So let's look at our example.

The song's character might have discovered his thrill for stealing things or for making mischief. So after stealing a chocolate bar which was the inciting incident for his life of crime, he might start blackmailing people. That's an act that's even worse than stealing. And it progressively makes his situation worse. Later, he could also start hurting people to get their money. Now it's not only about extortion, but his crimes are getting more and more serious.

And lastly, we come to the Turning Point Progressive Complication. This is the precise, progressive complication that shifts the value from positive to negative, negative to positive (or bad to worse/good to better). Here, the initial strategy of how the character reacted to the inciting incident doesn't work anymore.

The turning point can be either active or revelatory.

So let's look at our example: An active turning point in the life of crime of our song's character could be that he has crossed the line by killing someone. That is something he can't make undone. This act turns him into a killer – something he will never get away from. So the shift or the change of the situation would go from bad to worse.

The turning point could also be revelatory. That means our character encounters some new information. This is something surprising like Darth Vader saying: "Luke, I'm your father."




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So in our example, our song's character might find out that he was played all along. Maybe someone else took advantage of him? Or he discovers that a person he stole from now can't take care of their family anymore and lost their home. So the song's character is confronted with the consequences of his actions and they understand all the wrong's they've done.

### Commandment #3: Crisis

**[00:19:05]** After that active or revelatory turning point event, our character faces a dilemma. They have reached a crossroad moment. All the choices they once had at their disposal have now shrunk to a binary choice. And that choice is either choosing the lesser of two evils or deciding between two irreconcilable goods. That means: What is good for one is not good for another. When presented with options that could benefit him or another, he must choose one. It's important to note that there can't be a clear right or wrong way.

And remember, something must be at stake when the character is in a crisis. And the choices need to matter. And the outcome should matter and be meaningful.

So in our example, a best bad choice would be: Shall he continue his life of crime and lose himself entirely but at least be free OR shall he get himself arrested to start repenting for his sins?

An irreconcilable goods choice would be: Shall the character go to prison to clean their conscience, which is good for them, OR shall they keep being a criminal accomplice so that their friends still have a partner in crime, which is good for them?

### Commandment #4: Climax

**[00:20:32]** The fourth commandment is the Climax. That's the character's choice at his/her crisis point. This includes the decision and the action taken. We, as the audience, must be able to clearly observe how the character decides or how he chooses in his binary dilemma.

So our character can either choose to stay a criminal or go to jail.

### Commandment #5: Resolution

**[00:20:56]** The last commandment, commandment #5, is the resolution. This is the aftermath of the character's choice. This is how the rest of the scene plays out. The tension is resolved.



So our character might be in jail now. The story is resolved.

## Verse Development by using the five commandments of storytelling

**[00:21:12]** So the five commandments are

- the inciting incident
- the turning point progressive complication that follows a series of progressive complications
- the crisis
- the climax
- and the resolution.

Now when you think about your three boxes, ask yourself where you could put those commandments to work.

In our example, we could use the chorus to show that the life of crime is over, and that's why he keeps referring to them as "The Good Old Days" that you have to move on from, or you'll die. So the inciting incident would be in verse 1 – we show how he made mischief as a boy.

The second verse could be about the progressive complications of how his life of crime worsened until he hit that turning point moment that threw him into a crisis.

In a song, we don't have to state the options of the dilemma explicitly.

We can figure that crisis out once we know the character's decision. So did he go to jail or stay a criminal after that turning point event? And that's what we'll hear in the bridge or in the third verse.

And the chorus – "The Good Old Days" – refers to the resolution.

So even though we just started talking about the five commandments of storytelling, I hope you can see how they can help you dive into the story you'd like to tell. Of course, you can use them as you wish – with or without Pattinson's boxes. But the concept of Pattinson's verse development is a great starting point from which you can start exploring the five commandments.

## "I'm A Believer" and the five commandments

**[00:22:49]** Let's just look at another example.



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In the song “I’m A Believer” by the Monkees, the first verse starts with reference to the inciting incident. “I thought love was only true in fairy tales.” That’s the character’s starting point from which the story develops.

Now the progressive complications are shown in the second verse: He’s trying and trying to find love, but when he “wanted sunshine, he got rain.”

The chorus is the turning point and the resolution all in one.

The turning point moment is when he says, “And then I saw her face”, and the resolution is “Now I’m A Believer.”

So now we’re left to figure out the crisis and where we can find the decision?

Well, the crisis is not explicitly mentioned. And that’s okay because we can puzzle the story together by the information we’ve been given.

The crisis must have been: Shall he risk getting hurt again but maybe find love or shall he just stop trying and risk losing his chance for true love?

And the decision is implied because he says there’s no more doubt in his mind, and he’s a believer now.

So just by looking at this song example, you can see that you can juggle the five commandments and include them explicitly or not explicitly in your lyrics as you see fit. You can also mix them up, but keep in mind as a general rule of thumb: It’s always good if you start your lyrics with some kind of problem. That’s either a progressive complication or an inciting incident. Because this way, you can hook your listeners for they are interested in figuring out how it all turns out. They want the tension resolved that you created with your narrative.

I hope you liked this episode. Make sure to leave a rating or review, and subscribe to the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Join me for our next bite-sized episode next time when we look at the song “Hero of War” by Rise Against to see how important it is to complicate your song’s character’s situation progressively. And you’ll learn a lot from that episode and how you can apply the five commandments further to the development of your song’s idea.



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So tune in next time.

Bis zum nächsten Mal, bye bye, eure Melanie

## Show Notes

- Coursera Songwriting Course with Pat Pattison:  
<https://www.coursera.org/learn/songwriting-lyrics>
- “Kiss Me Slowly” by Parachute – Why Change is Better than Repetition  
<https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-020/>
- Finding Topics to Write about by Looking at Universal Human Values  
<https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-023/>



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