GUIDELINES FOR WRITING PARTS

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[] SOME GUIDELINES FOR WRITING PARTS

It stands to reason that the clearer the part you put in front of a musician, the better the chance that it will be read correctly. My own personal motto when writing parts is "why give things a chance to go wrong if you don't have to?"

The following are some guidelines that will help you make your parts clearer and give your compositions and arrangements the best chance of succeeding, even at zero or next-to-zero notice. Of course, clarity is particularly important when you're writing originals, where there is no pre-existing frame of reference for your musicians.

Some of what follows are generally accepted principles, some are my own preferences. Some of the points are just common sense, but then common sense can be so bleeding obvious that it gets overlooked…

A. Information about the Tune

Don't neglect the basics. Give title, composer, a rough tempo (or range of tempos) in beats per minute and a verbal indication of style at the top of the chart. You can never give too much information about style, by the way, and it doesn't have to be in elegantly phrased Italian... The likes of Fats Waller and Erik Satie would give humorous (often over the top) indications as to style on their compositions – but you don't have to be music's answer to Jimmy Tarbuck (unless you want to, of course). The charts you'll see in a West End orchestra pit can be very verbal indeed when it comes to indicating style – I recall once seeing a section marked "Tempo di boozed-up hussy"… The style marking is a valuable opportunity to communicate information about how you want your music to be played. Make full use of it, both at the top of a tune and where the feel changes mid-tune.

Some basic style tempo markings:	Slow, Medium, Medium Up, Fast
Some basic style markings:	Ballad, Swing, Straight 8s, Latin, Latin-Rock, Funk, Bossa, Jazz Waltz, Samba, Calypso, ECM

Incidentally, most jazz musicians are shamelessly ignorant about the great diversity of distinctive styles in Cuban and Brazilian music. Just calling a tune "Latin" and straightening out the 8s is okay for a generic Latin jazz feel, but it's well worth broadening your horizons by studying the precise rhythms and instrumental patterns that define genuine Latin music styles.

A lot of jazz musicians prefer to take a chart away and learn it while listening to a recording, where one exists. So if you've taken the tune or arrangement from a CD, reference that recording on the chart somewhere. This is particularly important when you're dealing with a specific arrangement of a well-known standard. Musicians make a lot of assumptions about standards.

B. Key Signatures

Always give the key signature, even on chord parts – at the top of the tune and wherever a genuine modulation occurs. This sets the ground rules. In classical music, where a modulation occurs, you would write naturals to cancel the previous key, and follow up immediately with the new key signature. In a jazz chart you don't need to bother with the key cancellation.

In modal tunes, it's usually clearest to give the key signature *of the mode*. So What, for instance, is in D Dorian, a mode of C major, so the chart would have no sharps or flats.

In some modern tunes, where the structure is based on slabs of different modes, giving a key signature would be misleading – such tunes aren't really in any specific *key* at all. Notate this kind of tune without a key signature and just write accidentals where you need them for the melody line (oh, and take care when transposing – see later).

C. Number of Bars to a Line

Most jazz music is written in eight, twelve or sixteen-bar sections, and within this structure, phrases tend to be two or four bars long. The structure of the music you write will be a lot easier to grasp at a glance if you make it a basic rule to write charts with four measures to a line.

There are exceptions to this rule – in all cases, it's best to try to arrange it so that a new section begins on a new line, where possible. It usually is possible.

Where you have unusual section lengths (either within a tune or in an intro/outro or interlude); repeats and first and second-time bars; or a partial bar at the top to indicate a pickup to bar one, you can break this rule. In these cases, spread the music out so that the section ends at the end of a line by writing three, five or six bars to a line. Fewer than three isn't usually necessary, more than six is usually too tight.

Experienced players can intuit very complex structure even if you've not written it with clear sections. But why make life harder for everyone if you don't have to?

D. Sections and Rehearsal Letters

Always include rehearsal letters to indicate new sections and always use double lines to indicate both the start and end of a section (where possible – and it usually is – at the start/end of a line). This is more of an aid to reading than many people realise. Oh, and they're called rehearsal letters for a reason – it's very convenient to be able to call out "take it from letter J" when rehearsing. This has an added benefit in jazz, where arrangements sometimes get modified on the fly on a gig…

E. Repeat Marks

It's very helpful to draw extra attention to repeat marks with big friendly brackets, or "wings" as they're sometimes known (jazz often gets played in rather gloomy environments, and it's all too easy to miss a "naked" repeat mark). By the way, a lot of people make the mistake of trying to keep a chart on one page at the expense of readability. Nested repeats and more than one DS or DC are a great way to run the unnecessary risk of people mucking up your chart, although one ending mark (a segno) is usually okay.

The point is that you should feel perfectly free to spread yourself out over two or more pages if it aids clarity. Oh, and though big band charts often fan out over great big paper concertinas, I've found that even the most highly arranged jazz chart can usually be kept within the more practical compass of four pages. Maybe five, at the absolute outside.

F. Accidentals

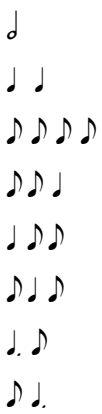
In classical music, the rule is that where you use accidentals in the line you should prefer a flat in a flat key and a sharp in a sharp key. In jazz music, things are a bit looser. You should generally adhere to this principle, but there are times when it may be clearer to break the rule.

Let's take as an example a tune in Ab, containing a bit where the harmony is F#m7 B7. Strictly speaking, in this context these chords should be written Gbm7 Cb7 – but nobody wants to read that. Now jazz musicians often use the accompanying chords as a helpful reference when reading the melody line – so in this instance you would write the melody over the F#m7 B7 bit with naturals and sharps. It's not strictly classically correct, but it will stand a better chance of being read correctly, because in situations of doubt the player will always have half an eye on the chords.

By the way, classical practice dictates that if the key signature dictates a Gb and you want a G#, you have to write a natural *and* a sharp symbol ahead of the note. Jazz charts don't bother with this.

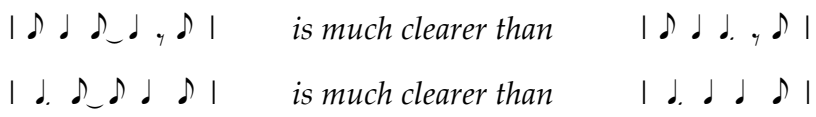
G. Rhythms and the Invisible Half Bar Line

All players who have become proficient at sightreading rhythms have spent time internalising potential note groupings across two beats – half a bar in the most common context of 4/4 time – so they can read the groups as a single gesture at a glance. The basic two-beat units are:



(Either notes or rests. There are other possibilities involving triplets and semiquavers.)

The clearest way to notate rhythms over a four-beat measure is to use these two-beat permutations and tie across the invisible half-bar line where necessary. For instance:



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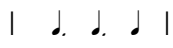
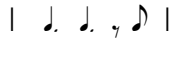
Some exceptions to this bar-splitting business are the simple unsyncopated crotchet-minim-crotchet figure:

as well as the common Cuban clave figures, the 3-side of son and rumba clave respectively:





In highly syncopated music, Latin styles for instance, the following common regular off-beat figure is fine:

Incidentally, I prefer never to split a bar across two lines of manuscript, but if you really, really must do this (hmm), do it in the middle of the bar.

H. Note Tails and Beaming

All notes below the middle line of the staff should have tails up, all notes above the middle line should have tails down (except when you're indicating multiple parts on one staff – see below). If you have to beam two notes that cross the vertical midpoint of the staff, this rule can be bent.

As to beaming, you should always smile when writing parts. (Ouch, sorry.) I prefer to beam eighth notes in twos and sixteenth notes in fours. This is most in keeping with the common rhythmic pulse of jazz music and can help the feel to come through when people are reading. Some people prefer to beam eighth notes in fours – fine by me.

However you choose to beam notes, you should always make sure that both the tail lengths and the slope of the beams follow the pitch contour of the line. This is a very subtle but effective aid to reading – often, even if a musician doesn't quite nail the specific pitches you've written, they'll play something similar and compatible if you take care with your note tails and beams.

I. Multiple Parts

Let's start with the situation where you have a two-part arrangement. It's often useful to your musicians to know what the other part is – if you've got your ranges right, you can even allow them the choice of who goes high and who goes low. Actually, it's okay – but not ideal – to go out of range on the "other" part, for indication purposes.

Anyway, when notating two parts: top part tails up, bottom part tails down. Obvious, really. Where you need to use rests in individual parts, mentally split the staff into two vertical halves and place your rests clearly and unambiguously in each half.

Where you have a three-part arrangement, it may be useful to indicate all the parts on each chart, but only where the voices move together, in the manner of block chords. Where you have different rhythms or counterpoint between the voices, it just becomes too confusing to notate three parts on the one staff.

Where you have more than three parts, don't bother putting multiple parts on each chart. A possible exception might be, for instance, where you have two saxes and two trumpets, to put the sax parts together on each sax chart and the trumpet parts together on each trumpet part. In general, though, when you're dealing with bands this big, best to keep each part separate and single.

J. Cues

In some situations it may be useful to indicate figures played by one instrument (or even a few words of the vocal) on the part for another, to act as a helpful cue. On a part for a front-line instrument, treat this as a temporary multiple part and mark the name of the instrument playing the cue figure clearly (but write small). On a part for a rhythm instrument, write the cue as if it were a temporary multiple part, again marking the name of the relevant instrument, and either crunch the chord symbols into the other half of the staff, or if it's clearer temporarily house the chord symbols above the line.

K. Chords

I always indicate chords above the written line on a melody part. Well, nearly always – there's no such thing as always. The reason I do this is because jazz players will often use the harmonic information you give in chord symbols to help when reading the melody. This also means that if they don't get it right in the heat of battle, they'll have a chance of playing something that at least works with the harmony.

Take care with upper chord extensions and alterations, particularly on dominants. Most players will interpret dominants pretty flexibly when improvising, but you should take care to include the extensions/alterations necessary to match the melody during that part of the chart.

For instance, if the melody is Bb-Ab-G, the chord symbol at that point should specify G7b9 – you're leaving the potential of a harmonic clash if you just write G7.

By the way, lots of chord sounds can be written in different ways. The way you choose to notate them will affect the way your musicians solo over the changes. For instance:

Gsusb9, D∅/G, Bb13/G, Ab+/G, F$\underline{\Delta}$/G

All mean pretty much the same thing, but people will interpret the symbols slightly differently.

M. Which Octave?

Jazz charts tend to be written with a cavalier attitude towards register. A lead sheet will usually be written, as much possible, within the printed staff lines, and the performer is expected to adjust octaves as needed. So far, so good.

But there's more. Pianists tend to think of melodies being played around middle C and up. A lot of instruments will actually play a melody an octave below that. Be aware of this when you're writing arrangements.

Another point – this is more about arranging than notation. Horns have a very different sound in different octaves – it's not just the same note up or down the octave, the colour and impact of the note is actually very different. This can have a big effect on how your carefully considered unison, octave or harmony line sounds when played by real people.

A lot of jazz horn players are used to adjusting octaves as necessary, but it's bad form to make them have to do so because you screwed up on range. This is unnecessary work for them and can breed a certain exasperated disrespect for what you've written. Be warned.

Remember that, for a horn player, playing in a different octave means a very different physical and technical experience – it's not, as on a piano, just the same shape shifted up.

Bear in mind that tenor saxophonists and trombonists are completely happy reading great big scaffolds of ledger lines above the staff that pianists would usually avoid by writing down the octave. In fact, it's not uncommon to see well-written parts for these instruments that hardly ever use the printed lines at all. For this reason, it can make a lot of sense to write horn parts on manuscript paper that has 10 lines to a page, rather than the more common 12, to allow yourself more room to build scaffolds.

I'm not making this up. I've experimented with giving tenor saxists the same chart in different octaves, and the result has been very different.

Trumpets are a Bb instrument and so are tenor saxes. But the tenor plays an octave below the trumpet. To get a genuine unison between the two, you'd have to write the line in octaves. If you have a Bb part that is meant to do double service between these two instruments (not an uncommon thing), you might consider writing it as an octave multiple part, for ease of reading by both instruments.

While we're on the subject of octaves, don't forget that the guitar will play an octave below what you write (and what you may assume). This can have important implications as regards the harmony. If you have a band including a guitar which you intend to use as a front-line instrument, it makes sense to think of it in the same way as you would a trombone – the ranges are comparable. Oh, and the bass plays an octave below what you write too.

[] HANDWRITTEN VS COMPUTER-GENERATED CHARTS

Okay, here comes one of those highly subjective observations. I understand entirely that some people find it very convenient to write music in sequencing or notation programs, which can then spit out publication-quality parts, automatically transposed and cleanly laid out. Alterations and corrections can be made simply and quickly on sequencing or notation software. Obviously, if you have to write a full big-band score for a West End musical, the convenience of software is clear and I won't dispute it. While I fully understand the benefits of working this way, I've still always found it best to write band parts out by hand, especially for a small to medium-size jazz ensemble.

There are many reasons why I believe this is a good idea, some of which you may not have considered. So please, even if you're addicted to the computer age, let me make my case and then feel free to call me names when you've heard me out.

A lot of people just assume that computer-generated parts will naturally look better than anything they could write out themselves. Actually, the reverse is often the case.

Handwritten parts are more friendly on the eye. The most used fakebooks out there are either handwritten or try to look like they are. One of the most popular choices of font for music notation goes out of its way to mimic a handwritten look. Why should that be? Music presented in a classic printed font can look rather cold and impersonal in comparison. It's a minor point, but a point nonetheless.

It has been my experience that handwritten parts are more immediate and personal. They also indicate that the composer or arranger has put in time and effort, and you'll often find that musicians will respond to handwritten charts with greater respect.

This is even more the case when your musical handwriting has become more mature. In this day and age, people use pen and paper less and less – as a result, most people's handwriting either never matures, or has become scrappy. Yeah, I know, I'm such an old fogey… But handwriting, whether you're writing words or music, is something that requires practice. Think how the handwriting affects the way you respond to a written message. The same effect is there with musical handwriting.

It's hardly surprising that people tend to have rather immature musical handwriting – they've never had much practice, and if they rely on notation software they never get any practice at all. Making it a point to write out parts by hand is the only way of improving your musical handwriting. Sorry to sound like an old fart again, but this is a good outcome in its own right.

So much for legibility, what about clarity? Software will usually do a fair job of laying out your music, but you can always make it clearer by hand. Sure, the better programs allow you all sorts of possibilities to tinker with spacing, line breaks, accidentals, beaming, multiple parts, annotations, etc. But by the time you've fiddled the charts into shape, you could usually have written it out by hand anyway. What's more, jazz charts can often involve rather unorthodox notation – verbal instructions, complex chord structures, partial indications of modes or voicings – again, by the time you've got the software to do what you want it to do, you could just as easily have written it out by hand.

Doing transpositions by hand is an extremely valuable exercise in its own right – so why deny yourself the opportunity? Seeing how lines and chord structures look and work in different keys is great experience – at the very least, if you're writing out transpositions for Bb and Eb instruments as well as the concert parts for the rhythm section, you're getting training in three different keys on every tune. After a little of this kind of practice you'll also find that transposing at sight becomes a lot easier and that's very useful in a general playing context.

You should also bear in mind that not all computer programs are terribly diligent when it comes to making sure instruments stay in range. A computer program also doesn't care how "playable" a part may be (I find it useful to write out transpositions and then play them into a sequencer to check accuracy and playability). By taking the time to write out the transpositions by hand, you'll have a closer connection to the music as regards these and many other aspects.

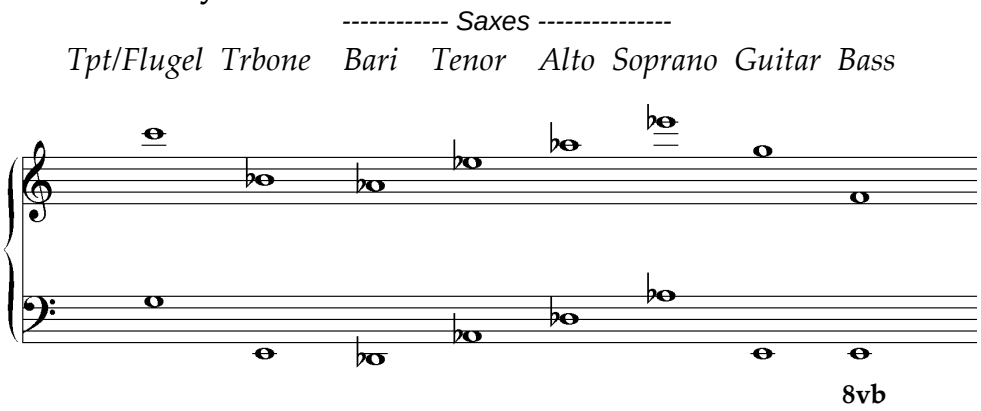
One final thing. You'll sometimes find yourself having to write out and transpose parts during the break on a gig. Do you take your laptop to every gig? If not, you'll have to trust your precious tune to Mr Spiderhand…

[] TIPS FOR TRANSPOSITION

Never fear, transposing isn't all that difficult – it's like anything else, a habit, and one that can be quickly acquired.

First – learn your ranges and transpositions:

Approximate Useful Ranges
(in concert key)



(Some lower tones are available to the brass instruments.)

Transpositions
(what you write on a transposed part to get the concert note you want)

Trumpet/Flugel	Bb	Write up a tone, in treble clef
Trombone	C	No transposition, in bass clef
Baritone Sax	Eb	Write up an octave plus a major 6th, treble clef
Tenor Sax	Bb	Write up an octave plus a tone, treble clef
Alto Sax	Eb	Write up a major 6th, treble clef
Soprano Sax	Bb	Write up a tone, treble clef
Guitar	C	Write up an octave, treble clef
Bass	C	Write up an octave, bass clef

Some of these instruments may play lower than you'd previously assumed. Even for a trained musician, the ear can be surprisingly octave-ignorant…

Second – you'll spend most of your time transposing into Bb and Eb (I'm assuming that most people are okay to write a treble-clef line in the bass clef, which is what you'd do for a trombone part).

Transposing instruments are known as either Bb or Eb instruments for the following reason. When a Bb instrument reads and plays a C, it comes out as

a Bb in the real world (concert pitch). When an Eb instrument reads and plays a C, it comes out as an Eb. Some of these instruments also involve octave displacements.

Now here are some handy shortcuts.

When you're writing a part for a Bb instrument, you just take each note in the concert part and move it up a tone – a Bb becomes a C, a G becomes an A. But the first thing you do is add two sharps to the concert key signature. (In this context, a sharp cancels a flat, by the way.)

When you're writing a part for an Eb instrument, you just take each note in the concert part and convert it to its relative minor – a Bb becomes a G, and G becomes an E. But the first thing you do is add three sharps to the concert key signature.

Transposing is a three-stage process:

A. Transpose the key signature.
B. Transpose the chords.
C. Transpose the instrumental line.

When experienced musicians are transposing a part, they are constantly applying a layered multitasking checklist to what's going on during stage C.

On one level, you're always checking that the concert note is up a tone for Bb or the relative minor for Eb. This is the equivalent of the C-A-T stage of reading.

On another level, you're comparing the note to the accompanying chord and translating it to the transposed chord. For instance, if the concert-part melody has a Db over a C7b9 chord, that means it's the b9th of the chord. For a Bb part, the chord is D7b9, so you need to write the b9th of *that* chord – an Eb. This is equivalent to the CAT … SAT … ON stage of reading. Refer back with stage one for a double-check, and we find, yep, it's up a tone.

On another level, you're taking a whole phrase over the accompanying chord and translating the shape. For instance, if the concert part melody is DEGB over a CΔ chord, that means the phrase reads 2357 over the chord. For a Bb part, the chord is DΔ, so the equivalent 2357 phrase will be EF#AC#. This is equivalent to the CAT SAT ON THE MAT stage. You can check back to the previous stages for each individual note, if you're not sure.

On yet another level, you are constantly keeping an eye on the accidentals in the transposed part. This is why it's important to start by transposing the key signature – what this means is that where you have an accidental in the concert part, there will be a comparable accidental in the transposed part. It's a good mechanism for troubleshooting. For instance, if the melody note in concert is an F# in the key of C (involving an accidental) you would expect to find an accidental in the transposed part. Sure enough, in Bb transposition, the key is D, so you'd expect an accidental – sure enough, G#. And back to basics, yes, it's up a tone, so correct and double-checked.

By the way, a lot of experienced horn players can transpose concert parts (or even other transpositions) at sight. Don't rely on this, but it can help in a tight spot. Also horn players tend to be much more "ear-orientated" than pianists or guitarists, and will often be capable of hearing and responding to changes in whatever the key may be. Again, though, don't rely on it.

In closing, here's another curiosity. A lot of experienced trombone players can read an Eb treble-clef part. Can you figure out why that may be? Think about it – look at an Eb treble-clef part and pretend it's in concert but *in the bass clef*. The notes are pretty much the same, but some of the accidentals need adjusting. The chords still have to be transposed, of course. Once more, useful in a tight spot, but don't rely on it.

Best of luck, and feel free to e-mail me with any queries or comments at jlyon@opus28.co.uk.

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November 2007