



Pre-Mastering Recommendations

To achieve the best possible outcome from your recordings, it's crucial to take certain steps to improve the quality of the material you plan to submit. Before sending in your content, it's advisable to thoroughly review these mixing and submission guidelines. Attention to detail can make the difference between a good master and an exceptional one. Consider printing this PDF and discussing the guidelines with your mix engineer before finalizing your submissions. If you have any questions about the guidelines, feel free to contact us via email or phone.

Preparing Pre-Masters: Mix and Submission Guidelines

While we strive to produce the best results, the quality of the material we receive ultimately limits what we can achieve. The more elements you perfect during the preparation of pre-masters, the better our results will be.

Though there are many “mastering grade” plugins and built-in DAW processors available today, there are only a few we would recommend that are capable of delivering the processing quality needed for a high-quality master. Avoid using unnecessary processing on your mix before mastering, as this can compromise the final product. Instead, focus on a minimalist approach and apply only essential mix bus processing if desired. Ideally, leave the mastering tasks for the mastering session.



Before submitting your work, carefully inspect your mix for issues like clicks, pops, vocal sibilance, and isolated loud events (e.g., unusually loud cymbal crashes, vocal peaks, or bass notes). Ensure you're satisfied with your mix before sending it in.

Technical Considerations

Technical adjustments such as phase correlation, filtering of unwanted frequencies, noise reduction, de-essing, and volume automation should ideally be applied to individual mix elements rather than the entire mix. While we have excellent tools for these tasks during mastering, addressing these issues at the mixing stage generally yields better results.

The best mix is one that requires minimal processing, where only minor equalization and level adjustments are needed during mastering.

General Mix Levels and Processing

To help us deliver the best possible master, follow these guidelines:

- Keep peak levels on the main mix bus between -10 to -4 dBFS, and never exceed -3 dBFS or make sure you are not exceeding 0dBTP. If peaks are higher, lower the faders of individual elements or groups within the session, while keeping the master fader at 0.
- For console mixing, maintain conservative digital capture recording levels, with peaks around -4 dBFS.



This approach is not about preserving headroom for mastering but about preventing intersample peak distortion, which can occur even at levels as low as -4 dB below full scale in some DAWs. This type of distortion is hard to detect but can seriously affect the final result, especially when using analog hardware.

Always work at the native sample rate of your session; do not upsample or downsample your files. Stick to the original sample rate (e.g., 44.1 kHz) to avoid degrading your audio.

Additional Processing Tips

- Avoid normalizing your files.
- Refrain from applying processing on the master bus, particularly loudness maximizers or limiters. Minimal compression from a high-quality processor is acceptable, but avoid limiter plugins.
- If you wish to provide a processed version as a reference, that's fine and can be a helpful tool.
- Do not apply dithering or noise shaping to the final mix; we will handle this if necessary during mastering.

File Formats, Fades, and Submission

Submit your files in either 24-bit or 32-bit .wav or .aiff format, using the original sample rate of your session. Avoid altering the sample or bit rate before submission; let us handle any necessary conversions during mastering.



Ensure track start and end points include a few seconds of silence, and refrain from applying fades unless they are integral to the final master. If fades are required but not printed into the mix, provide precise details of their length, including start and end times.

Label your files clearly with track titles and version details (e.g., “MyNewTrack_VocalUp_Premaster_”). Group all files into a single folder, and zip the folder before sending it. Zipping ensures data integrity by preserving the exact bits and bytes of your files.

Delivery of Finished Digital Masters

By default, we provide 16-bit 44.1 kHz digital masters but can accommodate other sample rates or bit depths upon request. Please inform us of your requirements before the session begins.

Before sending your final mix, listen to it at high volume in your listening environment. This helps identify if the levels or EQ have been overdone, particularly in the midrange and highs, which can result in a harsh mix that’s difficult to correct during mastering.



Considerations for Loudness and Audio Quality

The trend towards excessively loud masters has compromised audio quality, affecting clarity, punch, depth, and stereo imaging. In addition, compressed codecs such as MP3 inherently degrade sound quality even further. Though the demand for loudness persists, it's often at the expense of the emotional impact of the music.

Loudness is a complex subject, with different genres requiring different loudness levels. It's important to communicate your preferences for loudness or dynamics when ordering mastering services. We aim to place your music in the "sweet spot" for loudness relative to quality, and your input on this is invaluable.

As playback technology advances, the focus may shift back to color and sonic signature, rather than sheer loudness, leading to a more engaging listening experience. Until then, loudness remains a central topic in mastering discussions. While loud can be good, it's not always the case, and understanding this balance is key to achieving the best results.