



THE MIXING ENGINEER'S CHECKLIST BOOK

7 Checklists To Help You
Reach Your Best Mix

BOBBY OWSINSKI

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Introduction	4
Mixing Checklists.....	5
Mix Prep Checklist	5
Personal Pre-Mix Prep	7
General Mix Checklist	9
EQ Checklist	11
Mix Element Clash Checklist	12
Finished Mix Checklist	13
Mixing For Mastering Checklist	15
Get 4 Free Mixing Tricks!	17
About Bobby Owsinski	18
Other Books By Bobby Owsinski	19
Bobby Owsinski Lynda.com Video Courses	21
Bobby Owsinski Coaching Courses	22
Bobby Owsinski's Social Media Connections	22

Introduction

A successful mixing sessions is based on a variety of factors, not the least is how well played and recorded the tracks are themselves. Many times an engineer can't seem to make a mix work, but there are so many factors that go into a mix that it's easy to overlook something that can be critical to the end result.

Here are a number of checklists collected from *The Mixing Engineer's Handbook* and *Audio Mixing Bootcamp* that cover the different phases of the mixing process as well as some basic troubleshooting when a problem presents itself.

These checklists come from not only my experience, but from many of the legendary engineers that I've been lucky enough to interview and learn from over the years like Al Schmitt, Elliot Scheiner, Dave Pensado, Ed Cherney, and many more.

I've also included a number of tips where appropriate to either help speed the mixing process along, or help take the mix to the next level.

Happy mixing!

Mixing Checklists

The following checklists and tips are specially designed to make your mixing session more efficient. By not overlooking some of the smaller element or process of a mix, you'll find that you're less likely to have to go back to retouch the mix, or redo something that might have repercussions later in the mix.

Mix Prep Checklist

One of the keys to a great sounding mix is the preparation made beforehand, but before you can begin moving faders the tracks need to be cleaned and prepped to make sure that your mix sounds as professional as possible. Here are a number of questions to ask yourself before you proceed with the mix.

- Have you made a copy of the your mix file so you can return to zero if needed?
- Did you name your mix file something descriptive?
- Did you tweak any track timings that seemed out of the pocket?
- Did you eliminate any track noises by trimming the heads and tails of noisy tracks?
- Did you eliminate the intro count-off or set the start point beyond it?
- Did you check that all the region and event fades are smooth-sounding?
- Did you cross-fade any edits to eliminate potential pops and clicks?
- Did you delete any extra or ghost notes from MIDI tracks?
- Did you preform all the vocal or solo comps as needed for the mix?

- Did you tune any tracks as needed for the mix?
- Did you delete any empty tracks?
- Did you deactivate and hide any unused tracks?
- Did you deactivate any unused plugins?
- Did you order your tracks in a logical manner and color coded as needed?
- Are all the tracks correctly labeled so they're easy to find?
- Did you insert memory location markers at the appropriate sections of the song?
- Did you create any groups or subgroups as needed?
- Did you create any parallel compression channels as needed?
- Did you create the effects channels that you know you'll need?
- Did you insert the appropriate processors on the master buss?

TIP: It's also a good idea to make a copy of the session file on another hard drive, flash drive, online backup, or any place that you can easily grab it if for some reason your work file becomes corrupted.

Personal Pre-Mix Prep

Sometimes the key to a great mix can come from being in the right frame of mind more than anything else. Making sure that you're comfortable in both body and mind can really go a long way to taking your mix to the next level, so here are a number of things to be aware of before your mix begins.

- Did you calibrate your hearing?** Staying in a quiet environment before your mix allows you to become aware of minute changes inside a mix.
- Did you attain your listening reference?** Listen to a song that you know very well to get your reference point on how a really good mix sounds in your room before you begin to mix. This gives you a reference point for balance, frequency response, depth and dynamics that you can shoot for throughout your mix.
- Are your clothes comfortable?** Wearing comfortable clothing and shoes allows you to work longer hours without any distractions.
- Is the room temperature appropriate?** A room temperature that's too warm can put you to sleep, while one that's too cool can distract you from thinking about the mix. A comfortable temperature allows you to think of nothing else but the mix.
- Is the mixing environment free from distractions?** Is your phone and email turned off? Are too many people in the listening area? Are people who won't contribute to the mix in the listening area?

Can you hear the final mix in your head? Can you visualize the balance of the various mix elements in your mind before you begin the mix? Can you visualize the frequency balance and instrument dimension? Can you hear the dynamics of the song?

***TIP:** Closing your eyes while mixing can sometimes improve your hearing by both lessening the distractions and allowing your brain to concentrate on that sense.*

General Mix Checklist

A modern mix can be sophisticated and complicated, so it's very easy to overlook something in the heat of the moment that can be important to the integrity of the mix and that can help take it to the next level. Here are a number of questions to ask yourself as your mix goes along.

- Does your mix have contrast?** Does it build as the song goes along?
Are different instruments, sounds or lines added in different sections?
- Does your mix have a focal point?** Is the mix built around the instrument or vocal that's the most important?
- Does your mix sound noisy?** Have you gotten rid of any count-offs, guitar amps noises, bad edits, and breaths that stand out?
- Does your mix lack clarity or punch?** Can you distinguish every mix element? Does the rhythm section sound great by itself?
- Does your mix sound distant?** Try backing the reverb and effects down.
- Are you listening at the proper level?** Listen louder for low frequency balance and quieter for general balance.
- Are instruments clashing frequency-wise?** Can you hear every mix element distinctly?
- Can you hear every lyric?** Every word must be heard.
- Can you hear every note being played?** Automate to hear every note.
- Are the sounds dull or uninteresting?** Are you using generic synth patches or predictable guitar or keyboard sounds?

- Does the song groove?** Does it feel as good as your favorite song? Is the instrument that supplies the groove loud enough?
- Does the song have too many elements occurring at the same time?** More than five mix elements occurring at once sounds confusing.
- Does the song have dynamics?** Does the intensity change from section to section?
- Are the bass, kick and snare balanced?** Does each have their own frequency space? Can each be heard distinctly?
- What's the direction of the song?** Should it be close and intimate or big and loud?
- Are you compressing too much?** Does the mix feel squashed? Is it fatiguing to listen to? Is all the life gone?
- Are you EQing too much?** Is it too bright or too big?
- Are your fades too tight?** Does the beginning or ending of the song sound clipped?
- Did you do alternate mixes?** Did you do at least provide an instrumental-only mix?
- Did you document the keeper mixes?** Are all files properly named? Are you sure which file is the master?

***TIP:** Taking a short break before going over this checklist can provide a clearer perspective of how the mix really sounds.*

EQ Checklist

The equalization process can sometimes take more time than any other process of a mix. Here are a number of points to check if you can't seem to make an instrument or vocal fit into the mix.

- Is the sound muddy?** Cut at 250Hz.
- Is the sound honky?** Cut at 500Hz.
- Do you want to make things sound clearer?** Cut instead of boost and use a narrow Q (bandwidth).
- Are you trying to make things sound different?** Boost instead of cut and use a wide Q (bandwidth).
- Do you want a sound to stick out of the mix?** Roll off the bottom.
- Do you want it to blend into the mix?** Roll off the top.
- How many instruments or mix elements are in the mix?** The fewer instruments that are in the mix, the bigger each one should sound. Conversely, the more instruments in the mix, the smaller each one needs to be for everything to fit together.

***TIP:** Be aware that making an instrument sound great while soloed may make it impossible to fit together with other instruments in the mix.*

Mix Element Clash Checklist

When mix elements clash, a number of procedures can be used to make them each stand out from the mix.

- Did you try muting one of the offending mix elements so that they both never play at the same time?
- Did you try lowering the level of the one of the offending mix elements?
- Did you try tailoring the EQ so that the one of the mix elements takes up a different frequency space?
- Did you try panning one of the offending mix elements?
- Did you try changing the arrangement and re-record the track?

***TIP:** The more mix elements or tracks, the smaller each one must be to have them all fit in a mix. The fewer elements there are, the bigger they must sound for the mix to be full.*

Finished Mix Checklist

One of the tougher things to decide when you're mixing is when the mix is finished. If you have a deadline, the decision is made for you as the clock ticks down, but if you have unlimited time or a deep pocket budget, a mix can drag on forever. Use the following checklist to help determine if your mix is near completion.

- Is the groove of the song solid?** The pulse of the song is strong and undeniable.
- Can you distinctly hear every mix element?** Although some mix elements like pads are sometimes meant to blend seamlessly into the track, most mix elements should be clearly heard.
- Can you hear every lyric and every note of every line or solo?** You don't want a single note buried. It all has to be crystal clear.
- Does the mix have punch?** The relationship between the bass and drums should be in the right proportion and work well together to give the song a solid foundation.
- Does the mix have a focal point?** Make sure the most important element of the song is obvious to the listener.
- Does the mix have contrast?** If you have too much of the same effect on everything, the mix can sound washed out. Likewise, if your mix has the same intensity throughout, it can be boring to the listener. You need to have contrast between different elements, from dry to wet, from intense to less intense, to give the mix depth.

- ❑ **Are all noises and glitches eliminated from the song?** This includes any count-offs, singer's breaths that seem out of place or predominate because of vocal compression, amp noise on guitar tracks before and after the guitar is playing, bad sounding edits, and anything else that might take the listener's attention away from the track.

- ❑ **Can you play your mix against songs that you love, and have it hold up?** This is perhaps the ultimate test. If you can get your mix in the same ball park as many of your favorites (either things you've mixed, or mixes from other artists) after you've passed the previous seven items, then you're probably home free.

***TIP:** Don't forget to leave time for alternate mixes. TV (all elements but lead vocals), instrumental, acappella, and vocal up/down mixes are still common exported at the end of the mix.*

Mixing For Mastering Checklist

Regardless of whether you're sending your mix to an outside mastering engineer or doing it yourself, there are a number of things to keep in mind about mastering when your mixing.

- Are there spots in the mix that seem over-EQed?** Better to be a bit dull and let your mastering engineer brighten things up. In general, mastering engineers can do a better job for you if your mix is on the dull side rather than too bright or too big.
- Is there a less compressed version of the mix available for mastering?** Too much compression deprives the mastering engineer of one of his major abilities to help your project. It's best to compress and control levels on an individual track basis and not on the stereo buss except to prevent digital overs.
- Are the master files well-marked?** Make sure that each file is properly ID'd for easy identification (especially if you're not going to be at the mastering session).
- Have you put too much emphasis on hot mixes or level matches between songs?** Getting hot levels during mixing is *not* important. You still have plenty of headroom even if you print your mix with peaks reaching -10dB or so. Leave it to the mastering engineer to get the hot levels. Likewise, matching mix levels between songs is not important. Just make your mixes sound great, as matching levels between songs is one of the reasons you send your mixes to mastering in the first place.
- Have you checked your fades?** If you trim the heads and tails of your track too tightly, you might discover that you've trimmed a reverb

trail or essential attack or breath. Leave a little room and let the mastering engineer perfect it.

- Have you checked the stereo phase of the track?** Even though this was more of a problem in the days of vinyl and AM radio, it's still important since many so-called stereo sources (such as television) are either pseudo-stereo or only stereo some of the time. Check it and fix it before you get to mastering.
- Do you have alternate mix versions of the song?** Alternate mixes can be your friend. A vocal up, vocal down, or instrument-only mix can sometimes provide a quick fix and keep you from having to remix.
- Do you know the final sequence of the album?** Sequencing (the order that the tunes appear on the CD or vinyl record) is especially important and making this list beforehand will save you money in mastering time. This is really important if you'll be releasing in multiple formats such as CD and vinyl or different countries or territories, since they may require a different song order due to the two sides of the record.
- Do you know the running time of the songs and the total running time of the album?** If your project is going to be released on CD or vinyl, you want to make sure that your project can fit on the disc or record.

TIP: *If you're unsure of the amount of compression or EQ that you're applying while you're mixing, send the mastering engineer a mix of a song and ask for his opinion. He can guide you on what you got right and what you got wrong so that when you finally deliver the master to him, the mixes sound their best.*

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About Bobby Owsinski

Producer/engineer Bobby Owsinski is one of the best selling authors in the music industry with 24 books that are now staples in audio recording, music, and music business programs in colleges around the world, including *The Mixing Engineer's Handbook*, *Social Media Promotion For Musicians*, *Music 4.0: A Survival Guide For Making Music In The Internet Age* and more.

He's also a contributor to Forbes writing on the new music business, his popular blogs are nearing 6 million visits, and he's appeared on CNN and ABC News as a music branding and audio expert.

Visit Bobby's music production blog at bobbyowsinski.blogspot.com/, his Music 3.0 music industry blog at music3point0.blogspot.com, his Forbes blog at forbes.com/sites/bobbyowsinski/, his podcast at bobbyinnerscircle.com, and his website at bobbyowsinski.com.

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