Part-Writing: The Horizontal Rules

The supreme goal of part-writing is good voice leading... making each individual voice part easy to sing by avoiding awkward intervals or large leaps!

Before we get to the specific dos and don'ts, let's take a look at some important characteristics of four-voice part-writing:

- Note how each voice moves as little as possible, going to the nearest chord note in each subsequent chord!
- In some cases, the voice can simply stay on the same note. This is called keeping the common note, and it's always cool!
- It's common for the bass to move in the opposite direction of the upper three voices. This is called contrary motion and it helps maintain voice independence.
- The bass line, since it provides the foundation of the harmony in each chord, tends to include larger leaps than the other three voices, but that's okay.

Four-voice harmony is a form of counterpoint, which is the combination of more than one melody played simultaneously. In counterpoint, each voice is equally important; no voice is given a role of accompaniment to another voice.

In counterpoint, it is important for each voice to be independent; that is, no two voices should be doing the exact same thing. If two (or more) voices were moving in parallel, the richness of the texture would be reduced.

As a result, common practice composers were very consistent in avoiding two or more voices that moved in parallel perfect octaves, parallel perfect fifths, or parallel perfect unisons!

There are also a few other rules that apply to this style:

- When you have the leading note in an outer voice (soprano or bass) it must resolve to the tonic in the next chord.
- You may not move any voice by an interval of an augmented second or an augmented fourth.

The good news: you can avoid all three of these by doing the following whenever possible:

1. Keep the common note!
2. Move to the nearest chord note!
3. Use contrary motion!