

Guidelines for Traditional Four-Part Vocal Writing

General Rules: Keep in mind the goal of part-writing/voice leading: four independent, singable melodic lines that together form the harmony of the chorale. You have already studied how to write melodies for the soprano voice. The rules outlined here are for the relationships between voices, and for writing the alto, tenor and bass. They do not replace what you already know about the soprano melody.

1. Voice relationships (S = soprano, A = alto, T = tenor, B = bass. S/A/T = upper, S/B = outer, A/T = inner)
  - a. Guidelines for voice ranges (vocal writing only):

Soprano (TC, stems up)      Alto (TC, stems down)

Tenor (BC, stems up)      Bass (BC, stems down)

- b. No more than one octave between neighboring upper voices (S/A, A/T).
  - The tenor counts as an upper voice; it can be more than an 8ve above the bass.
  - When the bass is low, the tenor should stay high as an upper voice. Avoid small intervals between B-T when the bass is low.
- c. No unisons (see example at right); octaves are ok.
- d. Emphasize contrary or oblique motion between S/B.
- e. A and T should be mainly stepwise.
  - No consecutive leaps in A/T (below left).
  - Leaps in A/T should resolve by step in the opposite direction (below right – unresolved leap).

- f. No more than three of the same interval class in a row between any two voices.
- g. If two neighboring chords have notes in common, keep the common tones in the same voice whenever possible.
- h. Avoid melodic leaps of A2/A4 in any voice, and leaps larger than a fifth in A or T.

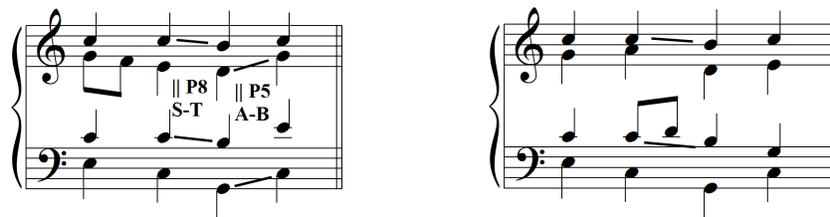
2. Avoid voice crossing or overlap (most likely between A and T).
  - a. Voice crossing: one voice goes higher than one of its neighboring voices at the same time (at right – A-T).

- b. Voice overlap: one voice goes higher than (or the same as) the preceding note in an adjacent voice. This is ok if there is at least one chord between the overlap; it is also ok immediately after a cadence (at right: S-A).

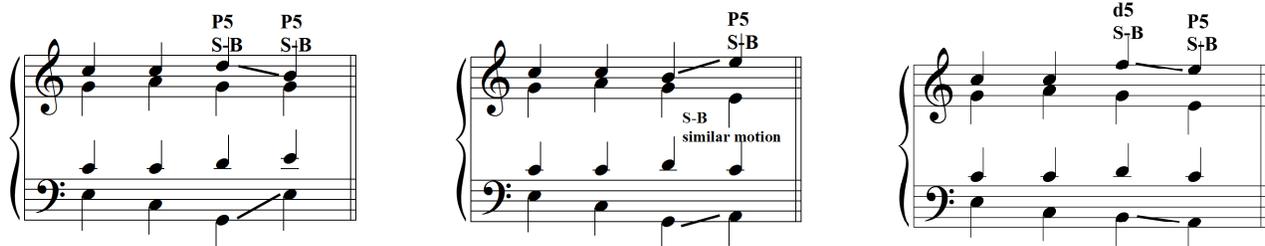
3. Obey chord and note tendency. Tendency tones must resolve by step in the proper direction, in the same voice, as soon as possible. In particular:
  - a. Chord 7ths resolve down.
  - b. The leading tone resolves up to tonic (exceptions: Ti may fall to Sol at the end of a phrase, usually in A or T; also, a melodic line can move Do-Ti-La-Sol in one voice).
  - c. Altered notes resolve in the direction they were altered.
  - d. Weaker tendencies within the scale: Re-Do, Fa-Mi, La-Sol. Do not worry about these.
  
4. Avoid parallel motion by P1, P5, P8 between any two voices; parallel P4 or non-perfect 5ths/8ves ok.
 

**Note:** All the rules for 5ths also apply to octaves, even if I only write "5ths" in the description.

  - a. Repetition of an interval is not a problem – only parallel motion by that interval (below left).
  - b. The parallel motion is between chords (think about harmonic rhythm), so parallel P5/P8 **cannot** be disguised with a passing tone or other non-chord tone (below right).



- c. Other related problems:
  - Parallel P5 or P8 by contrary motion – avoid (see below, left).
  - Direct or "hidden" P5/P8 – moving to a P5 or P8 by similar motion (instead of parallel) – avoid between S/B, otherwise ok; but, ok between S/B if S moves by step (below, center).
  - Unequal 5ths or octaves (d5-P5, P5-d5, d8-P8, P8-d8) - these are fine except for d5-P5 or d8-P8, when the bass voice is involved (below, right).



5. Summary: certain part writing errors apply to either the outer or inner voices only.
  - a. Outer voice issues: direct fifths, unequal fifths.
  - b. Inner voice issues: no leaps larger than P5; no consecutive leaps; leaps must resolve by step in the opposite direction.
  - c. All other errors apply to all voices.

Doubling: Since we are writing in four-voice texture, and a triad has only three notes, one note of the triad must be played simultaneously in two voices. We say that this note has been “doubled.” Seventh chords can also have a doubled note, if another note has been left out.

1. General rules for doubling:
  - a. **Don't double tendency tones.** They both resolve the same way, creating parallel octaves.
  - b. It is usually ok to double the bass.
  - c. If a note must be left out, it is most often the 5<sup>th</sup> (the 3<sup>rd</sup> is needed to establish chord quality).
    - All chords must have a root and a third, and seventh chords must have a seventh, so these notes can't be left out.
    - In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we begin to see “rootless” chords and “indeterminate” chords (no 3<sup>rd</sup>), but not in the Common Practice period.
  
2. Specific guidelines for doubling (some of this information won't be needed until Harmony 2):
  - a. Any chord note may be doubled, as long as it is not a tendency note (leading tones, accidentals, chord sevenths), and as long as it doesn't create a voice leading problem. In general, avoid doubling non-chord tones.
  
  - b. Doubling in root position: usually doubling the root is preferred, but any note may be doubled subject to the previous point.
  
  - c. Doubling in first inversion:
    - diminished and Augmented triads are usually in first inversion with the third (the bass) doubled.
    - When a major or minor triad is in first inversion, choose which tone to double in this order: soprano (first choice); bass (second choice); an inner voice (last choice)... but again, double any note as long as 2a (above) is observed.
  
  - d. Doubling in second inversion: when a triad is in second inversion, double the bass.
  
  - e. Seventh chords: many seventh chords are fully-voiced, meaning they have four different notes and so no doubling is needed. If you want to leave out a note, the fifth is the best note to omit. Then, follow the doubling guidelines above depending on the chord's inversion.

“Key” to interpreting my part-writing corrections in your homework:

VO – voice overlap

VC – voice crossing

LT – incorrectly resolved leading tone

7<sup>th</sup> – chord seventh not resolved correctly

CL – consecutive leaps (A or T only)

UL – unresolved leap (A or T only)

A2 or A4 – melodic leap of A2 or A4 in one voice

>P8 – more than an octave between adjacent upper voices (S-A, A-T only)

>P5 – leap greater than P5 (A or T only)

//P5 or //P8 – parallel fifths or octaves

D5 or D8 – direct fifths, direct octaves

U5 or U8 – unequal fifths, unequal octaves

C5 or C8 – contrary fifths, contrary octaves

P1 – perfect unison between two voices

X – a wrong note (not part of the required chord) will be crossed out with an X.