



Vocal EQ Cheatsheet

3 Steps To EQ Any Vocal

Step 1: Filter

- Get rid of stuff that doesn't contribute musically to the performance
- Apply before compression
- Not always necessary

Step 2: Sweep and Destroy

- Remove frequencies that don't sound good (boomy, muddy, harsh, etc.)
- Two areas to focus on: lower midrange (150 - 300 Hz) and upper midrange (2 - 4 kHz)
- Do this on headphones

Step 3: Enhance

- Bring out pleasing qualities
 - Smooth, broad curves
 - Always do this in context with rest of mix
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EQ is one of the most important tools in your vocal mixing arsenal.

If you're not using it to its full potential, your vocals are destined to sound muddy, lifeless, and one-dimensional.

Here are some tips to help you EQ vocals like a pro...

1. Be Bold

Need to add 20 dB of top end to a vocal?

So be it.



Sometimes you need a gentle touch, but other times, you've got to rip out the chainsaw and hack away. As long as you're making deliberate decisions, let your ears be the guide.

Ignore what the screen looks like. Do whatever it takes to bring your vocals to life.

2. Don't Abuse The Solo Button

Mixing is all about context. You're trying to make a group of sounds blend together as a cohesive unit.

It's impossible to do this when you overuse the solo button. This is because [the solo button removes the context you need to understand how tracks contribute to the mix as a whole](#).

You'll get much better results if you make the majority of your vocal EQ decisions with the rest of the mix playing. Remember – it doesn't matter what the vocal sounds like in solo. The end listener is only going to hear the full mix.

3. Master The Spectrum



If you find yourself aimlessly sweeping to find frequencies, you'll likely benefit from ear training. With consistent effort, you can train yourself to identify frequencies accurately within 1/3 of an octave, without resorting to the classic “boost and sweep” method that many mixers rely on. If you're interested in learning more about ear training, I recommend exploring the following resources:

- [TrainYourEars EQ Edition](#)
- [Dave Moulton's Golden Ears](#)
- [SoundGym](#)

Develop a mastery over the frequency spectrum, and your vocals will improve by leaps and bounds.

4. Cut Before You Boost

Many mixers are die-hard boosters; they add what they want to hear more of. But focusing on cutting the things you don't like instead is a better strategy—especially when it comes to vocals.

Boosting makes things louder. Our ears think louder sounds better. This makes it difficult to determine whether or not a boost is an improvement over the original, unprocessed vocal. Is it really better, or just louder?

By contrast, cutting isn't subject to this problem. This makes it easier to determine if cuts are good decisions. If a cut sounds better than the unprocessed track, it's a clear win. For this reason, focusing on cutting instead of boosting can often lead to better vocal EQ decisions.

5. Know When To Leave It Alone

Not every vocal track needs to be EQ'd. In fact, many don't.

The best mixers know when to leave the vocals alone.



To this point, a lot of people will tell you to high-pass every vocal track. This is ridiculous. As a general rule, [the less processing you can get away with, the better your mixes will sound](#). If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

6. Always A/B

Mixing isn't just about making the right decisions. It's also about avoiding the wrong ones.

Take the time to ensure that every move you make is actually making your vocals sound better. Get in the habit of A/B'ing everything with the original, unprocessed track. Always level-match the before and after versions, so you can compare at a consistent volume. If you apply a hefty boost to a vocal, this means that you'll need to turn down the output gain on your EQ to compensate. This is the only way to determine whether or not a decision is actually making things better.

Every move you make should be a clear improvement. If you have any doubts, you're probably better off without it.

7. Know Your Tools

Your plugin library should be like a box of crayons. There should be no question what to reach for when.

Learn how each of your EQs differ in tone and functionality. Study their unique saturation curves. Develop your own opinions about when to reach for one over the other.

To this point, there's a big misconception about phase as it relates to EQ. Most mixers don't understand the difference between conventional minimum-phase EQs and their linear-phase counterparts. It's important to learn when to use one versus the other, and what the drawbacks are of each.

To get the scoop, watch FabFilter's excellent video below:



For more vocal mixing tips and tricks, visit BehindTheSpeakers.com.

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