

Writing Your First Chart: Ready, Set, Go!

By Mike Dana

Ready...

- Pick a song you really like (you will be spending a lot of time together)
- Don't try to write an original composition for your first chart. But if you do...
 - Short form (blues, 16 bar)
 - Contrafact

Set...

- Decisions to make early on
 - Style/groove/feel/"point of view"
 - Featured instrument? Soloist(s)?
 - Important to consider before you start
 - Experience, age level of the group you are writing for
 - Ranges, esp. for brass
 - Playability of groove (rhythm section) at the group's experience level
 - Complexity of solo changes
 - Rhythm section...notated, slashes, or combination?
 - Woodwind doubles? Extra/unusual instruments?
- Things I always try to include
 - A cool rhythm section groove or hook
 - Something interesting for every section (esp. trombones)
 - Something "unique"
 - A new color (Duke's "scoring across sections")
 - Something I've never tried before
- Save until later (don't get stuck on these early on!)
 - Intros
 - Endings
 - Solo backgrounds
 - These can be derived from ideas you've used in the chart someplace else.
 - Melodic or harmonic ideas from the tune itself.
 - Something derived from a great solo from a definitive recording
- Ways to build interest
 - Harmonic tension (also reharm)
 - Counterpoint
 - Rhythmic tension
 - Pedal, ostinato
 - Repetition (w/ layering?)
 - It's shouldn't just be volume

- From Dick Grove's book Arranging Concepts (Amazon, \$85, I recommend)
 - Weight
 - Density
 - Span
- Common mistakes
 - Not enough rest time for brass
 - Too heavy too often (use more unison and 2-part, less chords)
 - Too much "Lego" music ☺

Go!

- Do an outline (this is for an AABA tune...)
 - First chorus
 - A1
 - A2
 - B
 - A3
 - Second chorus
 - A1
 - A2
 - B
 - A3
 - (Maybe a transition to...)
 - Solo section
 - Sendoff?
 - Backgrounds
 - Who? (think contrast)
 - When? Use repeats or no? On cue or 2nd X?
 - KISS
 - What's next? Transition into, maybe...
- Shout chorus
 - Should be "big." Golden Mean.
 - Doesn't have to be a full chorus (A A, then DS to the B section?)
- Out chorus
 - To DS or not to DS... less than 8 bars, not always worth it IMO.
- NOW, think about the intro and ending.
 - Try to use something you've already written into the chart for the idea(s) for intro/ending
 - Should the ending
 - build up? (big finish)
 - wind down chill!
 - be abrupt/surprising?

- Prep the score
 - Should be clear to a total stranger
 - REHEARSAL NUMBERS!!!
 - At logical places/sections
 - Double bars for longer sections, tempo/meter/key changes etc.
 - Make sure all multi-measure rests break at rehearsal numbers
 - Avoid short “DS al Coda”s
 - Proof-read!
 - The playback from your notation program really helps here
 - Upgrade: export MIDI file to your DAW; use better instrument samples
- Prep the parts
 - Look at how rehearsal #s and staves interact.
 - Page turns?
 - Length of parts for rhythm section (esp. bass and drums)
 - **Every** page has title, part, page #. Every. Single. Page.
 - Put key sig on every staff line, NOT just the first.
 - TAPE THE PARTS. Please.
 - Odd/even tape on front. Flip if needed, then even/odd on back.
 - Best: artist tape (for “keepers”)
 - OK: Scotch tape (fine for rehearsals, drafts)
 - Hard NO: masking tape (sticky mess)
 - Fold with title in front
- First rehearsal
 - Good to talk through or run down tricky parts
 - Sometimes I get parts ahead of time to rhythm section
 - First read through, try to make it all the way through ☺
 - ALWAYS RECORD REHEARSALS!
- Notation programs
 - Definitely should use one
 - Pros use Sibelius, Finale (I know...) or Dorico... more control over final look
 - MuseScore has come a long way
 - Learn the **keyboard shortcuts**
 - Use **templates**
 - I use dates in my titles as I update scores I am working on (ex. Title 052226) so I can always go back to a previous version of the chart with no problems.
 - Be very organized with your folders/filing system (lost charts = ☹)
 - Use Google Drive, DropBox etc.
 - There are GREAT users groups on Facebook!

- Parting thoughts
 - 10 steps:
 1. **Conceive:** develop your thoughts, make a plan.
 2. **Write:** your goal is to write every day. Have reasonable short-term (daily) goals.
 3. **Edit:** When I'm near the end of the writing phase, I play it back, and ask myself "Does the most important thing *sound* like the most important? Is there variety in texture, color, density, tension vs. release? What can I omit?"
 4. **Prep:** score and parts, plan for the rehearsal.
 5. **Rehearse:** Have a plan, use time efficiently, maybe point out (run?) tricky spots first.
 6. **Record/Perform:** listen honestly. Keep what works, improve what doesn't.
 7. **Get organized.** Create a folder for every title/chart, make sure all files have a date stamp (for June 4, 2025, I'd use 060425). I have a PDF folder inside the main one. Good to have a combined PDF of score and all parts...only one file to email. 😊
 8. **Copyright your music** if you plan to put it "out there" in the world. I group my charts together; you can register up to 10 titles in a group with one name and pay one fee. Details below.
 9. **Clearances for your arrangements of songs you did not compose:** I Use ArrangeMe to publish my charts of songs I did not write. They handled the paperwork, obtain the necessary clearances, and pay you your composer royalties when your minimum balance has been meant. They also make your Music available on online retail outlets.
 10. **REPEAT!** 😊

More Resources

- John Clayton shares thoughts on this topic in a GREAT video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pofh2TQ0TG4>
- US Copyright Office here: <https://www.copyright.gov/registration/>
- ArrangeMe info here: <https://www.arrangeme.com>