

How to Write a Canon

The process for writing a canon is straightforward. The following order is recommended, and shown in the example below.

1. Compose the leader up to the point at which the follower enters, keeping in mind harmonic clarity and simplicity, shape, motivic unity, and rhythmic drive.
2. Bring in the follower in an appropriate place in terms of time and pitch interval.
3. Continue the leader against the follower, keeping in mind the precepts of good two-voice counterpoint regarding vertical intervals, clear harmony, idiomatic nonharmonic tones, and rhythmic interplay. This line must represent a smooth, logical continuation of the opening.
4. Continue the follower exactly as you did the leader in number 3 above. Here, though, you may sometimes make subtle adjustments by adding or removing accidentals in order to create a modulation or to avoid tonal monotony. Modulation can be accomplished by reinterpreting certain diatonic notes of the theme in a new harmonic/tonal context, as in measure 5 of the example below, where the F-D in the lower part, originally in d minor, is reinterpreted in terms of Bb major. (Also notice how the motive marked "x" in the first example on the back is interpreted in different harmonic contexts).
5. Meanwhile the leader will continue with its counterpoint, reinforcing any new tonal direction taken by the follower. The canon may be continued in this way for as long as the materials suggest. Be sure to return to the tonic key before the end.

The musical score illustrates the process of writing a canon in d minor. It consists of two systems of staves, each with a treble and bass clef. The first system shows the leader (top staff) and follower (bottom staff) entering. The leader starts with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, Bb4, and C5. The follower enters in the second measure with a half note D4. Harmonic annotations below the staves include: d: i (under G4), (V VI) (under A4 and Bb4), and vii^o7 (under C5). The second system shows the continuation. The leader continues with quarter notes D5, E5, F5, and G5. The follower continues with quarter notes G4, A4, Bb4, and C5. In the fifth measure, the follower's line has a half note F4 and a quarter note D4. An arrow labeled "change" points to the F4-D4 interval, indicating a modulation. Harmonic annotations below the staves include: [d: VI⁶ / F: IV⁶] (under F4), v⁷ (under D4), and I (under the final G5).

g: i V⁷ i V⁷ i V⁷

i B \flat : V⁷ I V⁷ I

G: I V⁷