Important Rules for 4-Part Progressions

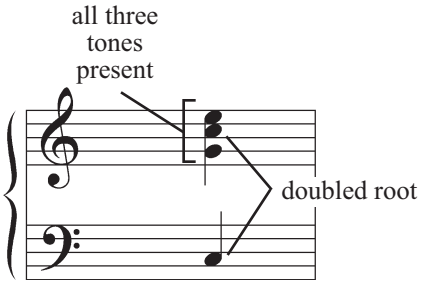
In general, some theorists (including Ottman and myself) try to spend most of our time telling you what *to* do rather than what *not* to do. If you internalize all of our little "procedures" then you should be able to churn out progressions quickly and easily without really worrying about making mistakes.

However, there are times when you really have to be familiar with the rules. Ottman sprinkles many of these around the later chapters of the text, and he tries to summarize everything you need to know in his Appendix A. I've produced my own summary because I have a few slightly different ideas of what needs emphasis or de-emphasis. Please compare what I say here to what Ottman says.

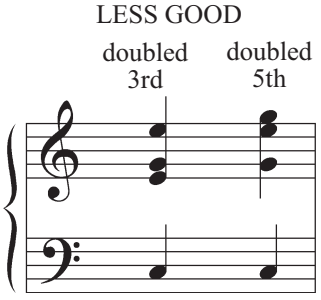
Making each triad

Doubling the root.

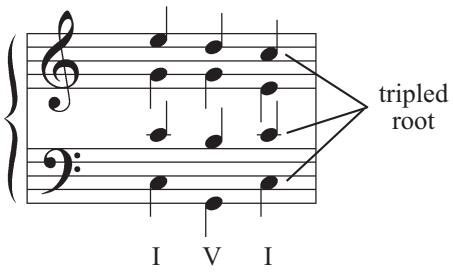
For triads in root position, try to cover all three chord tones in your upper voices. That means you will end up "doubling the root."



Doubling any other tone in a root-position triad will happen occasionally, but it is considered less good. I will sometimes subtract a point for these "bad" doublings.

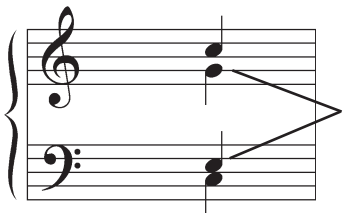


Ottman (p. 95) teaches that sometimes at cadences you will end up tripling the root (and leaving out the fifth.) Use this for cadences only. (If you do it in the middle of a progression it will probably cause bad parallels afterwards.)



Using proper spacing (open position)

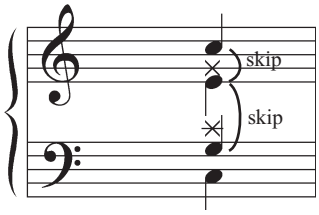
Adjacent upper voices are not allowed to be more than an octave apart. (The bass, however, can wander freely away from the other voices.) Students often mess this up when writing in open position.



Tenor and alto are more than an 8ve apart.

Notice how uneven the upper three voices are in the example above. The interval between soprano and alto is very small, and the interval between alto and tenor is too big. A perfectly-spaced chord in open position "skips over" a chord tone between each voice.

GOOD



(Also, in open position it is easier to screw up the doubling. Notice how all of the tones from the triad are represented in this open voicing, and the root is doubled.)

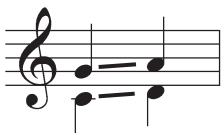
Motion Rules

Parallel Fifths or Octaves, Fifths or Octaves by Contrary Motion.

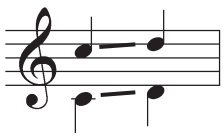
The rule about parallels is fairly simple. Any two parts that make a perfect fifth are not allowed to go on to make another perfect fifth. In other words, you cannot make two perfect fifths in a row. Two octaves in a row are also considered bad.

When the voices move in the same direction it is called "parallel" 5ths or 8ves.

parallel 5ths



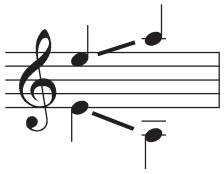
parallel 8ves



However, it is still bad if the voices move in contrary motion and make another 5th or 8ve (or its equivalent, an octave larger). I usually call this 5ths or 8ves "by contrary."

5ths by contrary

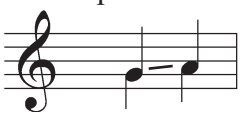
8ves by contrary



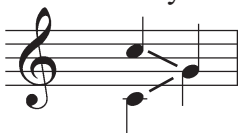
The two "rules" really boil down to the same thing: no two 5ths in a row, and no two 8ves in a row.

Unisons (two parts sharing the same note) count as a kind of octave. Thus, these two instances are also bad.

same as parallel 8ves

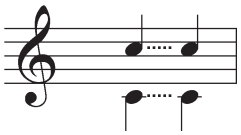


same as 8ves by contrary



Repeating the same octave or fifth in a row, however, is not bad. In this case there is no parallel or contrary "motion" at all.

(OK)



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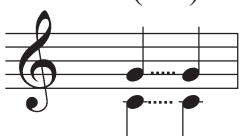
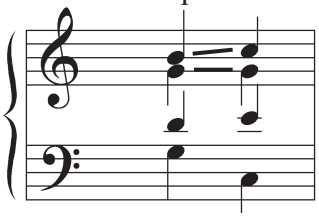


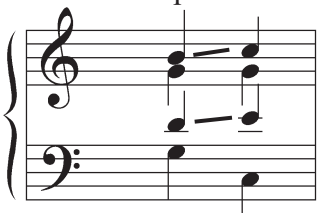
Parallel 3rds, 6ths, 4ths, and even tritones are all OK.

What makes writing 4-part progressions so difficult is the fact that you have to check for parallels between *every pair of voices.*

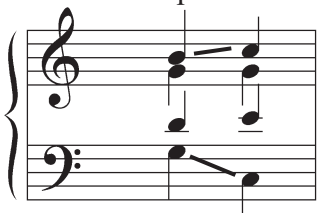
sop. - alto



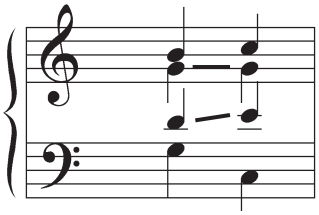
sop. - tenor



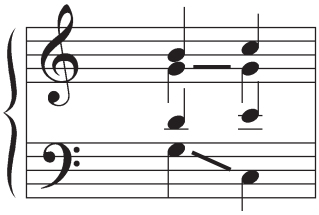
sop. - bass



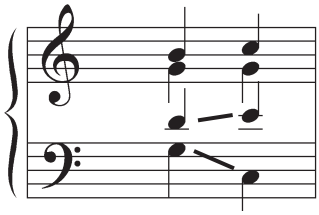
alto - tenor



alto-bass



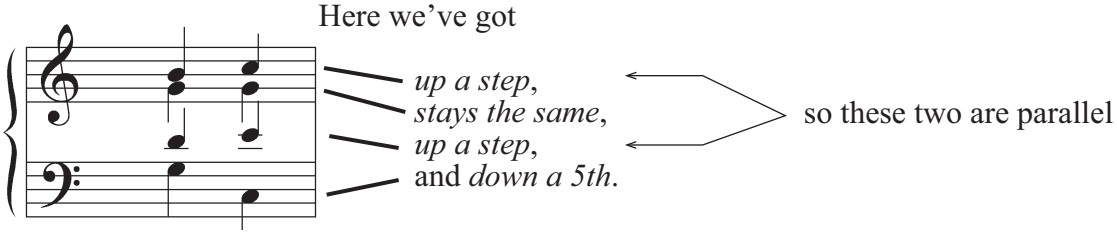
tenor - bass



Systematically checking every pair is, of course, time consuming and somewhat confusing. I find that I use a shortcut when I evaluate the connection between two chords.

The first step is to take an inventory of the melodic (or horizontal) intervals -- how far each individual voice is going up or down. Voices that move the same interval in the same direction are parallel. (Don't confuse these melodic intervals with the vertical 5ths and 8ths we are on the lookout for -- we don't really care if a voice moves up or down by a fifth.)

Here we've got

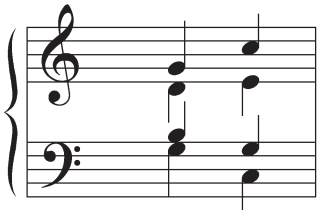


The two voices that move up a step are in parallel motion. So next we consider whether this is good parallel motion or bad parallel motion. In this case the soprano and tenor parts make parallel 6ths, which is good. No problem there.

Since every other voice is doing its own thing, you know that there are no other pairs of voices in parallel motion.

This method is a little less simple for finding 5ths and 8ves by contrary, though. You've got to find two voices that do the *opposite interval* in *opposite directions*. Thus, it's possibly bad if two voices make any of the following combinations:

up a step + down a seventh	down a step + up a seventh
up a third + down a sixth	down a third + up a sixth
up a fourth + down a fifth	down a fourth + up a fifth



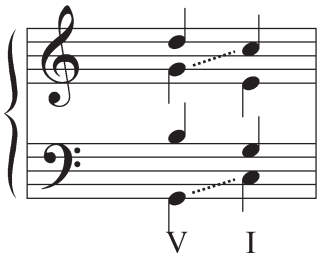
so here we've got:
a fourth up,
a step up,
a third down
and a fifth down.

The 4th up + 5th down indicate that there might be something bad happening, and if you look closer you see that, sure enough, the soprano and bass parts make 8ves by contrary.

Fake parallels

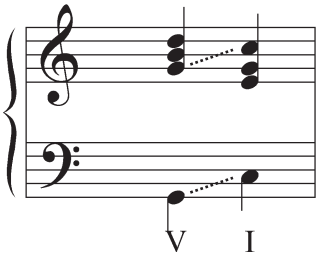
Sometimes students start to see parallels when there aren't any, because they get confused as to which notes belong to which voice.

For instance, there are *not* parallel 8ves here.



(not bad)

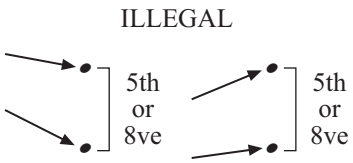
That might be a little more confusing if we are writing in keyboard style.



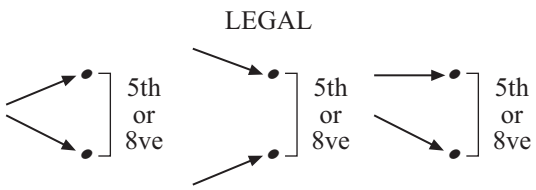
(*still* not bad)

Direct Octaves and Fifths (Ottman pp. 188-189)

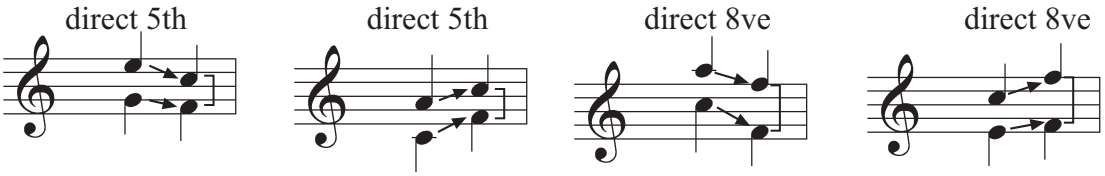
As in two-part counterpoint it is illegal to approach a fifth or an octave in similar motion.



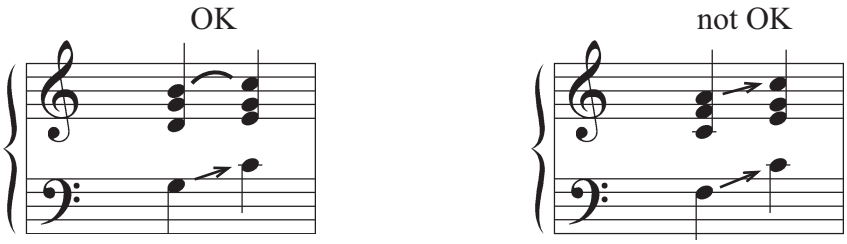
(similar motion into 5th or 8ve)



(contrary or oblique motion into 5th or 8ve)



You will be happy to know that this rule is considerably weakened in a 4-voice texture. It only applies between the outer voices, soprano and bass. Also, if the soprano is moving by step it "covers up" the direct 5th or 8ve, so it's OK.



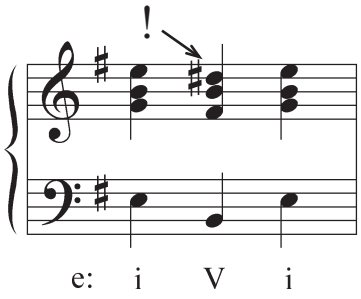
As a result, you really don't have to worry about this rule much in 4-part writing.

Leaps

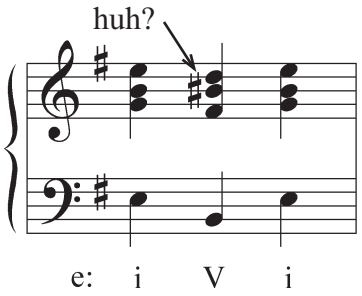
Generally, any melodic interval larger than a sixth is considered too big to leap in any single voice. Octaves, however, have a special status, since in a sense they are a repetition of the same note. Thus, you should avoid leaping by sevenths or by anything bigger than an octave.

Other common mistakes:

Don’t forget to raise your leading tone in minor keys (when making a V or vii° chord).

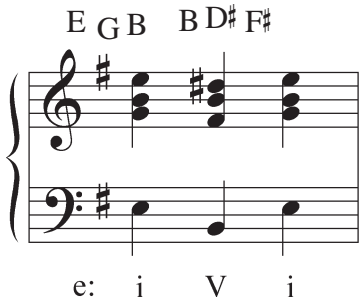


Surprisingly often people put the accidental on the wrong note.

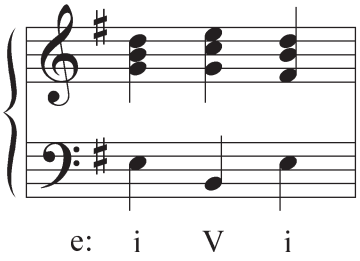


Finally, a big problem that never goes away is flat-out wrong notes. Double check your triads by scribbling out the letter names above the staff.

Good



Bad



"New" Rules for Later Units

Doublings

As I mentioned on the first page of this packet, it is usually good to make a complete triad in the upper voices and thus double whatever is in the bass. However, it turns out there are some "alternate" doublings for triads in first inversion that you will need to use on occasion. Thus, the recommendations for doubling must be amended slightly:

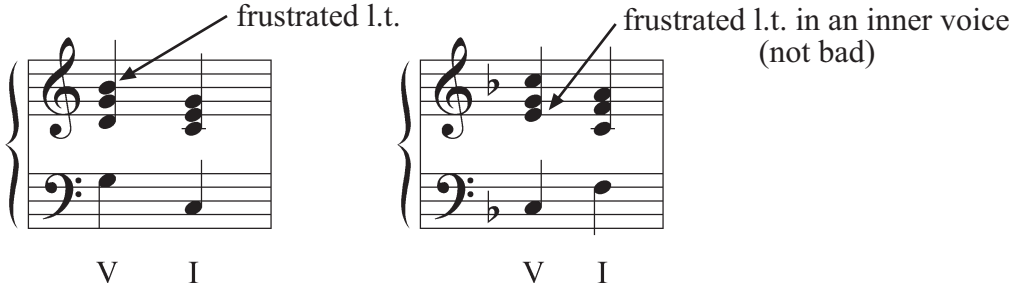
Root-position:	double root
First-inversion:	double third, **or** double root, **or** double fifth
Second-inversion:	double fifth

Leading-tone Rules for V or vii°

As you probably know, the seventh-scale degree is commonly referred to as the "leading tone," and it often has a strong tendency to resolve to scale-degree one.

Frustrated Leading Tone

If the leading tone in a V or vii° chord lies in one of the outer voices (soprano or bass, where it would be most noticable) and the chord resolves to I without connecting $\hat{7}$ to $\hat{1}$ as expected, this is called a "frustrated" leading tone.

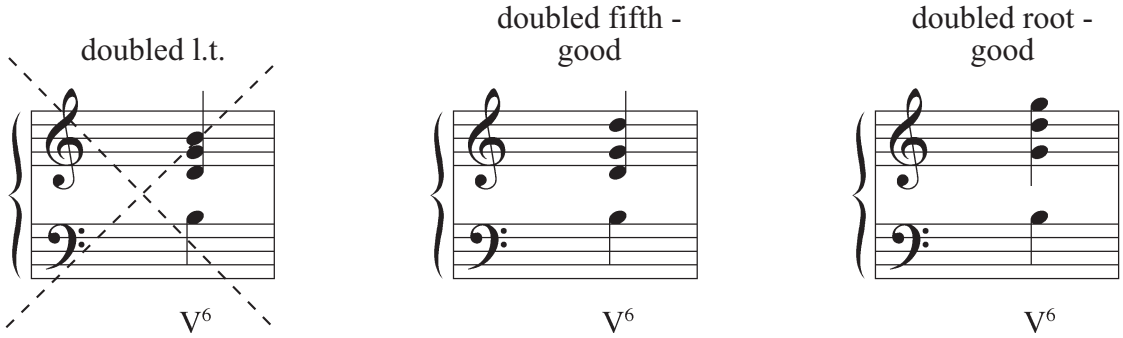


Note that in the second example I would still call the $\hat{7}$ going to $\hat{5}$ a "frustrated leading tone," but since it's in an inner voice it is allowed.

Don't Double the Leading Tone

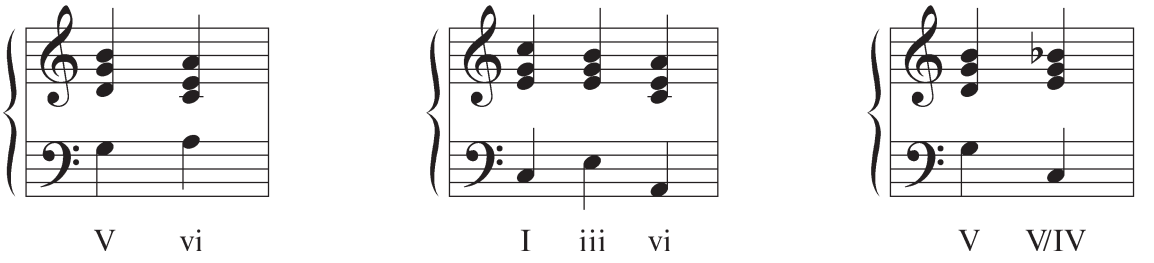
Since the leading tone often has such a charged quality, you are not allowed to double it in a chord. For one thing, you would possibly be tempted to resolve both leading-tones to $\hat{1}$, thus creating parallel octaves. Also, having one voice where the tone resolves correctly and another where it leaps away will dilute the effect - it is much clearer if only one voice does it.

Note that this rules out our "normal" doubling for a V^6. You must make V^6 with one of the "alternate" doublings.



When does the leading tone get frustrated?

It turns out that there are plenty of exceptions to the "frustrated leading-tone" rule, and theory textbooks generally aren't good at explaining why this is the case. I would say that anytime the $\hat{7}$ is expected to go to $\hat{1}$ and instead *leaps away from it*, it is frustrated. However, there are times when $\hat{7}$ moves downwards by step, and I suspect that in all of these situations it is OK.



deceptive cadence,
$\hat{7}$ - $\hat{6}$

moving downwards into iii,
$\hat{8}$-$\hat{7}$-$\hat{6}$

secondary dominant,
$\hat{7}$ - $\flat\hat{7}$

This has got to do with the psychological phenomenon of "streaming." It is thought that we often hear leaps as a jump to a different line, leaving a "trace" of the old note in memory. Steps, however, "displace" the old note. Thus, when we hear a $\hat{7}$ that followed by a leap, we ask "why didn't that $\hat{7}$ connect to $\hat{1}$?" If we hear a $\hat{7}$ that steps down to $\hat{6}$ or $\flat\hat{7}$, however, we know exactly where it went.

The idea of the "trace" vs. "displacement" is mentioned in Steve Larson, "The Problem of Prolongation in Tonal Music: Terminology, Perception, and Expressive Meaning." *Journal of Music Theory* 41/1 (1997), 104.