

# Voice Leading Rules - Cheat Sheet

## Voice Leading Rules:

- Move the voices a little as possible when changing chords
  - \*\*Rule: Resolve 7->1 in a V chord in the outer voices.
  - \*\*Guideline: Keep the notes the same if you can (except in soprano). Move mostly by step.
  - \*\*Guideline: Avoid melodic leaps with dissonant intervals.
- Make each line unique
  - \*\*Rule: no parallel fifths/octaves (or unisons)
  - \*\*Rule: no hidden fifths/octaves between the outer voices
  - \*\*Rule: Don't double tendency tones!
  - \*\*Rule: Keep upper voices within an octave of one another  
(i.e. soprano is within an octave of the alto, alto is within an octave of the tenor)
  - \*\*Guideline: No voice crossings (where one voice goes above another) or overlaps (see below)
- Doubling/complete chords
  - \*\*Guideline: Write complete chords whenever possible.
  - \*\*Rule: you may only leave out the fifth
  - \*\*Guideline: Double the root of the chord (except for diminished...)  
Double the fifth if it makes the voice leading smoother. Be careful with the third.
- Misc:
  - \*\*Rule: Write outer voices first – make sure they sound good together!
  - \*\*Guideline: Contrary motion between upper voices and bass whenever possible
  - \*\*Guideline: Start with a closed position chord and work out from there.
  - \*\*Guideline: If a pair of upper voices leap together by more than a third, rethink it...

## Terrible Example:

The musical score illustrates several voice leading errors in a piano accompaniment. The errors are annotated as follows:

- Alto leaps too far:** A star marks a large leap in the alto voice.
- Parallel 5ths:** A star marks a parallel fifth interval between the alto and tenor voices.
- missing 3rd:** The third of the chord is missing in the first and third measures.
- Parallel 8ves:** Multiple instances of parallel octaves between the alto and tenor voices.
- doubled leading tone:** The leading tone is doubled in the second measure.
- spacing:** Poor spacing between notes in the second measure.
- weird (bad) leap (tenor):** A star marks a dissonant leap in the tenor voice.
- too many unisons:** Multiple unisons between the alto and tenor voices.
- alto is lower than tenor B and T:** The alto voice is lower than the tenor voice in the final measure.

\* Voice overlap - where a voice jumps higher (or lower) than a neighboring voice's preceding note. In the first measure, the alto leaps above the soprano's previous A. This confuses our ears and sounds bad.