

# 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 for Piano shows several voice leading errors across four measures. Annotations include:

- Measure 1:** "Alto leaps too far" (star on alto note), "Parallel 8ves" (arrow to bass notes), "missing 3rd" (arrow to bass staff).
- Measure 2:** "Parallel 5ths" (star on bass notes), "doubled leading tone" (arrow to alto and bass notes).
- Measure 3:** "missing 3rd" (arrow to alto staff), "Parallel 8ves" (arrow to alto and bass notes), "spacing" (arrow to bass notes), "weird (bad) leap (tenor)" (star on tenor note).
- Measure 4:** "missing 3rd" (arrow to alto staff), "doubled leading tone" (arrow to alto and bass notes), "Parallel 8ves" (arrow to alto and bass notes), "too many unisons" (two arrows to alto and bass notes), "alto is lower than tenor B and T" (two arrows to alto and bass notes).

\* 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.