



The complete music production checklist

Four stages, every step in order — each stage closes before the next opens, and each has an exit test.

Most unfinished tracks don't die of hard problems — they die of unordered ones. Mixing a song whose arrangement isn't final means mixing it twice. This checklist enforces one idea: check steps, don't remember them.

1 • Songwriting

EXIT TEST: THE SONG HOLDS ATTENTION PLAYED ON ONE INSTRUMENT, NO PRODUCTION.

- ☐ Key and scale chosen; every part written inside them
- ☐ Chord progression finished and satisfying played solo
- ☐ Main melody singable from memory after one listen
- ☐ Counter-melody / secondary hook written (or deliberately skipped)
- ☐ Song structure mapped: intro, verses, builds, drop or chorus, break, outro
- ☐ Emotional intention stated in one sentence — you know what this song is for

2 • Production

EXIT TEST: A FULL LISTEN STAYS INTERESTING WITH ZERO MIXING MOVES; MUTING ANYTHING MAKES IT WORSE.

- ☐ Tempo and groove locked; drums follow a genre-appropriate pattern, not a guess
- ☐ Sound selection final — every placeholder replaced
- ☐ Layers chosen for contrast (frequency, stereo width, wet/dry), not sameness
- ☐ Bass and kick relationship decided (who owns the low end, when)
- ☐ Every section transition built — no cut feels like an edit
- ☐ Fills, risers and ear candy placed where the energy curve needs them
- ☐ Automation pass complete: filters, volume or space moving in every 8-bar block
- ☐ Arrangement length final — nothing overstays; nothing essential missing

3 • Mix

EXIT TEST: LOUDNESS-MATCHED AGAINST TWO REFERENCES, THE MIX TRANSLATES ON EARBUDS, CAR AND PHONE SPEAKER.

- ☐ Session prepped: tracks named, colored, bused; static balance with faders only
- ☐ Volume balance done before any plugin — volume is the mix's biggest tool
- ☐ EQ: each element has a home; masking resolved between competing parts
- ☐ Compression with a purpose per track (control, glue or color — name which)
- ☐ Space assigned: front/back (reverb, delay) and left/right (pan) deliberate
- ☐ Vocal or lead intelligible on every playback system tested
- ☐ Low end checked in mono
- ☐ Each bus soloed once: no clicks, pops, clipped transients or bad fades
- ☐ Two reference tracks compared loudness-matched — no embarrassing gap
- ☐ Headroom for mastering: peaks ~-3 to -6 dB, no limiter on the master bus

4 • Mastering

EXIT TEST: COMPETITIVE LOUDNESS AGAINST REFERENCES WITH NO AUDIBLE DAMAGE, ON THE SMALL SPEAKER TOO.

- ☐ Fresh ears — at least one day between final mix and master
- ☐ Corrective EQ (if needed) before any loudness processing
- ☐ Loudness matched to two references on the target platform
- ☐ No pumping, distortion or collapsed transients introduced
- ☐ Final translation check: earbuds, car, phone, loud monitors
- ☐ Exports: 24-bit archive master + platform versions, named and tagged
- ☐ Project archived: stems bounced, session backed up

Two rules keep this from becoming decoration.

1. Steps get checked, not remembered — "I basically did that" is how steps get skipped.
2. Closed stages stay closed — reopening one requires naming the concrete defect, not a feeling.

This checklist, per project, with progress that persists.

The Engineer's Workpad tracks all four stages per song — plus notes, a progress log and EQ/panning reference charts. In the browser, on your phone. One active project free · \$4.99 one-time unlocks full features.

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