

FORM

Form: *The structure of a composition. The framework. Based on repetition, contrast and variation.*
(Source: <http://www.music.vt.edu/musicdictionary>)

Musical FORM relates to the various units (or parts, or sections) of a composition. It is analogous to a book, which has different-sized “units” of chapters, paragraphs and sentences; or to architecture, where a building itself is a form, but made up of smaller sections like stories, rooms, closets, walls, and even the individual bricks that make up that wall.

In music, the Blues is a form, usually 12-bars long, further divided into three smaller sections of four bars each. In traditional Western European music, there are large forms like multi-movement compositions (such as the typical *symphony*); each movement can have its own form such as the sonata-form, rondo-form, ternary-form, or binary form. Jazz also embraces its versions of binary and ternary forms, often within a 32-bar framework. Different sections are usually labeled with uppercase letters (“A”, “B”, or “A’”, meaning a section is more of a variant rather than something wholly different). Within sections are even smaller units of music: periods, phrase-groups, phrases, sub-phrases, sentences, motifs, and sequences.

What helps differentiate between sections is the use of contrasting ideas (like different melodies or chord progressions), and/or modulations (a not-brief change of key), with different sections being in different keys. In traditional Western European based music, if a piece modulates away from its original (home) key, it will definitely modulate back to that key by the end, implying a large-scale sense of resolution and balance.

In rock/pop music, the different portions of a song are usually called *sections*, with more specific names like *verse*, *chorus*, *pre-chorus*, *refrain*, *bridge*, *solo*, *intro*, *outro*, *coda*, *digression*, *jam*. But sometimes it’s hard to identify certain sections with these labels, and more neutral ones (“A”, “B”, “C”, etc.) are used.

Other styles of music can be less form oriented, such as Minimalism, or music that emphasizes free-form improvisation.

What follows are very condensed definitions of some of the more common forms.

ROCK/POP SONG FORM-RELATED VOCABULARY

Blues (12-bar blues)

A short song form (usually 12 bars) that follows the same chord pattern throughout the song. It is in three four-bar subsections. The basic chords (if in the key of C) are:

I (C)	IV (F)	I	I
IV (F)	IV	I	I
V (G)	IV	I	V (or I)

A “verse” and/or “chorus” is usually not recognized in this shorter form.

Verse

A section of a song that repeats the same chords and melodies, but usually has different lyrics. Alternates with the chorus and/or other sections. Usually precedes and prepares (leads up to) the chorus. One of two main sections in most songs.

Refrain

A repeated one or two-line fragment that comes at the end of a verse. Importantly, it feels attached to the verse, as opposed to the independent, stand-alone nature of a *chorus* section.

Chorus

A section of a song that repeats the same chords, melodies and lyrics. Alternates with the verse and/or other sections. Usually felt to be the goal of the verse. The material is usually different from that of the verse, providing contrast.

Pre-Chorus

A short section after the verse and before the chorus. Usually uses the same chords, melody and verse upon each occurrence.

Bridge

A possible “third” section that usually connects the chorus and verse. It may occur once or more often. A shorter, instrumental bridge can be called an **Interlude**.

Solo

A section usually often containing the same chords as the verse or chorus, without singing, where the guitar or other instrument performs a solo (effectively replacing the singing) with the band accompanying.

Intro/Outro

Short sections at the beginning and ending (respectively) which may or may not be based on material from other sections of the song. Probably the most typical *outro* is where the chorus is repeated several times while fading-out (in volume), like in “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds”. A **Coda** (short section at the end) can also be an outro. An exceptional and long coda is the final “Nah, nah...” section of “Hey, Jude”.

Digression (long interlude)

An extended middle section that contrasts the other parts of a song. It is usually instrumental and might provide a backdrop for improvisation and/ less cohesive, murky material. It is usually followed by a strong return of the verse and/or chorus, or it might act as a segue to another song in fewer cases.

RELATED TERMINOLOGY**Arrangement**

The manner in which a song is performed or recorded, referring to the specific instruments (and voices) used and the roles they play. An arrangement can also refer to a performance/recording of a previously recorded song (a “cover”, or new version of the song). The cover might be arranged in a significantly different way.

Cover

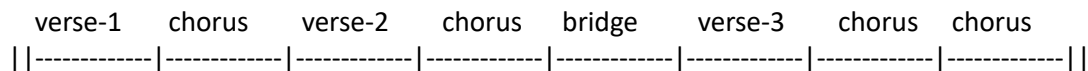
A song where the artist performs/records a song written by someone else.

ANALYSIS, LABELING & HOW TO ORGANIZE FORM INFORMATION

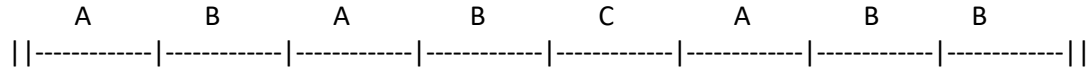
As you can tell from above, modern songs and pieces have the potential for a lot of different parts. Depending on the exact kind of music we're dealing with, it can be useful to label different sections with specific terms to help explain a section's function and importance - it's overall role in the music.

In other cases, it's better to use more generic *letter* labels like "A", "B", "C", etc. (or "A¹", "A²" if there are minor variants between otherwise very similar sections). These kinds of labels don't run the risk of misidentifying what a section is (is it a chorus? is it a refrain? is it a long verse, or a pre-chorus?).

As seen in earlier topics, with lead sheets (a.k.a. charts) or lyric & chord charts, we've encountered either sectional labels ("Intro", "Verse", "Chorus"...), or letter labels (especially in jazz and blues contexts). But when organizing this kind of information for discussion purposes, it's common to turn that information into a *linear diagram*, kind of like a timeline. As an example, a simple song that has an two verses and choruses, a bridge, then another verse with a double (repeated) chorus could be diagrammed like this to show each section:

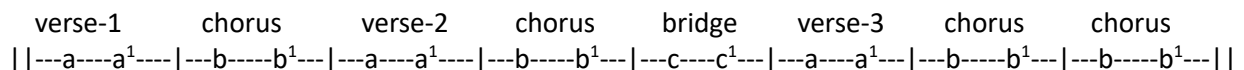


This depiction gives us a quick and easy overview of the music's architecture, like a storyboard for a film. It's especially helpful when the music's form is more complex. If we wanted to do a similar diagram using letter labels, it would look like this:



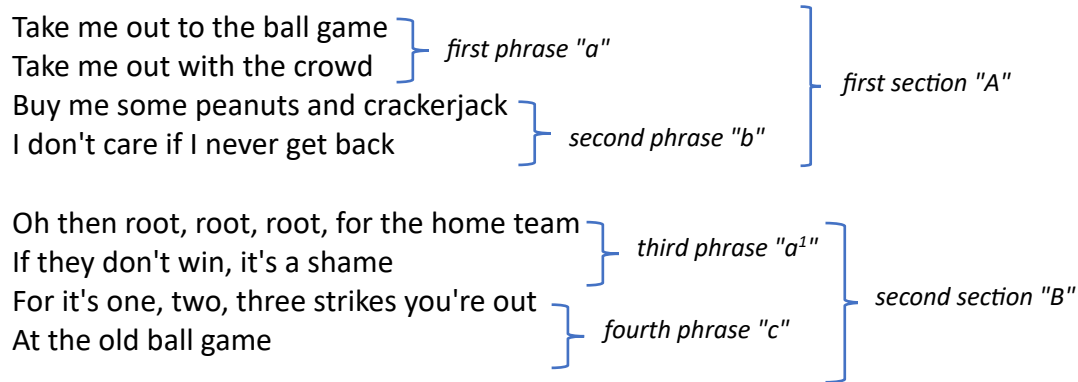
A = verse
B = chorus
C = bridge

If we wanted to make a diagram that goes into more detail to show the phrases within each section, it might look like this (using section terms), with the lowercase letters representing phrases (assuming two phrases per section):

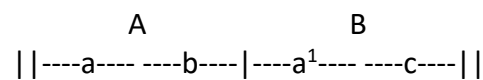


Let's apply this approach to some popular songs. (hopefully you can hear these in your head already)

"Take Me Out to The Ball Game" by Jack Norworth



Its linear diagram would look like this:



"Jingle Bells" by James Lord Pierpont - excerpt

