

The Blues

SUPPLEMENTAL LESSON

The Blues is a supplemental lesson that is intended to be taught between Lessons 7 and 8 in the Words & Music unit.

OBJECTIVES

Students will explore the history and elements of traditional blues songs.

Students will apply their knowledge of blues to writing their own traditional blues lyrics.

VOCABULARY

Blues, chorus (review), cover, genre, holler, rhyme (review), work song, verse (review), 12-bar blues

PREPARATION

- Make copies of the **Blues Styles Across the United States Worksheet**, **“Cross Road Blues” Lyric Sheet**, and **“I Can’t Quit You Baby” Lyric Sheet**.
- Locate audio or video versions of “Cross Road Blues” performed by Robert Johnson and “I Can’t Quit You Baby” performed by Willie Dixon.

STANDARDS

English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.5

Tennessee Social Studies

AAH.26, AAH.31, AAH.35, TN.50

INTRODUCTION

The Blues lesson is divided into two parts. In **Part I: Blues History**, students will explore the history of blues styles across the United States. In **Part II: Blues Form**, students will analyze blues lyrics and learn how to write their own traditional blues lyrics. Depending on class time and needs, Part I and Part II can be taught together in one day or over two separate days.

BRAINSTORM (5 minutes)

Prompt: Think of times when you felt sad, heartbroken, disappointed, or treated unfairly. In your journal, list as many of these experiences as you can. Select one of these experiences and write a detailed account of it. Describe what happened, the way you felt, the way you dealt with it, and any other details relating to the experience.

TEACHER TIP

Allow students to volunteer sharing their journal entries. Create a safe environment by setting classroom expectations for being kind and respectful to others as their peers share personal experiences. By sharing, students will develop social and emotional learning competencies such as self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills.

GROUP DISCUSSION (5 minutes)

Divide students into small groups and give them 30 to 60 seconds to discuss the following questions. After each question, let the groups share their answers with the whole class.

- What is the blues?
- Who writes blues songs?
- Why do people like blues songs?
- Are you familiar with any blues artists?
- What makes the blues different from other music genres or styles of music?

ACTIVITY

PART I: BLUES HISTORY (20-25 minutes)

1. Distribute the Blues Styles Across the United States Worksheet. Students may use the worksheet to identify key words that best describe each blues style discussed in class. Share the information below with students. Refer to the Teacher Resource Portal for the audio/video examples and accompanying PowerPoint, which includes the history information below.

Blues songs often tell stories of misfortune, regret, and overcoming bad luck. This style of music has its roots in African American history. In the 1800s, enslaved individuals would collectively sing **work songs** as they were forced to work long, hard days often in fields. A song leader would sing a short improvised melody (call), and the workers would answer with a single repeated melody (response). Enslaved people also sang **hollers**, which sounded a lot like work songs, but were sang alone, rather than as a group.

The origins of blues music can be traced to the Mississippi Delta during the late 1800s and early 1900s. From there, it spread to other areas of the country, where the sound evolved due to musicians adding musical elements popular in their regions.

Examples of different blues styles across the United States include:

The **Mississippi Delta Blues** are considered the oldest style of blues, originating in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Most Delta blues records feature singers accompanying themselves on guitar. Usually, they play a basic repeated musical pattern, known as **12-bar blues**. (See Part II for more information.) The lyrics typically used an AAB line pattern and were often about failed relationships, life on the road, and other emotional topics. In Mississippi, blues music venues were train stations, street corners, barns, and other informal locations.

Example: "Pony Blues" by Charley Patton

Perhaps no other region combines as many styles into their blues music as **Texas Blues**. In the early 1900s Texans often kept elements of the Mississippi Delta Blues (i.e., AAB line pattern and **12-bar blues**) and combined it with their own folk and spiritual tunes. Singers like Blind Lemon Jefferson found a way to accompany long, free form, holler-like melodies with freely strummed guitar chords. Additionally, Texas blues musicians added in musical elements from around the world including Latin rhythms and polkas.

Example: "Match Box Blues" by Blind Lemon Jefferson

Many **Memphis Blues** musicians moved from the Mississippi Delta to escape the oppression of field work. Memphis offered opportunities for black businesses and entertainment on its famous Beale Street. Musicians could also perform at house parties, corner saloons, traveling tent shows, or in jazz bands. In order to compete with large performance ensembles (like W.C. Handy's band), artists often performed as a duo and developed a distinct musical sound where one guitar played high treble chords and melodies while the other played low bass lines—a sound still present today.

Example: "Beale Town Bound" by the Beale Street Sheiks duo

St. Louis Blues soaked up diverse music styles from the Mississippi Delta, ragtime from local artist Scott Joplin (composer of “Maple Leaf Rag” and “The Entertainer”), and jazz influences from New Orleans. In 1914, W.C. Handy published his song “St. Louis Blues” which would become one of the most popular blues songs in history.

Example: “St. Louis Blues” by Bessie Smith

When you think of **Chicago Blues**, think of a bigger band and electricity! This style developed in the 1950s and added several instruments to the typical Delta blues style, including electric guitar, bass guitar played with an amp, a piano, a miked harmonica, and sometimes a horn section (trumpet, trombone, and saxophone).

Example: “Trouble No More” by Muddy Waters

PART II: BLUES FORM (20-25 minutes)

2. Distribute the “**Cross Road Blues**” **Lyric Sheet**, and listen to a recording of the song by Robert Johnson. Have students discuss the following questions with a partner, then share their answers with the class:

- What is the theme or main subject of the song?
- How are the theme and message reflected in the title?
- What do you think the artist means when he refers to “the crossroads?” Is it figurative, literal, or both?
- What feeling is conveyed in this song?
- What evidence from the song supports your position?
- How is the form or structure of this song different than songs you listen to today?



Robert Johnson (1911-1938) was an American blues musician from the Mississippi Delta. Johnson is widely accepted as one of the greatest guitarists of all time and has influenced blues and rock & roll musicians like Muddy Waters, the Rolling Stones, and Eric Clapton.

3. Share the following information with students:

“Cross Road Blues” (also known as “Crossroads”) was written and recorded by Robert Johnson in 1936. The song has become part of the mythology surrounding Robert Johnson, referring to the place where he supposedly sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his musical talents. When blues artists, like Johnson, sing about having the “blues,” it means they feel sad, regretful, down on their luck, or betrayed. Although blues music often deals with personal struggles, it’s also about overcoming hard times, saying how you feel, venting your frustration, and having fun while doing it!

Unlike most popular or country music that follow a verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus music form, blues songs like “Cross Road Blues” typically use multiple verses and no chorus. Traditional blues songs typically follow a three-line **verse** with an AAB line pattern, which is sang over a basic repeated musical pattern called **12-bar blues**. This form of blues typically has the following lyrical elements:

A. Line 1 – State the problem, situation, or issue.

A. Line 2 – Repeat the first line.

B. Line 3 – Response to the first two lines, which:

- States a solution or consequence.
- Is often phrased as a two-part answer separated by an implied “but” or “therefore.”
- Is longer in length to the first two lines.
- May contain up to the same number of syllables as the first two lines.
- Rhymes with the first two repeated lines.

12-bar blues refers to a chord progression that is 12 bars (or measures) long. It can be divided into three four-bar segments that follow the AAB line pattern of a verse.

4. Give students the following writing prompt:

In your journal, write about a time when you were at a crossroads (literal and/or figurative). What did it look like? What decision(s) did you have to make? What were the consequences of your choices?

5. Distribute the “**I Can’t Quit You Baby**” **Lyric Sheet** and listen to the version recorded by Willie Dixon.

Students will discuss the following questions in small groups, then discuss as a class:

- How does this style of blues differ from Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues”?
- What story is being told and what message is conveyed?
- What is the conflict explored in this song?
- What specific lines from the song communicate conflict or struggle?

TEACHER TIP

If time allows, listen to “Crossroads” by Cream and “I Can’t Quit You Baby” by Led Zeppelin. Compare and contrast these recordings to the music examples covered in the lesson. Draw students’ attention to the similarities and differences in the lyrics, blues form, music instrumentation, and performance style. This activity also allows for discussion on cover songs and how artists sometimes record and perform other artists’ music. You can preface it by mentioning the British invasion in the 1960s when British bands like the Rolling Stones were heavily influenced by American blues. British bands then brought the blues back to American audiences, but in a rock & roll music style.

6. Give students the following assignment:

In your journal, practice writing a blues lyric in the AAB verse format. Feel free to draw on the experience you wrote about during the brainstorm activity and the previous journal entry about your personal crossroads.

HOMWORK

Distribute the **Blues Songwriter Quotes Worksheet** and review the instructions:

Read the quotes from professional blues songwriters. Underline or highlight any key words that explain the blues. Using at least one of the key words you identified, create your own definition or explanation of the blues.

If you want a challenge, pick two to four of your favorite quotes, and look up a few songs by these blues songwriters. Read the lyrics and listen to the songs. Pay attention to what you like or dislike about the lyrics.

TEACHER TIP

If time allows, it may be helpful to do the first quote together, as an example. Monitor students who research additional blues songs, as they may come across mature material.

FOCUSED LYRIC WRITING DAY

After teaching this lesson, students are ready for focused lyric writing and revision (see lessons 8 and 9). Students will apply what they have learned in the blues lesson to writing traditional AAB blues lyrics using the **Blues Song Template** or a traditional song lyric using the **Songwriting Template**. Students should be encouraged to write lyrics based on their song form preference. Note: not every student should write a blues song.

TEACHER TIP

Remind students that although blues music often deals with personal struggles, it's also about expressing feelings, venting frustration, and having fun while doing it! For their blues song, students do not need to write about death or traumatic experiences—students should feel free to write about anything!



Willie Dixon (1915-1992) is considered the father of modern Chicago blues and served as a crucial link between the blues and rock & roll. In addition to writing more than 500 songs, he wrote, produced, arranged, and played bass on sessions for Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, and others.