

How to Write a Music Method Book

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Music educators write method books for many reasons. They may be unable to find the right text for their students, and thus create a resource that they would like to exist. They might have a new approach to something and want to create a resource for other music educators who may be struggling with the same concept. They might hope that publishing provides an additional income stream. They may want the “author” credential. Or, it’s their innate entrepreneurial spirit. These are all good reasons for writing.

The most common mistake is in trying to make the books too complex—ideas enough for three or four books, rather than just one.

1. Working Titles

Begin by brainstorming title ideas. Come up with at least five and preferably twenty or more potential titles that encapsulate your subject. Be creative! Be precisely descriptive about your contents, so that a reader can tell at a glance what they are buying. Here are some potential title ideas that describe the same content, from different directions:

Scale Studies for Guitar: Technique for speed and intonation

Fire on the Fingerboard: Lightning-Fast Fingerings for Guitar

Finding Your Fingers: Building Fingerboard Facility Through Scale Studies

Try to arrive at three solid titles that you would feel comfortable with naming your book. Don’t forget subtitles! They can provide additional information. The goal is to describe your content in an inviting way. If you get a publisher, their marketing team will likely help you to hone the actual title.

Publishers will be looking for fresh takes on the material—hooks to make the reader say, “I want this book about guitar scales, and not those other ones.” A good title can have profound influence on this, and given similar proposals, a publisher will likely lean towards the one with the sexier title.

2. Audience

Once you have your working title, articulate as much as you can about your intended readers.

What do they know, before they pick up the book? Can they read music? What scales can they play? Be specific. Among the most difficult aspects of writing (and teaching) is in making sure that everything you say is comprehensible. If you say “Dorian is like natural minor without a flat

6,” and your reader doesn’t know what natural minor is, your reader will lose heart and put your book down. Not every book must start with the Big Bang, work its way through the dinosaurs, and finally arrive at the first caveman who banged two rocks together and invented rhythm. But the prerequisite knowledge should be keenly in the author’s mind, and perhaps articulated in an introduction or quickly reviewed in a preliminary “basics” section.

Classic piano teacher, older woman who assigns pieces and checks them off
Composition teacher who is always looking for new approaches and topics
High School band teacher tyrant and military like direction, looking for a disciplined approach, systematic and progressive.
Guitar teacher who loved music and wanted to “spread the love” of music

3. Objectives

With your audience articulated, it’s time to write a few sentences about the book. Fill in the blanks: “In this book, readers will learn to....” List five objectives the reader will accomplish.

In this article, readers learn to:

- focus their book concept
- address the needs of their readers
- organize their thoughts
- write an engaging, useful book
- overcome writer’s block

Think in terms of writing marketing text, to sell the book. What will your readers get? Why should they buy it? Don’t just list intended chapter titles. Frame this list in terms of benefits. It will become your constant assessment tool, throughout the writing process, to confirm that you’re covering your intended bases and not straying off topic.

4. Topics

The next step is to brainstorm a list of topics about your subject, whether you not you actually plan to discuss them in your book. The idea is to list everything necessary to do the tasks discussed in your book.

Back to the book about guitar scales, you might list all scales you’d discuss,
How to read notes and rhythms,
How to tune a guitar,
How to get good tone on guitar,
How to form a proper playing position

—everything necessary and relevant to your subject.

If they are going to be reading the scales, that means that they must know how to read traditional notation and it is a topic you should list.

Expect between 40 and 200 topics on this list.

5. Sequence

Once you have your list, put the topics into the right sequence.

Before you present the Dorian mode, your reader must know what a “mode” is. More subtly, you may want to present major and minor scales first, as it will be easier to define “Dorian” in terms of these known structures, rather than starting from scratch.

6. Filter

When your list is in sequence, look again at your objectives. Do your topics support your bullets? If not, brainstorm and sequence some more. Are some topics beyond the scope of your bullets? Lightly cross them out; they are probably for a different book. Alternatively, update your objectives, if you are absolutely certain that the book would be improved by doing this. In this process, you will come up with a complete list of relevant, focused topics.

7. Cluster

With your sequence of topics in order, scan the list, and look for logical groupings of ideas. Name these groups, if possible. This could reveal to you your table of contents. Likely, you will omit some of the topics particularly at the list’s beginning and end. Again, these could go in a different book.

Then take a step back and admire your **table of contents**. It should be magnificent! The topics will be a complete rendering of your overall concept, in an order that flows naturally and intuitively. Your readers will be engaged because you are taking care of them so well. Your path will seem inevitable and correct.

This table of contents will be your roadmap and meditation, as you write your chapters.

8. Chapter Structure

When you know what you are going to write about, you are ready to figure out the format for each chapter. Chapter structure will depend on your content. Recurring chapter designs are often useful for books about technique, such as the book about guitar scales. Every chapter (or “lesson”) may conform to a similar structure. Every chapter in the guitar scale book, for example, might begin with an explanatory section in which a scale is presented, with suggested fingerings. Then there might follow a series of exercises. Finally, you might present an “etude,” in which the scale is used in a musical context. This is a common “template” for books about music technique: Theory, Practice, and Performance. Look at the music books on your

bookshelves, and see if there are any such approaches that seem to work well. Web sites such as Berkleeshares.com offer free excerpts from many music books, and they are also a great resource for ideas about how to structure your own books.

If your book more text-based, rather than teaching physical techniques, you might still have some recurring structural elements. Chapters might begin with short conceptual introductions. They might end with “workshops” or “projects,” in which the reader can put the ideas to work. Generally, chapter lengths should be roughly consistent. About twelve to twenty pages is usually a good length for a chapter. Shorter, and the book can seem fragmented, though this certainly works well for some topics. Longer, and it can seem endless, and your reader might have a hard time digesting the material. Figure that after each chapter, the reader will put down the book, take a rest, and try to assimilate what they have just learned. Try to balance the length of your chapters, and don’t vary their length by more than 100% or so unless you are certain that it’s necessary.

In this way, your book will have a consistent rhythm. It will seem deliberately crafted, and in a way that makes your reader feel that you are looking out for their interests, and doing all that you can to help them understand your content.

With your table of contents and your chapter structure figured out, you will have a plan for your book, which you can then fill in with examples, explanations, and instructions. Don’t stray too far, and only modify the structures you’ve designed if you are certain that you are improving the book by doing so.

All this planning will help you stay on track, crafting content that is in support of your best ideas. You will find that “writers’ block” won’t hold you back because there is no longer a blank page to fill. Your structure will propel you forward, as topical suggestions are in front of you, which you know are in good service to your higher intentions.

You are then ready to write!

Jonathan Feist is the series editor for The Berklee Practice Method and co-author of its Teacher’s Guide. He teaches music at Berkleemusic.com and presents seminars about writing. Feist holds bachelor's and master's degrees in composition from New England Conservatory of Music.