7 Step Mixing Blueprint Cheatsheet

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A producer's guide to professional quality mixes

Step 1: Setup

1. Remove all preset reverbs and delays. **Starting the mixing process dry is the key to great sounding mixes**. If you use a lot of audio samples with reverb pre-applied, that is fine. Just remove reverbs and delays where you can
2. Organize your project with easy-to-understand labels and colors
3. Group together similar layers

Step 2: EQ

1. Low-cut every instrument to at least 150 hz besides the kick, bass, and *sometimes* snare
2. Apply a downward bell filter to tame resonating (overly loud) frequencies
3. If there is more than one instrument in a certain frequency range, make sure to decrease the volume of the shared frequencies of the less important sound, or cut out the shared frequencies of the less important sound

Questions to ask yourself before moving on to the next step:

1. Does my bass sound un-interrupted and clearly defined?
2. Do my dominant layers like my drums, chords, bass, and leads sound crisp and clear?
3. If I can't hear a certain sound in the mix the way that I would like to hear it, is it because there are other instruments sharing the same frequency range?

Step 3: Balance

1. Start balancing your mix by turning the volume of each track down to nothing. You should hear nothing when pressing play
2. Start by balancing the drums. I recommend finding a reference song to determine how loud your drums should be *relative to each other*. Bring your most important drums (usually kick and snare) to a desired volume leaving at least -6db of headroom
3. Balance other drums around the kick and snare
4. Once every percussion instrument is balanced to your liking, mute them
5. Focus now on balancing all of your melodic instruments like bass, chords, and leads

6. Find a desirable balance for both your drums and your melodic instruments
7. Next, balance drums and melodic instruments together

Questions to ask yourself regarding balance:

1. Does everything sound even?
2. Are any instruments so loud that I can't hear other important instruments?
3. Does the balance of my song sound similar to the balance of my favorite artist's songs?

Step 4: Stereo Imaging

1. Pan or spread everything that is not the kick, snare, lead, or bass
2. Counter melodies, hihats, FX, background vocals, and chords get panned or spread

Questions to ask yourself regarding stereo imaging:

1. Does the lead sound uninterrupted and dominant?
2. Are my center panned instruments clearly defined?
3. Can I hear a distinct directional difference between instruments that require the center pan and instruments that don't?
4. Does my song sound as wide as professional songs?

Step 5: Compression

1. Compress any sound that is too quiet at some points and too loud at other points
2. Compress raw recordings like vocals, guitars, and bass guitars for a more consistent, even sound
3. Lightly compress plucks and drums for more punch

Questions to ask yourself regarding compression:

1. Is any instrument difficult to balance because it is loud at some points and quiet at other points?
2. Do my raw recordings now sound even throughout the mix and sore through the mix?
3. Does my overall mix sound tight or loose?

Step 6: Sidechain (Rock genres skip this step)

1. In EDM, HipHop, Pop, or any other related genres, sidechain the bass to the kick to ensure the kick is well defined and able to cut through the mix so that we can hear it
2. If the kick still struggles to cut through the mix, sidechain other layers to it until you hear it the way you want to hear it

Questions to ask yourself regarding sidechaining:

1. Is my sidechain signal smooth and easy to listen to?
2. Is my kick easy to hear and comfortable to listen to?
3. Is there any layer that sounds like it is over-riding the kick?

Step 7: Fine Tuning

1. Apply a similar reverb setting to every appropriate instrument in your mix
2. Apply delay to appropriate leads
3. Do not apply large reverbs or delay to sub bass or kicks
4. Make sure your EQ settings are at a desirable setting
5. Make sure your balance sounds professional and ready for mastering (use a reference track for this step)
6. Make sure you're happy with the result of your mixing process and that nothing else needs to be done

Questions to ask yourself regarding this step:

1. Are you satisfied with the overall outcome of your song?
2. Does every instrument in your mix come together and sound like one song?
3. Do any instruments strike you as too loud?
4. Do any instruments sound as if they don't blend well with the other instruments?
5. Does your song sound like a nicely blended group of instruments or does it sound like a bunch of instruments piled over each other?
6. Does your song sound as close as possible to professional songs released by your favorite artists or labels? If not, why?