

19 RIFFING APPROACHES

To Jump-Start Your Creativity
& Bring Your Riffs to Life



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Stuck in a Riffing Rut?

Writer's block can hit anyone at any time, but sometimes all it takes is a handy checklist to remember what's out there. It's my hope that this short ebook will be that handy checklist that helps you crank out your next awesome riff, and from it, your next killer song.

Following are 19 rock-solid approaches you can use to write riffs very quickly, ranging from simple and solid to intense and virtuosic. It really just depends on what you want to convey.

Start with a Chord Progression 99% of the Time

One of the biggest mistakes most guitarists make when trying to write a good riff is neglecting to think about what underlying chord progression is being implied. So don't be one of those guitarists.

This is one of the easiest things to sort out, too. You can mine your favorite songs for chord changes you like, or if you're really stumped, just Google the phrase "chord progression generator" and try out what you find in the search results.

Having a chord progression in mind helps tremendously by making the most important decisions right from the start. You're essentially planning the harmony throughout your riff, so you can devote your focus on doing interesting things to IMPLY those chords (something specific) rather than just "what to do next" (something entirely vague).

For this reason, I'm not even adding a number to this step. It's Step Zero, really — you haven't even begun UNTIL AFTER you do this.

Even if you're just coming up with a one-off scale run/breakdown that only happens once in the song, you should STILL at least consider which chord(s) it either implies or that would complement it best by being played under it.

To make it easier, just think, "What note would sound good held out under this part?" Start with just that one note, then add a 3rd to it and see if it should be major or minor (or something else!). At least then you have a root note, and maybe that's all you'll really need.

Rhythmic Criteria

It should also go without saying that a RIFF, that cornerstone of *rhythm guitar*, needs a rhythm pattern. For that you'll need to decide on some basic criteria.

At least decide on a time signature from the start, & based on the tempo (which I think of as the "energy level" of the song), what rhythmic subdivision value (eighth notes, eighth note triplets, sixteenth notes, etc) you're going to follow for the basic pace of the riff.

Starting with a specific rhythm pattern in mind (see #2 on the next page) can really go a long way toward planning out a solid riff in a very short time, rather than agonizing over what you're going to play over the course of several measures as a whole.

#1: Chugging Power Chords or Single Notes

Not every riff needs to be the star of the show. In fact, often, the riff needs to just get the hell out of the way & make room for something else that's going on, like the main melody (lead vocals, lead guitar, etc.).

Am	C	F	G
2 2 2 2	5 5 5 5	3 3 3 3	3 3 5 5
0 0 0 0	3 3 3 3	1 1 1 1	1 1 3 3
□ □ □ □	□ □ □ □	□ □ □ □	□ □ □ □
PM-----			

That's where "chugging" riffs come in. Steady motion, mostly palm muted, for a thick, chunky delivery of whatever the root note of the moment happens to be. (If you're using power chords, then doing all downstrokes will ensure you hit the lowest root note *first* every time.)

In fact, even if you're ultimately aiming for a more complex riff, writing a riff like this initially can make a great placeholder riff while you work out the other parts of that section of the song. Then you can come back later when more of the melodies and instruments parts are in place and revisit that riff with a more complex approach.

(Btw... Notice I'm talking about songwriting here, which really means recording, since that's really the only way songs actually come to exist. If you're not already recording at home yet, get a recording interface & Reaper software ASAP so you can write music that exists on its own without you being there to play it 24/7. You'll have a lot more to show for the tips in this book once you can record your ideas on multiple tracks & bring something to life.)

#2: Rhythmic Picking Patterns

If you have a specific rhythmic groove or accenting pattern in mind, that can be the very thing that makes your song "move" the way you want your listener to feel it.

Just like in approach #1, this one is simple, functional, and solid. Most of what you need to come up with is the rhythmic groove, and that alone can make a song distinctive & memorable.

#3: Crazy Technical Rhythm Patterns

Of course you can take the idea from #2 above to a whole new level and get insanely technical by using faster sub-beat values, speed bursts, syncopation, polyrhythmic patterns, polymeter (multiple time signatures played over each other), and other rhythmic concepts to create dizzying riffs that stun your listeners and make them wonder how the hell you ever came up with something like that.

For me, the trick is simple. Start with double-bass drumming (program it!), with steady sixteenth (or whatever rhythmic subdivision you want to use; something fast). Then play along with consistent palm muting in "stop-and-go" fashion, playing clusters of notes and occasional single notes, all falling on a sub-beat. Then go back once you're satisfied and (1.) play/record it again on rhythm guitar #2, & (2.) delete the kick drum hits

that happen during sixteenth notes you didn't play on & essentially tailor your drums to fit what you actually played. It sounds tight as hell — and if you keep a crash or hi-hat cymbal going at a steady pace, it can still have a feel that listeners can follow while still making their heads spin.

#4: Held-Out Power Chords

Okay, so this is probably THE most simple approach on this list, but that's exactly why I've included it. It's so simple and obvious, it's easy to overlook and dismiss out-of-hand precisely because it's not even challenging to play.

But sometimes that's exactly what the section of the song calls for — a well-placed power chord to come in right at the right moment, and ring out, possibly even fading out to silence or near-silence before you even hear it again. That's how you build anticipation — that's dynamics 101.

The nice thing about simple power chords is that you can go with the standard 2-note for or the full-octave 3-note shape, but you can also get creative with power chord voicings and go looking for interesting ways to “stack” the root and 5th all over the guitar neck. And when you're only playing one power chord that rings out, those interesting voicings are more likely to stand out than in a really “busy” riff where all that extra work may go entirely unnoticed.

So don't forget the most obvious and easy to play approach. It's great for intros, build-ups, the main chorus riff when it kicks in, and pretty much any other part of a song.

#5: Classic Gallop Riffs

From Iron Maiden's “The Trooper” to Dio's “Holy Diver” to Therion's “To Mega Therion” to Heart's “Barracuda,” the basic gallop has always been a solid, reliable rhythmic tool at your disposal whenever you need to build a riff that moves the listener.

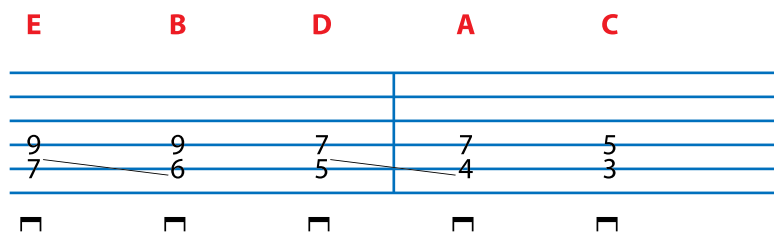
Additionally, you can throw in gallops with any other type of riff you're using for a little added rhythmic interest and a little more intensity.

#6: Thrashy, Gallop-Filled Riffs

Of course you can take gallops up a notch and throw them in all over the place in a dizzying array of raw aggression. Some great examples of this is approach are Overkill “Evil Never Dies” and Iced Earth “Travel in Stygian.”

#7: Minor 6th Diads as Passing Chords (with Power Chords)

Ever hear a cool power chord progression that uses out of key notes that sound like they belong? One way of thinking of this is to “borrow” the higher note (the 5th) of one power chord and lower the root of a half-step. (See the example riff.)



When you do that, the interval relationship changes. In the power chord, the lower note is the root, and the upper note is the 5th. When you move that root note down, suddenly the higher note is the root note and the lower note is the MAJOR 3RD, but it’s played in the bass. (Minor 6ths and Major 3rds are inversions of each other.)

One example of this approach is the opening riff to 38 Special’s “Hold On Loosely.”

#8: Full-Octave Power Chords PLUS the Open 1st and 2nd Strings

This approach works especially well for power chord progressions with the root on the 5TH STRING, with the 5th on the D string and the octave on the G string — simply add the open B and high E string to the chord.

Depending on the chord, this introduces up to 2 additional chord tones for a more interesting voicing. Plus, no matter what chord you’re playing, it adds a brightness to the chord that only the 2 highest open strings can provide, while anchoring the tonality to the E chord (or E minor chord), since “E plus B equals E5” (that is, play an E and a B together and E will feel like the root note and B will merely intensify it).

For an excellent Rock example of this approach, check out the Bridge section of Tom Petty’s “*Runnin’ Down a Dream*,” where he uses E, D, and C full-octave power chords on the 5th, 4th and 3rd strings along with the open B and high E strings to create interesting voicings for an otherwise all-too-common i - bVII - bVI progression.

#9: Classic Double-Stop Riffs

From the iconic opening riff to Deep Purple’s “*Smoke on the Water*” to the more aggressive edge of Skid Row’s “*Youth Gone Wild*,” simple 2-string double-stops are a great way to write riffs with “chords” (well, diads at least) that you can play rather quickly with 1 or 2 fingers. This gives you a lot more freedom of movement like you would have with single-note riffs but with almost as much fullness and harmonic depth as with playing full chords.

Often, this approach uses 4ths as the “main” interval (the higher note is the “root” note), but don’t forget to throw in other consonant intervals as well: 5ths, 3rds, and 6ths.

#10: Open chords & Barre chords

One of the nice things about most power chords is that your first finger merely has to press down the rest of the strings and you have a full chord right under your fingers at any given moment.

So even if you're not looking to strum chords around the campfire, throwing in a full chord into an otherwise low-power-chord-driven riff, either as an open chord or a barre chord, can provide a nice splash of color, brightness & added texture.

Personally, I like to use the CAGED system to locate and audition movable chord shapes and then look for any opportunities for chord melody between one chord and the next.

Most often, I'll default to using triads, but I do frequently also use sus2 barre chords, and occasionally I'll also use sus2 chords as "stacked power chords" (root 5th 9th).

Borrowing from #8 above, sometimes I'll also purposely include open higher strings like 1 & 2 or 2 & 3, depending on the chord and what key I'm in.

#11: Purposely dissonant chords

In the past decade, in progressive metal in particular, it's become more and more common to feature intentional dissonance, especially using a root-5th-minor 6th combination on 3 strings. The easiest place to do this is on the 4th, 3rd, and 2nd strings.

I personally used this same chord type, in an arpeggiated form, as the opening riff (and 1 layer of the verse riff) to my song "*Emanations*." (See Tab)

Bbm -6	F7no5
let ring -----	

#12: Scale Melody

From Black Sabbath to Candlemass to My Dying Bride to Ozzy Osbourne "Crazy Train," to the opening riff to Iron Maiden "The Trooper," a riff that IS a melody can really make the song.

Note, this is not the same as just playing the scale up and down, or playing scale runs. This is a melody constructed from the notes of a scale (at least mostly, anyway).

#13: Scales & Modes

Sometimes, though, scale runs can make a great riff! That is, if you use them as a sequence. This allows you to create an initial theme, and then reinforce it using other modes of the scale to create a sort of call-and-response effect. This can be as simple or as complex as you'd like, but it is especially well suited to more complex, technical styles.

#14: Arpeggios (simple, melodic)

If you're playing some interpretation of a chord progression anyway, why not create melodies based on the arpeggios of those chords?

As it is, there's a good chance you're already playing power chords at some point, and that's 2 of 3 chord tones as it is: root and 5th. If you just use a single-note approach to using the notes of a power chord, you're 2/3 of the way there already. Just include the 3rd here and there and you've fully established the character of the triad.

Depending on how you do it, you could almost think of this approach as the "single note approach" to #9 above, Classic Double-Stop Riffs.

#15: Bending phrases & melodies

With all the focus on picking, palm muting, rhythm, syncopation, etc, it can be easy to overlook string bending, but a well-placed bend can add LOADS of character and attitude at just the right time.

Whether it's based on classic Blues/Rock soloing vocabulary, or a more modern metal approach with intentional dissonance, bends add a special something to your riffs that you just can't get with any other technique.

If you have a whammy bar, you can also use that to add dips and divebombs for really extreme bend effects, and if it's a floating tremolo, you can bend down OR up.

#16: Sweep arpeggios

Are you into Neoclassical Shred or Technical Death Metal? If so, the line between lead and rhythm guitar is blurred (if not erased) as it is, so you should try throwing a sweep arpeggio into your riff here and there.

#17: Tremolo picking

There's a whole school of thought in Black Metal riffing that relies heavily on tremolo picking, and it's a great way to feature strong melodies while adding a sinister sense of darkness and intensity to every moment.

Some examples are Emperor "*The Loss and Curse of Reverence*," Dodheimsgard "*Satanic Art*," and Dark Funeral, "*Hail Murder*."

#18: Tremolo layers

Another use of tremolo picking that isn't as limited to extreme metal is to use it as a layer behind other chords playing at the same time. Radiohead used this exact approach during the chorus to "*Creep*." Of course this also works excellently with heavy styles of music as well, & I used it myself in my song "*The 7th Tower*."

#19: Strummed Octaves

This is a very similar approach to tremolo picking, and could essentially be considered to be just another form of tremolo picking, but the use of simultaneous octaves to play a melody is a particular style that has worked well at least since the early 90s.

You're basically strumming 3 strings, but muting the middle one with your first finger. The lowest and highest string of the 3 are the same note in two different octaves. Having that lower octave note there makes it sound thicker than if you just played a single higher note, yet brighter than if you had just played a single lower note. Kind of the best of both worlds.

And of course it works well on its own, or over chords played on another guitar.

One example of this riffing approach is the opening riff to Bush "*Machinehead*."

For a heavier example, I also used this approach to harmonize two guitars doing this technique during the bridge to Ol Sonuf "*Parasite*."

It's Really All About Songwriting, Though

A riff can pull you in instantly and really make the song, but a riff by itself is honestly not worth much.

That's why in most of the approaches I've talked about here, I've mentioned how it serves the SONG. You do need riffs to write Rock and Metal songs, but it's important not to lose sight of the real goal — to make music that sounds great. And one riff isn't going to do that. You need the rest of the song...and for that you need to be RECORDING at home.

Songs Don't Exist Until They're Recorded

Seriously... think of any song you know, and you'll notice that what you were REALLY thinkiing of is the RECORDING of that song.

In fact, even if you were thinking of the live version, that's still a recording. THAT is what people listen to: RECORDINGS. Until you have that, you aren't on the map.

So if you want to write great music, yourself, and especially if you're not recording yourself at home yet, visit <https://ShredMentor.com> and book a free consultation NOW so we can get you on the right track to writing the music you have inside you.

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