

Compression Checklist

Thanks for downloading my 7 Step Compression Checklist! **The goal of this checklist is to help you quickly and easily walk through the best methods and approaches to using compression in your mixes.**

These are the 7 steps I teach on The Recording Revolution.

Whether you are working on your first mix, or you've been mixing for years and just want to be sure you're approaching your compression plugins with the right mindset, these 7 steps will help you get the most musical, natural, and best sound possible out of your mixes. Enjoy!

1. Compressor: The Automatic Volume Fader

- The best way to think about a compressor is an automatic volume fader
- It can turn down the loud parts of a track and at the same time turn up the quiet parts of a track - giving you a much more even and smooth level
- **5 Main Controls of a Compressor:**
 1. **Attack** - How fast do you want the compressor to begin grabbing your audio?
 2. **Release** - How do you want the compressor to "let go" of the audio?
 3. **Threshold** - The volume at which you tell the compressor to turn down the audio
 4. **Ratio** - How hard/aggressive the compressor turns down the audio
 5. **Gain** - How much you want to turn up the volume to "make up" any volume loss.
- **Example:** To have a more consistent and up front vocal sound, use a compressor to turn down the louder words and phrases. Then with the gain knob you can bring up the volume of the quieter words and phrases to match.
- **TIP:** Not all compressors have these 5 controls. Some have only an Input and Output knob. This means that it has a fixed ratio, attack, and/or release and the input knob would act like the threshold and the output would act as the makeup gain.

2. Attack and Release

- The slower the attack time the more of the transient (and dynamics) you allow to come through.
- Think slow attack for more “energy” and “life” and fast attack for more “sustain” or “fatteness”
- The faster the release the quicker you let the compressor reset before the next transient. Typically I start with a medium release and move faster as necessary.
- **TIP:** To really hear what the compressor is doing, use extreme attack and release settings and then dial them back until it sounds more natural.
- **Example:** For a fatter snare use a fast attack to clamp down on the initial transient of the snare to be closer to the level of the tail of the snare. Then use the makeup gain to turn up the entire snare track to the original volume. In essence, all you’ve done is turned up the tail of the snare, giving it a fatter sound!

3. Threshold and Ratio

- If the threshold is at 0db, no compression is happening.
- The compressor ONLY turns down audio that crosses the threshold, nothing below it.
- **TIP:** The threshold and ratio knobs are interconnected. You can have a high/hard ratio (8:1) and a high threshold and get the same sound as a low/soft ratio (2:1) and a low threshold.
- **The 3 - 6db Rule:** Set the threshold while watching the gain reduction (or attenuation) meter on your compressor. Look for a 3db to 6db amount of gain reduction on the loudest peaks of that track. This is where to leave your threshold setting.
- **TIP:** I don’t care what the numbers say when it comes to ratio or threshold and neither should you. Rather, pay attention to the gain reduction - this is most important. Watch that meter while you adjust the ratio or threshold and when you see the the gain reduction you want, leave those knobs where they are.

4. Stacking Compressors

- A great way to get an upfront vocal sound is to use not just one compressor but two.
- The idea here is that by using two compressors with gentle/subtle settings, you can create a more “compressed” and radio ready vocal sound without having to push any one compressor too hard. In essence you are compressing the already compressed sound. This keeps the vocals sounding modern yet natural.
- **Example:** Start with a typical gentle vocal compression setting (2:1 ratio and 3db of gain reduction on the loud peaks). Then duplicate that compressor and insert it right after the first one. Adjust the output/gain knob of the second compressor to make sure you aren’t making the vocal too loud.
- **TIP:** Don’t feel the need to use different compressors to accomplish this. I typically copy the exact same compressor plugin and insert it right after the original. The point is the process here, not necessarily the tone.

5. Mix Buss Compression

- A little gentle compression on the mix buss (master fader) can glue your mix together and give it a bit of power.
- Go with a slow attack and fast release as this ensures you don’t squash all your transients. Keeps the mix sounding natural.
- Look for a super subtle amount of gain reduction on the loudest peaks (kick and snare). Usually this is around 1-2db at the most.
- **TIP:** Turn up the makeup gain so that the compressor is level matched (same volume with it on or off). It should peak around the same place on the meter, but will sound and feel a bit louder because you have raised the average volume.

6. Parallel Compression

- One of the most powerful uses of compression is to run it in parallel with a given track.
- **The idea is simple:** use over-the-top aggressive compression on a copy of the original track and then blend that compressed version in with the uncompressed version. The result is a powerful and modern sound that also sounds un-touched and dynamic.
- This is the perfect technique to give your drums weight and power.
- **Example:** Use a send to route a copy of your kick and snare to an available buss (or auxiliary track). Insert a compressor on this track and go for a high ratio (8:1), extreme attack and release settings (consider fastest attack, slowest release or the exact opposite), and low threshold (so there's lots of gain reduction). Now pull the fader down to zero and slowly bring it in alongside the rest of your drums (including the original kick and snare).

7. The 3 Biggest Compression Mistakes

- **Mistake #1 - Too Fast Of An Attack.** The faster the attack, the more of the transient you turn down. The more of the transient you turn down, the less natural and dynamic the track is. This can be suitable for many things, but er on the side of a slower attack when you can.
- **Mistake #2 - Too Low Of A Threshold.** The lower the threshold, the more of your track gets compressed. This is generally not the goal as it will squash the life out of our tracks. Shoot for compressing only the loudest peaks of a track by having a higher threshold.
- **Mistake #3 - Not Watching The Makeup Gain On Presets.** Compression presets are not a horrible thing as they give you good starting points for attack, release, and ratio. However the threshold and makeup gain knobs cannot be trusted as they have no idea how loud your track is. Make sure you turn off the makeup gain until you see the gain reduction you want with the threshold. Then adjust the gain knob as necessary to level match the plugin.

In Review...

Next to EQ, compression is your most powerful tool for shaping your mix. Used correctly, you will bring more energy, punch, power, and excitement to your song. In review, here is how to mentally approach the 7 steps we just covered.

When you sit down to use compression on your mix remember:

1. **A compressor is simply an automatic volume fader.** You can use it to turn down the loud parts of a track while simultaneously turning up the quiet parts of a track - automatically!
2. **Consider slower attacks and faster releases for the most natural results.** To create more fatness, do the opposite.
3. **Set the threshold and ratio so you see 3-6db of gain reduction.** Both knobs are interconnected, so adjust accordingly while watching the gain reduction meter.
4. **Stack compressors for an upfront vocal sound.** Two identical compressors with gentle settings can sound better than one compressor working hard.
5. **Consider some gentle compression on the mix buss.** Some slow attack, fast release, compression on the master fader can tighten up your mix in seconds.
6. **Parallel compression is a powerful secret.** Extreme compression on a copy of a track, blended in with the unaffected original is the secret to that in your face and yet natural sound.
7. **Avoid the 3 big compression mistakes:** using too fast of an attack, setting the threshold too low, and not watching the the threshold and makeup gain knobs on pre-sets.

Thanks for downloading and reading my 7 Step Compression Checklist. Feel free to review the 7 videos in my Mixing With Compression series anytime right here: therecordingrevolution.com/compvideos

To better mixes!

Graham Cochrane (*Founder at TheRecordingRevolution.com*)