

# 47 Compression Tips from the Experts

Edited by Scott Hawksworth



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We surveyed 55 mixing experts to get [their very best mixing tips](#)... and the result was awesome!

The experts gave us over 300 tips and techniques... so many that we couldn't fit all the compression tips into the original article. So we're publishing them here!

Here are 47 compression tips from the experts... including little known DAW shortcuts... common mistakes to avoid... and several highly effective techniques that may surprise you!

Cheers!



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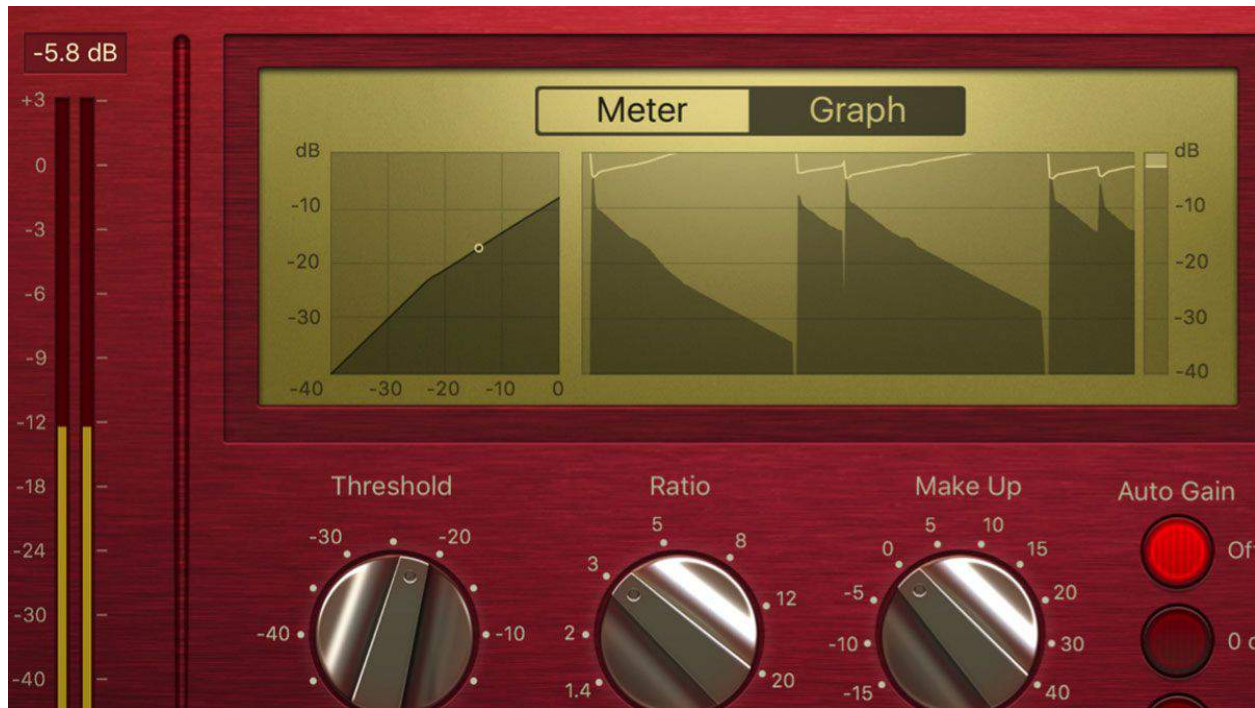
# Compression Philosophies

1. **Understand the value of subtlety** – a subtle compressor brings a smoothness and a linearity to the recording without making you feel like it's compressed. At other times, you can use compression as an effect, where you mash a track into a brick of a dynamic-less waveform. Understand both approaches and use each (or a hybrid) to achieve the desired effect. – *David Das, Academy of Scoring Arts*
2. **Learn how compressors work and how they shape sounds in detail.** When you've really got it, making compression decisions becomes so much easier. – *Dave S-B, Creative Mixing*
3. **Don't use compression because you think you have to.** Not everything needs compression. Sometimes you just need to automate the volume or a frequency band. So if you use compression, make sure you have a reason to do so, as opposed to just following generic rules. – *Cole Mize, Cole Mize Studios*
4. **Play around a lot with compressors and don't be afraid to really crush something to see what it can do.** – *Tyler Spratt, Thresh Mixing*
5. My #1 compression tip is **learn "Parallel Compression"** – *J-rum, J-rum Beats*
6. **Learn your compressor and experiment.** A and B or bypass – *Rick Elliott, Reiver Records*
7. **Know why you're compressing** and do it on purpose! – *Hubi Hofmann, Slash Zero Records*

8. **Be critical about what you are hearing** and don't just pick a random preset and leave it on your track without stopping to think about what it is doing and why. — *Stephen Michael Babula, SMB Recordings*
9. **Know your compressors and don't be afraid to push the limits.** There's no rules; if it sounds good it sounds good. Sometimes more than one compressor is the answer, don't be afraid to try new things. — *Dacota Fresilli, Parhelion Recording Studios*
10. If you're just starting out with compression (or maybe having some struggles), **focus on getting to know just one compressor's sound like the back of your hand.** With so many different compressors out there, it can be tempting to try them all. Get to know one really well first, then try others! — *Scott Hawksworth, AudioSkills*

## Common Mistakes (+ Less Is More)

11. **Don't use compression to make a track louder.** I make sure my compression plugin's output matches the output of the track dry. On rare occasions I will use compression to gain something up, but it's not common. — *Mike Glaser, pureMix*
12. **Use compression to keep tracks in a pocket volume-wise,** but be careful not to overuse as it could lead to your tracks sounding flat with no dynamics. — *Anthony Clint Jr., Clint Productions*
13. Unless you're going for effect... **less is generally more.** — *Scott Hawksworth, AudioSkills*



14. **Use less compression than you think you have to.** Every mixer I know (including myself) uses less compression on each mix as they become more experienced. Not to say that you can't absolutely obliterate a track if you need to. (I still do this on vocals quite often.) But pick and choose. Make sure your track is still breathing and not squashed beyond recognition. Leave that to the mastering guy. – *Jeffro Lackscheide, Make Your Mixes Not Suck*
15. **Sometimes less is more.** There is a thin line between killing your mix and compressing your mix to glue it together. – *CJ Jacobson, Audio Mastering And Mixing*
16. **Do not use presets!** The person making them did not have your song in mind nor your instrument tracks in mind when making them. Learn what each setting does (attack, ratio, release, etc.) and you use your ears to adjust each one. – *CJ Jacobson, Audio Mastering And Mixing*

17. **Not everything needs to be compressed!** Back in the days of hardware and real consoles, we often had a very limited number of compressors to work with, and had to choose carefully what to use them on. Most of the music from that era sounds much better than a lot of modern stuff, because there are still plenty of dynamics on the tracks since not everything was compressed to death! – *Stephen Sherrard, Stephen Sherrard Mixing*

## Attack & Release Times

18. Very generally speaking, **fast attack for elements that need to sit in the back**, slow attack for elements that need to stick to the front. – *Mathieu Dulong, Studio Fast Forward*
19. **On a vocal track, use one compressor with a fast attack to control the peaks** of the vocal and a second vintage type compressor at a slower attack (10-15 ms) to add tone and warmth. – *Chris Selim, Mixdown Online*
20. **Remember that attack and release do make a difference!** Use multiple compressors lightly and have them both do two different things. Have one compressor let the attack come through and the other compressor can compress the rest more heavily. – *Chris Blaney, Inner Creative Sound*
21. **For transparent compression use low ratio**, soft knee, fast attack and release, and a low enough threshold so the compressor is fairly consistently working – then you don't hear it kick in and out but it's never over-squishing. – *Adrian Breakspear*
22. **Do not go by the meters alone.** You need to use your ears to decide where to set the threshold, ratio, attack, release, knee, and gain. – *CJ Jacobson, Audio Mastering And Mixing*

23. **Don't over-compress!** When learning compression, a great trick is to pull your threshold right down so you can really hear what the compressor is doing when you are dialing in your attack and release. You want things to sound musical so when dealing with a fast song, think fast attack and fast release. When dealing with a slow song, think slow attack and release. Once you got things feeling good, bring your threshold back up to where it is just getting kissed by the compressor, not smashed unless it a smashed effect you are going for. – *Jeremiah, Undergunned Productions*

## Compression Techniques & Tricks

24. I use this technique for the bass track. **Create a parallel track and send the bass to it.** After that, put any kind of distortion plugin (I love the Decapitator and the UAD tapes plugins) on the parallel bass track and start to drive the plug in until you get some nice harmonic out of the bass. Then use an 1176, ratio 10:1, with a medium attack and release and compress 10 to 20dB. Blend the parallel track in the mix to get more power and sustain from the bass and also get a fuller sound without make the bass boomy or muddy. Also the la-2a (especially the gray UAD version) works well instead of the 1176. – *Mattia Magi, Blue House Studio*
25. **Try to match your input and output volume** when compressing dialog in film. – *James Aire, 5J Media LLC*
26. **I use parallel compression a lot.** Having the original there and blending in a compressed (or completely squashed) version isn't the same as a mix knob either. You can adjust the color with EQ and other tools on the compressed track and this can create exactly the vibe you want for almost anything –

including effects busses, which you can then volume ride the squashed track in and out of. — *Matt Russell, Gain Structure*

27. **Go for a slight gentle compression.** Then blend in compression from hell. — *Joe Vegna*
28. **Exaggerate ratio and threshold settings, and turn up gain.** Then play with the attack and release settings until you get a sound you want. Then back off ratio, threshold and gain. — *Soops, MixedBySoops*
29. **Use multiple compressors to do various things,** making sure each has an objective instead of one compressor doing all the work — *AJ*
30. **When working on a kick, duplicate the kick track.** On the duplicate track, place an eq on it and boost (4-6 dB) at the root frequency of the kick. Then compress [Dbx 160] the duplicate track (4-10 dB), lower volume, and blend to taste. Sometimes I'll follow the Dbx with Decapitator plugin. — *Kevin Lee, Mixed By Kevin Lee*
31. **Work out sub divisions of the tracks BPM in milliseconds,** for 1/4 1/8 1/16 notes. Experiment with setting compressor release time when compressing a drum group, works particularly well with hard parallel compression. — *James Aparicio*
32. For the drum bus, or even the mix bus, **try timing the release to the rhythm of the song.** You may have to temporarily crank the threshold to hear it, then adjust the release time to come back in time with the rhythm of the song. Then adjust the threshold to get the actual amount of compression you're looking for. — *Bobby Phillipps, HomeStudioMixTips*



33. Spend a few minutes copy pasting all of your snare fills and ghost notes to a new track, and take the time to add short fades both in and out to avoid pops and clicks. Insert the UAD 1176 legacy blackface plugin into the first slot of your channel. Hold down shift and click all the ratio buttons in. Set release all the way right and attack to 3. Turn the OUTPUT up as high as it will go and turn the INPUT all the way down so it is off. Insert the free plugin 'G clip' (or Kazrog K clip if you can find it) after the 1176 in the chain. Mute this channel. Now while playing over a snare fill adjust the input slowly till you arrive at approximately 30. The GR meter should only just move slightly. Pull the fader down, un-mute, and fade up to taste for amazing human expressive detail. Adjust the release till it grabs the part in a way you like. More ring / grit? Turn up the input. Thank me later. – *Stephen A Watkins, Mixed By SAW*
34. Renaissance Vox from Waves Plugins really helps bring out the sustain of a Reverb Tail when the attenuation is set to -30 or more, and then followed by another RVox plugin; the attenuation on the 2nd plugin is set for sustain

control. Mainly used in hip hop/rap vocals, and tucked behind the lead using S1 Stereo Enhancer from Waves. – *Anthony Olivares, Sound in the City*

35. **Compression in series works wonders.** Better to compress 12 dB GR using -4 GR of 3 compressors (split the GR) than compressing using 1. You can compress more without making the compressor “choke” this way. – *Paschalis I., Music Production Tips*
36. **Stop and listen, then decide if you think you need compression.** Depending on the the source, I usually start with the slowest attack time and the longest release. This will keep your transients in tact and the source will remain punchy. Adjust the compressor until you see the compressor starting to work... maybe a few dB of gain reduction. Match the level to the original source with a little makeup gain and then turn compressor on and off to see if it sounds better or worse. This is just one method to do some light compression without getting much of the pumping compressor effect or sound. – *Stephen Michael Babula, SMB Recordings*
37. **Always bypass the compressor** a few times to hear what you’re doing. – *John Myers*
38. **Always reference to the uncompressed signal** to make sure you’re not squashing the life out of the performance. – *Aaron Ahmad*
39. **For two instrument solos, run both through a single submix, 3:1 ratio, about 3 dB gain reduction.** As you boost one instrument it automatically ducks the other. Hear this on my single “A Brand New Heart”. – *Joe Arsenault*

## Compressing Vocals, Drums, Guitar, & Bass

40. **Don't think of compression as something that simply evens out the level of a signal.** Think of it as a tool to shape the tone and character. For example, faster releases on drums can really make them breathe and add a distortion characteristic that is very pleasing. – *Tyler Spratt, Thresh Mixing*
41. **Quicker attacks on acoustic guitars** can get rid of the clickyness and help them sound more full. – *Tyler Spratt, Thresh Mixing*
42. When working with recordings that have large dynamic contrast, such as vocals, you'll get better results by **automating the vocal levels PRE-compression**, so the vocal is hitting the compressor at a more consistent level. This will ensure the compressor doesn't work too hard, and the tone will be more consistent. – *Scott Horton, Virtual Mix Engineer*
43. I record a lot of acoustic instruments and rely on the microphone's characteristics and tube and solid state outboard compressors to get the signal IN as naturally (but controlled) as possible. **I use compression very sparingly in the box** – relying on bussing to group instruments & sonically organize the mix... leaving loads of room for flexibility in compression during the mastering stage. – *Catharine Wood, Planetwood Studios LLC*
44. **Duplicate a bass guitar track**, high pass one of the tracks at around 180-250 Hz and low pass the other in the same place. Hard Compress or limit the low passed bass track and more lightly compress the high passed bass track blend the two tracks together. Trick really holds down the low low and also retains the dynamics of the playing. – *James Aparicio*

45. **Put two compressors on a lead vocal.** First one at a low ratio to control it and bring out the noise and the second one at a higher ratio to help with just a little gain reduction to catch the really loud moments. – *Danny Ozment, Emerald City Productions*
46. **Don't be afraid to commit to compressing a vocal** on the way in, but don't paint yourself into a corner by over-compressing on the way in as it can't be undone. – *Stephen Freeman, Stephen Freeman Audio*
47. For vocals, you will **get a bigger and more easily placed sound with two compressors in parallel**, each giving 2 dB to 4 dB of compression, than one compressor giving 6 dB to 8 dB of compression. – *Matt Salazar, IndieRockInc*

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