

PROTOTYPICAL SONATA FORM

	Exposition				Development		Recapitulation				
:	First theme	transition	Second theme	Closing theme	:	?	retransition	First theme	transition	Second theme	Closing theme
M:	I		V	V		?	(V ⁷ chord in tonic)	I		I	I
m:	i		III (or v)	III (or v)		?	(V ⁷ chord in tonic)	i		i (or I)	i

Variations of Terminology

Although there is widespread agreement on the general principles of sonata form, many different sets of terms have arisen over the years. Fortunately, people who know one set of terms can easily understand the other sets. For example, some writers indicate that a typical sonata begins with the *first theme*, but other writers might refer to the *principle theme*, the *primary theme*, the *first theme group*, or the *first tonal area*. Although these terms might reflect a slightly different focus (notice, for instance, the emphasis on themes vs. key areas), they are by no means incompatible. Sometimes a particular composition may be more easily discussed using one set of terms rather than another, but, generally speaking, no set of terms is inherently preferred to another. (That said, however, you should be aware that designations like “third theme” are rare. Instead, the expression *closing theme* is strongly preferred.)

Common Variations:

End with coda (usually stays close to tonic with possible emphasis on IV; usually employs familiar thematic material)

Start with introduction (usually slow, usually ending on dominant chord, not usually repeated, might not have any obvious connection to the rest of the movement)

Use a retransition at the end of the exposition to return to the tonic (particularly likely if exposition ends in a remote key). Sometimes this retransition has a first and second ending so that it may serve as a transition to the development when the exposition is repeated.

Thematic groups (i.e., extra themes in the exposition) — if there are multiple distinct themes *before* the change of key, then it is best to describe them as part of a first theme group. If there are multiple distinct themes *after* the change of key, then you will have to consider their character to determine whether you have a second theme group, a closing theme group, or both.

Sometimes there is no closing theme.

The second key may not be closely related to the original tonic. However, the general pattern will be the same (i.e., the key contrast from the exposition will be “resolved,” in some sense, to the tonic during the recapitulation).

A significant portion of the first theme may appear transposed to some key other than the original tonic during the development. This is known as a *false recapitulation* for fairly obvious reasons.

Less Common Variations:

No distinct second theme (i.e., first theme appears in transposition after the transition) — it is best to use the designations *first tonal area* and *second tonal area*. Such sonatas are commonly described as *monothematic*. There may still be a distinct closing theme (or even a closing theme group).

Themes are reordered in the recapitulation. Usually all themes will return eventually, but it is possible for a theme to disappear entirely (especially if it is strongly emphasized in the development).

There may be three distinct key areas rather than the usual two. Such sonatas are creatively described as *three-key sonatas*. Of course, this extra tonal area may be approached through an additional transition.

Extra material (a new theme, an extended version of a familiar theme, etc.) may appear during the recapitulation.

Common Characteristics of the Standard Components:

(Warning: there are plenty of exceptions to these characterizations. Don't take them too seriously.)

First theme — tends to be loud and rhythmically active with a somewhat bold and aggressive character. Does not necessarily end with a perfect authentic cadence.

Second theme — tends to be quieter and more legato, often uses longer notes, often described as “lyrical.” The second theme will generally end with a perfect authentic cadence in the new key.

Closing theme — tends to be virtuosic and often incorporates scales, arpeggios, and other familiar but not genuinely melodic materials. The main purpose is a strong drive to a powerful cadence, or sometimes the repetition of a cadence.

Transition — necessarily includes some kind of harmonic instability, since it changes key, and often incorporates a compositional technique that makes modulation easier (e.g., a sequence). There are two types of transition: *dependent* (beginning as though they are part of the first theme, sometimes referred to as a *counterstatement*) and *independent* (beginning with contrasting material, not necessarily melodic in character). Transitions — particularly independent transitions — tend to include scales, arpeggios, and other simple virtuosic materials, especially near their endings (i.e., right before the arrival of the second theme). It is very typical to end on the dominant of the new key. Keep in mind that transitions can be very long — sometimes longer than the themes they are connecting.

Retransition — essentially the same idea as a transition, but the purpose is to return to the tonic key rather than to leave the tonic key. At the end of the development, expect strong (and perhaps exclusive) emphasis on the dominant seventh chord. At the end of the exposition, however, a retransition may merge back into the tonic more subtly.

Development — unpredictable and unstable (and therefore difficult to characterize reliably). Expect a variety of key areas (possibly fleeting, and often minor) and an avoidance of the tonic. Irregular phrases, active rhythms, chromaticism, and sequences are common. Although motives are usually recognizable from the exposition, it is possible for the development to include new material (perhaps even a new theme). The development almost always ends with a retransition to set up the recapitulation. The longer the development lasts and the more it modulates, the longer the retransition is likely to be.

Remember that this entire handout reflects a prototype, and that individual compositions may vary substantially without being considered “wrong” in any way.