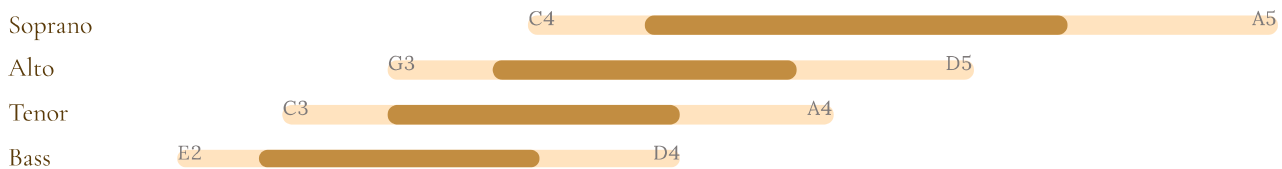


Writing for four voices

Soprano, alto, tenor, bass — four singers, one chord, and a set of rules invented not to restrict you but because voices that move this way are easy to sing and easy to hear.

COMFORTABLE RANGES

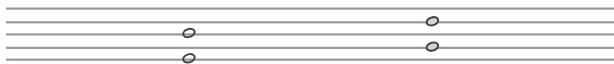


Pale band = the full range a trained voice can manage. Solid band = the tessitura, where a whole section can sit comfortably for minutes at a time. Write the melody in the tessitura and save the extremes for one note in a phrase.

FOUR RULES THAT DO MOST OF THE WORK

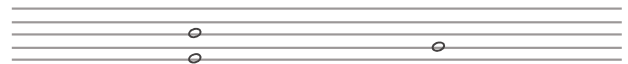
RULE	WHY	HOW TO FIX A BREACH
No parallel fifths or octaves	Two voices stop sounding independent	Move one voice the other way, or change the chord's inversion.
Keep upper voices within an octave	S–A and A–T wider than an octave sounds hollow	Raise the inner voice; the bass may sit as far below as it likes.
Resolve the leading note upwards	It is the note that makes a cadence work	In an outer voice, always. Hidden in an inner voice, it may fall to the fifth.
Move by the smallest step available	Common notes held, everything else stepwise	Before rewriting, check whether a different inversion removes the leap.

Parallel fifths — avoid



Both voices move up a step, still a fifth apart

Contrary motion — better



One voice up, one down — independence restored

BUILDING THE CHORD

- 1 Bass first, then soprano — the two lines anyone actually hears. Fill in alto and tenor afterwards.
- 2 Double the root of the chord. Never double the leading note.
- 3 Every chord needs its third; the fifth may be left out if the voice leading needs it.
- 4 Check each voice on its own, as a melody. If it is dull to sing, the chord was written before the line.

SETTING WORDS

One syllable per note unless a slur says otherwise. Stressed syllables land on strong beats — say the line aloud and the rhythm is decided for you.

Hyphenate across notes (glo-ri-a) and use an extender line for a held final syllable. Open vowels sing high; a top A on "it" is unkind.

Mark breathing places with a comma. If a phrase runs longer than about twelve seconds, the choir will invent its own.

TWO STAVES, FOUR VOICES

Short score: S and A on the treble stave, T and B on the bass, with stems up for the upper voice of each pair and down for the lower.

AMATEUR CHOIRS

Tenors are always short and always tired. Keep them below F4, give the altos something interesting, and the piece will be programmed again.

UNACCOMPANIED WRITING

With no piano, keep a common note between chords so singers can hear their way in — and end sections on a chord they can pitch from.