Modulation

Modulation is when the key of a piece changes. Almost all common practice and some popular pieces modulate. Sometimes the change in key goes along with the change in section (The A section being in one key and the B section beginning in another key, etc.).

Pieces may have many modulations. But almost always, there is a return to the original key by the piece or section's end. Music nearly always returns to the original (home) key. This rounds things off nicely on a harmonic level.

The purpose of modulation is to provide a contrasting key or set of keys to that of the original. With this effect, the inevitable return of the original key creates an ultimate feeling of harmonic resolution within the piece or movement.

In a binary (two-part) piece, a modulation timeline could look like this:

||----------A Section----------||----------B Section----------||
Original key New key(s) somewhere in the middle Return to orig. key

Many modulations follow the pattern of the circle of fifths. A modulation might go to a new key up or down a $4^{th}/5^{th}$, i.e. one key to the right or left on the circle (adding/subtracting one flat/sharp). A major key might modulate to its relative minor, or a minor key might modulate to its relative major (not changing the key signature at all).

A timeline of this process could look like this:

||----------A Section----------||----------B Section----------||
G Major Brief change to D Major Return to G Major

(The Bach Minuet in G major does this: briefly changing from G to D in the B section)

In these cases, the transition to a new key is usually subtle because there will be notes and/or chords that are common to both keys. The transition will have an overlapping area (a pivot area) where the notes or chords in question simultaneously fit into the old and new keys (like in the movies when the screen dissolves from one scene into a new scene and there is a moment of visual overlap).

Usually when a modulation of this kind takes place, the key signature does not change. Instead, the necessary accidentals are used wherever needed. While this seems more cumbersome, it supports the notion that the original key is the most important and one that will return by the end.

Modulations are often described in terms of how they take place. As mentioned above, a modulation is often *prepared* by using notes or chords that are also a part of the new key. Sometimes a modulation can be initiated by a *sequence*. A pattern begins in the original key and its sequence is put into a new key. The common pattern links the two keys and makes the transition smooth. In other instances, the modulation can be *abrupt*, without a sense of gradual transition (i.e. the opposite of smooth)–creating a feeling of surprise and immediate contrast. Longer pieces will often feature a combination all these modulation techniques.