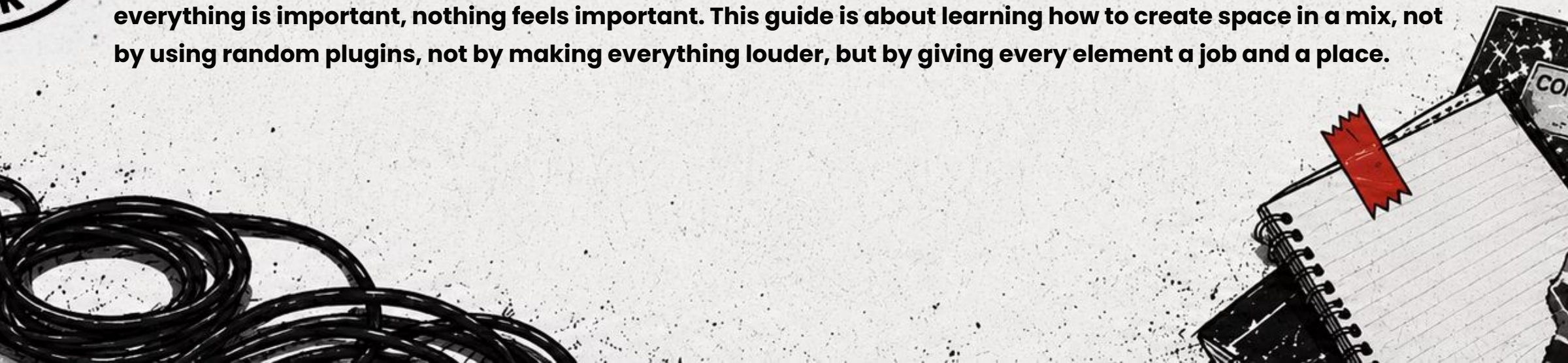

08. SOUND MIXING
COMPOSITION BOOK

The Art of Sound Space

How to Stop Overcrowding Your Mix and Give Every Sound a Place

A lot of producers don't have a sound design problem, they have a space problem. The drums are loud. The bass is loud. The vocals are loud. The synths are loud. Everything is fighting for the front of the mix. When everything is important, nothing feels important. This guide is about learning how to create space in a mix, not by using random plugins, not by making everything louder, but by giving every element a job and a place.



Part 1: The Main Problem

Everything Wants to Be the Main Character

Most messy mixes come from one mistake: every element is trying to be the hero. The kick wants to be huge. The snare wants to be huge. The bass wants to be huge. The vocals want to be huge. The leads, pads, and effects, all of them want to dominate. That doesn't create power. That creates traffic.

A powerful mix comes from hierarchy. You decide what matters most, and everything else supports it. Before reaching for EQ, compression, saturation, stereo widening, or mastering, ask one critical question: *W*hat is the listener supposed to focus on?

Drop

- Kick
- Snare
- Sub
- Bass hook

Verse

- Vocal
- Groove
- Minimal bass
- Supporting atmosphere

Intro

- Mood
- Texture
- One melodic idea
- Space

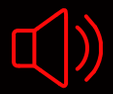
Breakdown

- Emotion
- Vocal
- Reverb
- Tension

Every section has a different focus. Do not mix the whole song as if every section is a drop. Match your mix decisions to the emotional intent of each part of the arrangement.

Part 2: The Four Types of Space

A mix has four main kinds of space. Understanding each one gives you a complete toolkit for placing sounds, before a single plugin is touched.



Volume Space

Front-to-back depth. Louder sounds feel closer. Quieter sounds feel farther away. If everything is loud, everything feels flat. Before touching plugins, use the faders. A quiet sound can still be important. A loud sound is not automatically better.

Frequency Space

Top-to-bottom spectrum. Kick, sub, bass, vocals, synths, hats, and effects all fight in different frequency areas. Every sound needs a frequency role. Not every sound needs to be full-range. A mix gets cleaner when every sound stops trying to take the whole spectrum.

Stereo Space

Left-to-right width. Some sounds should be centered, some can be wide, some can move. If everything is wide, the mix loses focus. Width only feels wide when something else stays centered. The center is where power lives. The sides are where space lives.

Time Space

Depth and movement. Reverb, delay, tails, fades, gaps, and silence create distance. A dry sound feels close. A wet sound feels farther away. If every sound has reverb and delay, the mix becomes blurry. Time effects should create depth, not mud.

Part 3: Classic Mixing Formula

This formula is the safer starting point. It works well when the goal is a clean, controlled, traditional mix with more headroom. These numbers are not laws, they are starting points. Different samples, synths, recordings, and plugins will hit the meters differently. Use this formula when the mix feels messy and you need to reset your balance.

Works best for

- Hip-hop, Pop, R&B
- House, Reggae, Rock
- Acoustic and vocal music
- Older-school electronic music
- Anything needing space before loudness

Classic Starting Levels

- Kick: **-10 to -12 dB**
- Snare: **-10 to -12 dB**
- Sub: **-10 to -12 dB**
- Bass: **-15 to -18 dB**
- Vocals: **-15 to -18 dB**
- Everything else: **-25 to -30 dB**

This formula gives the mix space before plugins. The kick, snare, and sub sit as the foundation. The bass and vocals sit slightly behind the drums. The extra sounds stay low enough to support the song without stealing focus. Once the mix feels clean at these levels, you can adjust based on the song, but always use your ears as the final judge, not the numbers.

ⓘ This is not the final mix. This is the starting balance. Use the numbers to reset the mix, then use your ears.

Part 4: Modern / New Gen Mixing Formula

Modern music often works differently from classic mixing. In a lot of newer genres, the mix is more forward, louder, denser, and more aggressive. But this does not mean everything should be loud, modern mixing still needs hierarchy. The difference is that the main elements are allowed to sit hotter, while the support elements stay controlled.

Works best for

- Bass music, Drum and bass, Dubstep
- Trap, Rap, Hyperpop
- Modern pop and club music
- Heavy beat-based electronic music
- Anything designed to hit hard on speakers, cars, and phones

Modern / New Gen Starting Levels

- Kick: **-5 to -8 dB**
- Snare: **-7 to -10 dB**
- Sub: **-8 to -12 dB**
- Bass: **-10 to -15 dB**
- Vocals: **-12 to -18 dB**
- Everything else: **-22 to -30 dB**

Modern Music Priority Order

01

Kick

02

Snare or clap

03

Sub

04

Bass or 808 movement

05

Lead vocal, hook, or main melody

06

Percussion and groove

07

FX and ear candy

08

Atmosphere and background textures

⚠ The modern formula is more dangerous. It can sound exciting while producing, but it can destroy the mix if you are not careful. Use the classic formula when the mix feels messy. Use the modern formula when the mix is already clean and needs more aggression. Clean first. Loud second. Aggressive last.

Parts 5-7: Core Mixing Principles

Beyond the formulas, three principles govern every great mix decision: knowing your main character, protecting the center, and using dry versus wet to create depth. These are the conceptual foundations that make the formulas actually work.

The Main Character Test

Before mixing any section, write down the top three most important sounds. Don't guess, commit. Once you know the top three elements, everything else becomes easier. Support sounds should support. Background sounds should stay in the background. Ear candy should create movement, not distraction. If a sound is not helping the main character, lower it, simplify it, or remove it.

Center, Width, and Power

The center of the mix is where the power lives. Keep kick, snare, sub, main bass weight, lead vocal, and main drop impact centered. Use width for pads, atmospheres, background vocals, FX, reverb, and delays. Do not make the low end wide just because it sounds cool in isolation, a wide low end can feel unstable and weak. Width should decorate the power, not replace it.

Dry Front / Wet Back

A dry sound feels close. A wet sound feels farther away. This is one of the easiest ways to create depth. Lead vocal, kick, snare, main bass, and main hook should be mostly dry and forward. Pads, atmospheres, background vocals, effects, and reverb tails can be wetter, wider, and lower. Depth is not created by putting reverb on everything, it is created by contrast.

Mixing Is Also Arrangement

A lot of mix problems are not mix problems, they are arrangement problems. If five sounds are playing in the same range at the same time, EQ might not fix it. If the drop feels crowded, maybe there are too many layers. The best mix move is sometimes deleting the sound. Mixing is not just adding plugins. Mixing is choosing what deserves to stay.

Exercises 1-5: Foundation and Balance

These exercises build the core skill: creating a mix that works before touching a single plugin. Start here every time the mix feels out of control.

1

Static Balance Reset

Turn off all effects. Bring every fader down. Start with only kick, snare, sub, bass, and vocal or main lead. Set a rough balance using only volume, no EQ, no compression, no limiters. The mix should already make sense with no plugins. If the fader balance is bad, plugins will not save it.

2

Classic Formula Reset

Set main elements to the classic starting levels: kick/snare/sub at -10 to -12 dB, bass/vocals at -15 to -18 dB, everything else at -25 to -30 dB. Ask: Does the mix feel more open? Is the main idea clear? Are background sounds too loud? Use these numbers as a reset, then adjust with your ears.

3

Modern Formula Reset

Set main elements to the modern starting levels: kick at -5 to -8 dB, snare at -7 to -10 dB, sub at -8 to -12 dB, bass at -10 to -15 dB, vocals at -12 to -18 dB, everything else at -22 to -30 dB. Ask: Is the mix exciting or just loud? Is the limiter working too hard? Modern means controlled aggression, not absent space.

4

The Top Three Test

Choose one section of the song. Write down the top three most important sounds. Mute everything else. Build the section around only those three sounds. Then add the other sounds back one at a time. If a sound doesn't support the top three, remove it or lower it. Ask: Is this sound helping the focus, or stealing focus?

5

The -30 dB Background Rule

Take all background sounds, atmospheres, pads, extra percussion, risers, noise layers, ear candy, textures, and start them at -25 to -30 dB. Slowly raise each one until you notice it. Then pull it back slightly. Background sounds don't need to be obvious. They need to be felt. A lot of producers ruin space by making support sounds too loud.

Exercises 6-10: Frequency, Arrangement, and Width

Once the volume balance is under control, these exercises train your ear to think in terms of frequency roles, stereo placement, and the critical relationship between wet and dry signals.

1

The Frequency Parking Lot

Pick one section. Write down every major sound and assign each one a main frequency job. Kick gets punch and low impact. Sub gets deep low-end weight. Bass gets midrange movement. Snare gets body and crack. Vocal gets midrange message. Two sounds can share a range, but they cannot both dominate it at the same time. If the vocal and synth both live in the same midrange, one must move, lower, or simplify.

2

Mute Instead of EQ Test

When the mix feels muddy, do not reach for EQ first. Mute one sound. Ask: Did the mix get better? If yes, the problem might not be EQ, the problem might be that the sound is not needed. The best EQ move is sometimes deleting the sound. Mixing is not only adding. Mixing is choosing.

3

Mono Center Control

Keep the most important low-end and punch elements centered: kick, snare, sub, main bass weight, lead vocal, main drop impact. Give width to pads, atmospheres, background vocals, FX, percussion details, reverb, and delays. Do not make the low end wide just because it sounds cool alone. A wide low end can feel unstable and weak. The center is where the power lives.

4

The Width Ladder

Place your sounds in three groups. Center: kick, snare, sub, main vocal, main bass weight. Medium Width: bass mid layers, leads, percussion, doubles. Wide: pads, atmospheres, reverb, delays, background textures. If everything is wide, nothing feels wide. Width only works when something stays centered.

5

The Reverb Distance Test

Choose one sound and send it to reverb. Start with too much reverb. Then slowly lower it until the sound still has space but does not lose focus. Compare dry vs. wet. Ask: Did the sound move backward? Did the mix get blurry? Did the reverb cover the vocal or snare? Does the tail continue too long? Reverb is not decoration. Reverb is distance.

Exercises 11-15: Depth, Reference, and Control

These final exercises push your ears toward professional-level discernment, learning from real tracks, fixing balance at low volume, and stopping the master chain from masking a broken mix.

1 Dry Front / Wet Back Method

Pick the main sound in the section, keep it mostly dry. Give support sounds more space, reverb, delay, filtering, or lower volume. Lead vocal stays dry and forward. Background vocal gets wetter and wider. Main bass stays dry and centered. Atmosphere gets wet and wide. Snare stays forward and punchy. Impact FX sit wet and behind. The more important the sound, the less blurry it should be.

2 Reference Balance Exercise

Pick one professional track in a similar style. Don't copy the song, study the balance. Ask: How loud is the kick compared to the bass? How loud is the snare compared to the vocal? Is the vocal dry or wet? Is the bass wide or centered? How loud are the background sounds? How much silence is there? What is actually carrying the drop? Then compare your mix quietly. If your mix only works loud, the balance is probably wrong.

3 The Low Volume Mix

Turn your monitoring volume very low and listen. Can you still hear kick, snare, bass, vocal or main lead, main rhythm, and song movement? If something disappears completely, raise it slightly. If something dominates too much, lower it. Low-volume listening exposes balance problems quickly. A good mix still makes sense quietly.

4 The One Plugin Limit

Pick one section. You are allowed to use only one plugin per track. Choose carefully, maybe EQ, maybe compression, maybe saturation, maybe reverb. But only one. This forces you to solve problems with volume, panning, muting, arrangement, and sound choice. If you need ten plugins to make a sound work, maybe it is the wrong sound.

5 The No Mastering Test

Turn off the master limiter, clipper, and loudness chain. Listen to the mix quietly. Ask: Does the kick still hit? Does the snare still cut? Does the bass still move? Is the vocal or lead still clear? Does the drop still feel exciting? Mastering should enhance the mix, it should not rescue it. If the track only sounds good because the master limiter is smashing everything, go back to the balance.

The Sound Space Checklist & Final Reminder

Before saying the mix is bad, run through this checklist. Most mix problems fall into one of five categories. Diagnose before you fix.

Volume

- Is the main element obvious?
- Are background sounds too loud?
- Is the kick too dominant?
- Is the vocal or lead buried?
- Is everything trying to be loud?

Frequency

- Is the low end clean?
- Is the sub fighting the kick?
- Is the midrange crowded?
- Could one sound be removed instead of EQ'd?

Stereo

- Is the low end centered?
- Is everything too wide?
- Is there contrast between center and sides?

Depth

- Are important sounds too wet?
- Is reverb making the mix blurry?
- Is the front of the mix clear?

Arrangement

- Are too many sounds playing at once?
- Does every sound have a job?
- Is the mix problem actually an arrangement problem?

Loudness

- Is the master limiter doing too much?
- Does the mix still work with the master chain off?
- Is the track loud but unclear?

Final Reminder

Mixing is not about making every sound huge. Mixing is about making the song feel **clear**.

A strong mix has priorities. A strong mix has space. A strong mix has contrast.

- Some sounds are loud. Some are quiet.
- Some sounds are dry. Some are wet.
- Some sounds are centered. Some are wide.
- Some sounds are full. Some are thin.

That is not weakness. That is balance.

> Do not make everything fight for the front. Give every sound a place. That is how a mix starts to breathe.