

DAW Session Guidelines

Zed Brookes version.

The basic guidelines for how to set up, organise and manage sessions on a DAW.
(Based on the Grammy DAW guidelines)

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DAW Management Guidelines

Goals:

To reduce confusion about which is the correct project session.

To make sure all files are present, and any unneeded files are removed to keep session compact and tidy.

To make it easy for someone else to navigate the session and know what is what and where everything is etc.

To ensure sufficient preparation is made for the mix process.

DAW session guidelines

(based on Grammy recommendations at www.grammy.org/recording-academy/producers-and-engineers/guidelines):

Only ONE master session (you can have other slave or temp or progression sessions, but everything should be imported back into Master session).

Always name audio tracks before recording, if not – rename all audio files appropriately after recording (there should be no generic eg “Audio01-32” named files).

Add comments to tracks “liberally” (and to projects if possible)

Always label internal busses

Label inputs, outputs and inserts

Make sure computer date and time is correct to make sure files are time-stamped correctly.

Include named Project Info document (plain text file) in session/project folder (see below)

New Sessions:

Good project naming: eg(Song-Title-MST).

Use WAV 24-bit audio format.

Save in appropriate location on drive (not Desktop).

Set tempo or tempo map.

Include click track or click plugin at top of session (if applicable).

Print the click track before sending the session out.

Use timeline markers/locate points.

Include key and modulation in comments.

Note any delay compensation in comments.

Add a well-labelled tuning note in session.

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Project Info Notes:

Accompanying each project/session and in the same folder should be a plain-text file with the same name as the session (eg "OverTheTop-Info") and documenting all relevant data for the session.

There should only be one text file per song – it can refer to the various versions, mixes etc.

It should include; Song/Project title, Artist/Client name, each operator's name and contact information, where it was tracked/mixed etc (and any pertinent details about the tracking – mics, processing etc). You should also have any notes about various important things like any track offsets, delay compensation, tuning, where to find things, which is the best version of a track, any potential problems or issues etc.

You should also ideally keep a log of what was done each session (eg 14-6-11 YouWantItV2; (Zed) added guitars, 16-6-11 YouWantItV3; (Bob) redid guitars, added BVs – still needs tuned etc).

Cleaning up sessions:

Clean all edits/punches, add fades if necessary, make sure NO clicks/pops.

Render all tracks into contiguous audio files that start from the beginning of the session.

Print tuned tracks to new track when finished.

Remove all tracks unneeded in session.

Tidy up redundant edit lists/playlists.

Remove unused audio files before closing project/session.

Print a copy of all tracks with non-standard (3rd party) plugins or instruments.

Organisation of Sessions:

Try to keep a logical order to tracks in the session – eg vocals at the top and together, all guitars together etc.

Keep associated bus returns etc adjacent to the source tracks.

Effects returns and mix bus generally at top or bottom of session.

If unused tracks are contained in session, use blank track, MIDI region or folder name "--unused--" and move unused tracks below it.

If there are unused sections after used parts, insert an "---unused---" marker to show this. Deactivate/disable, mute, hide and generally move unused tracks/regions to the right of this marker.

Keep a (muted!) recent rough mix labelled with file name and date at the top of the session.

Label I/O channels with direction (to/from) and any outboard gear used. Add comments to project or project info notes.

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Send/return for reverb, chorus and delay effects is preferred rather than inserts on audio tracks.

You can use blank MIDI regions for comments.

Recommended “Save” workflow:

Start each new work session on an existing project by saving-as a new version of the session for safety. Add today’s date and version number. eg “OverTheTop13May12.V3” if the last version was V2.

While working on project, after each significant change or set of tracking, regularly save-as with the date and new version number. This provides safety in case of corrupt sessions, allows clarity over which version is which, and allows easy reversion to an earlier version if necessary. Additionally, if you’ve just finished eg the guitar tracking you can add or similar.

At end of each session, save as new version, do a quick tidy-up if possible, and re-save-as the Master session eg “OverTheTop-MST”, so if it’s the last session ever done – it’s obvious which is ACTUALLY the Master session.

Management, Storage and Transfer.

Always keep at least one backup of the entire working session, with “_BU” appended.

Always keep a safety copy of the complete project in your possession when sending the masters elsewhere.

Only the current Master, Slave or Mix session should show in the top level of the session/project folder. (If session still in progress, perhaps also the final “version” session).

Use subfolders for other session/projects and files, for example:

Source (original tracking sessions)

Unused Audio (audio files no longer used in session)

MIDI Files (SMFs, tempo maps, Sysex files etc)

Auxiliary Audio Files (Impulse responses, samples, Reason files etc)

Notes

Rough Mixes

Final Mixes

Bounces

Slave sessions and Stems

Sometimes a version of your session might have to go out to another studio for some extras – eg brass or orchestra etc.

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In this case you want a slightly compacted version of your session – basically doing stems of the main parts, eg Drums, Keys, Guitars etc. You would probably also print a few things individually like bass and lead vocals with their effects.

Bounce all at the current levels (ie post-fader and with any automation), so that when all the bounces are played back simultaneously, the mix sounds identical.

Naming Slave Sessions:

Use the Song Title, intended purpose and SLV. Eg “OverTheTop-Brass-SLV”.

If there are MIDI parts in the session, provide both bounced audio versions and an exported MIDI file (for inter-app/platform compatibility).

Include any click track if present.

Include any reference tracks of the instrument/s the session is being sent out for – eg guide trumpet part.

If sending whole session eg ProTools to be done in ProTools, make sure all the essentials are present: markers, key sig, frame rate etc. Otherwise make sure these are documented in accompanying Project Info notes.

If there are any changes or edits done to the source tracks of the Slave session, add detailed comments/Project Info document, so they can be reproduced back in the Master session.

Sometimes a Stems Mix might be needed, usually with the same process used above; bounce all groups down with effects/automation so that they all, when played together, sound exactly the same as the Master mix.

At times, generally for remix purposes, you may need to supply individual Stems pre-fader – ie without the automation – these will usually be much louder and often without bus-effects included. Make sure you check before performing the bounces.

Source Projects:

These are generally the unneeded tracking sessions and unused or subsequently-changed tracks and any earlier versions of the session.

Keep these in a separate Source Projects/Sessions folder.

Mix Sessions:

Only ONE Mix session for each mix.

Eg. “OverTheTop-Mix”.

Pretty much the same rules as the Master session, plus;

Note any offsets in timeline (eg bass track has been slipped forward 48 samples or rhythm gtr 2 has been slipped back 20ms and WHY).

Print reference final rough mix with title and date on stereo track at top of session.

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Always label audio files of any final mixes with the song title and type of mix (alternative mixes) eg “OverTheTop-Voc+1”, “OverTheTop-TVMix”, “OverTheTop-Inst”.

For delivery to another mixer:

First, talk to the Mixer if possible about what they would like as far as session delivery.

Generally;

All essential plugins should be printed to fresh track.

Keep the original track, with plugins and settings. Label clearly. Move to the bottom of the session.

Remove any non-essential plugins that will be redone by the mixer (unless the producer would like to keep them as a reference)

Audio-based fade-ins and outs are better than automation (the mixer can then remove all automation for a track and start over without worrying about clicks etc). Same with region mutes being better than automation mutes.

Leave only automation that the producer deems essential – eg backing vocal blends, panning. Make sure to add detailed comments.

Checklist:

Included Elements:

Every essential track is included.

All essential parts are on each track.

All “flys” (copies and pastes) are completed and tidied as necessary.

All “comps” (composite tracks) are completed and labelled (eg lead vocal).

The CORRECT lead vocal or melody instrument is there and very clearly labelled.

All tuned tracks have been printed to a new track and are clearly labelled as “tuned”.

There is an un-tuned version available in the session.

Clean-Ups

Delete all extraneous noises not wanted in the mix.

Repair all clicks and pops at edit and punch points (note: turn off auto-playback fades in DAW if possible) and insert fades as necessary.

Render all tracks into contiguous files from the beginning of the session when edits are completed on them.

Remove all tracks not needed for mix.

Remove any unneeded edit list and playlists.

Remove all unused audio files before final save of session and “Save-copy” to new location with only those files necessary for session.

DAW Management Guidelines

Organisation

Arrange tracks in logical order (see previous Master session setup for busses, submixes etc).

Leave optional tracks showing, but disable/deactivate, and label clearly.

Use “---unused---” markers/tracks to separate any unused or optional content.

Leave comments showing for mixer to see when opening session.

MIDI and Virtual Instruments

Ensure labelling on MIDI/Software Instrument tracks and regions reflects the part being played (eg Main Melody), the instrument (eg Flute) and where possible the patch (p115 BreathyFlute).

Keep MIDI and Software Instrument tracks ordered sensibly.

Merge multiple MIDI tracks together when they trigger the same instrument.

Delete all MIDI tracks and regions that are no longer needed in the session.

Bounce each software instrument to an audio track and give the track the same name as the MIDI version but append with “_Audio”.

Always create a Type 1 Standard MIDI File when exporting.

Before exporting MIDI files, make sure any real-time effects are rendered – eg quantising, transposition, gate times, note lengths, delays etc. Make sure duplicate events are deleted.

During recording, keep MIDI tracks and their printed audio versions adjacent (but hide one).

When mixing – move all the MIDI versions down to the “unused” section.