

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, holler, work song, verse (review), 12-bar blues

PREPARATION

- Make copies of the **Blues Styles Across the United States Worksheet**, **“Everyday I Have the Blues” Worksheet**, and **“Hound Dog” Worksheet**.
- Locate audio or video versions of “Everyday I Have the Blues” performed by Memphis Slim and “Hound Dog” performed by Big Mama Thornton.

STANDARDS

English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text, analyze their development, summarize key points.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5

Analyze the structure of texts including how portions relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.5

Strengthen writing by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

Tennessee Social Studies

SSP.01, SSP.05, 3.04, 3.10, 5.14, 5.51

*See page 66 for standard descriptions.

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, disappointed, treated unfairly, or when things didn't go your way. 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 will use the worksheet to identify key words or draw a picture 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 “**Everyday I Have the Blues**” **Worksheet**, and listen to a recording of the song by Memphis Slim. Have students discuss the following questions with a partner, then share their answers with the class:
- What does the artist mean by “Everyday I Have the Blues?”
 - What is the subject and theme of the song?
 - What evidence from the song supports your position?
 - How is the form or parts of this song different than songs you listen to today?



John “Peter” Chatman (1915–1988), also known as Memphis Slim, recorded over 500 songs and is widely regarded as one of the world’s greatest blues pianists.



B.B. King (1925–2015) earned the nickname “The King of the Blues” and is considered one of the most influential blues artists in history.

3. Share with students:

When you “have the blues,” it means you feel sad, regretful, down on your 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 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 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. Review the rhyme pattern of “Everyday I Have the Blues” by completing step 3 on the “**Everyday I Have the Blues**” Worksheet.

5. Share the following information with students:

In the early days of the music industry, “covering,” or recording someone else’s song, became a standard practice with record labels. Artists would often record another artist’s song and release it to compete with the original, or they would record it in a different style of music (genre). The earliest version of “Everyday I Have the Blues” was written and performed by Aaron “Pinetop” Sparks and his brother Milton Sparks in 1939. The song became a blues standard when Memphis Slim reworked and recorded it under the title “Nobody Knows Me” in 1949. The song was later recorded by many blues artists, including the Count Basie Orchestra with Joe Williams (1955) and B.B. King (1955).

In the 1930s, many blues musicians adopted faster musical styles and beats. As the beat changed and the music gained more listeners, popular music performed by black artists was identified by Billboard magazine as “rhythm & blues,” or R&B, in 1949. Male R&B artists like Fats Domino and Little Richard dominated the charts in the early 1950s. One of the great female artists at the time was Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton. In 1953, she recorded the hit single “Hound Dog,” which topped the R&B charts. “Hound Dog” was later reworked and covered by Elvis Presley, who helped introduce listeners to a new style of music called rock & roll.

6. Distribute the **“Hound Dog” Worksheet** and listen to the version recorded by Big Mama Thornton.

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

- What are the differences and similarities between “Hound Dog” and “Everyday I Have the Blues”?
- What elements of traditional blues songs are found in “Hound Dog”?

7. Students will complete the **“Hound Dog” Worksheet**, by writing a blues lyric writing prompt.

TEACHER TIP

If time allows, listen to “Everyday I Have the Blues” by B.B. King (1955) and “Hound Dog” by Elvis Presley (1956). Compare and contrast their recordings to the examples that were covered in the lesson. Draw students’ attention to the similarities and differences in lyrics, music instrumentation, and performance style. This activity also allows for discussion on cover songs and how artists sometimes record and perform other artists’ music.

HOMEWORK

Distribute the **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.

TEACHER TIP

If time allows, it may be helpful to do the first quote together, as an example. Depending on the age and reading level of the students, you may want to assign only a portion of the quotes.

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, but 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 Mae “Big Mama” Thornton (1926–1984) was an American R&B singer who first recorded “Hound Dog” in 1952.



Elvis Presley (1935–1977), commonly referred to as “The King of Rock & Roll,” was one of the most significant cultural icons of the twentieth century and also recorded “Hound Dog.”

WORKSHEET

Blues Styles Across the United States

Name: _____ Date: _____

Write a key word or draw a picture that best describes each blues style discussed in class.

MISSISSIPPI DELTA BLUES**TEXAS BLUES****MEMPHIS BLUES****ST. LOUIS BLUES****CHICAGO BLUES****THE BLUES**

WORKSHEET

“Everyday I Have the Blues”

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Listen to “Everyday I Have the Blues.” Read along using the lyrics below.
2. Discuss the following questions with a partner, then share your answers with the class:
 - What does the artist mean by “Everyday I Have the Blues”?
 - What is the subject and theme of the song?
 - What evidence from the song supports your position?
 - How is the form or parts of this song different than songs you listen to today?
3. Identify the line pattern of each verse by placing the correct letter (A or B) in the blanks provided.

“Everyday I Have the Blues”*John “Peter” Chatman (Memphis Slim)***VERSE 1**

Everyday, everyday I have the blues _____

Everyday, everyday I have the blues _____

When you see me worried baby, because it’s you I hate to lose _____

VERSE 2

Oh, nobody loves me, nobody seems to care _____

Yes nobody loves me, nobody seems to care _____

Speaking of bad luck and trouble, well you know I had my share _____

VERSE 3

I’m gonna pack my suitcase, move on down the line _____

Yes, I’m gonna pack my suitcase, move on down the line _____

Where there ain’t nobody worried, and there ain’t nobody crying _____

WORKSHEET

“Hound Dog”

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Listen to “Hound Dog” by Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton. Read along using the lyrics below.

2. Discuss the following questions in small groups, then discuss as a class:

- What are the differences and similarities between “Hound Dog” and “Everyday I Have the Blues”?
- What elements of traditional blues songs are found in “Hound Dog”?

“Hound Dog”*Jerry Leiber / Mike Stoller*

You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, been snoopin' 'round my door
 You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, been snoopin' 'round my door
 You can wag your tail but I ain't gonna feed you no more

You told me you was high-class, but I could see through that
 Yes, you told me you was high-class, but I could see through that
 And daddy, I know you ain't no real cool cat

You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, been snoopin' 'round my door
 You just an old hound dog, been snoopin' 'round my door
 You can wag your tail but I ain't gonna feed you no more

You made me feel so blue, you made me weep and moan
 You made me feel so blue, well you made me weep and moan
 'Cause you ain't looking for a woman all you lookin' is for a home

You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, been snoopin' 'round my door
 You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, been snoopin' 'round my door
 You can wag your tail but I ain't gonna feed you no more

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!

Fill in the blanks to write your own blues lyrics using the prompt below.

A. I woke up this morning, and _____
 (State the problem/what happened)

A. I woke up this morning, and _____
 (Repeat the line above)

B. _____
 (State the solution or consequence, and rhyme with Line A)

WORKSHEET

Blues Song Template

Name: _____ Date: _____

Song title: _____

FIRST VERSE

A. _____

A. _____

B. _____

SECOND VERSE

A. _____

A. _____

B. _____

THIRD VERSE

A. _____

A. _____

B. _____

FOURTH VERSE (optional)

A. _____

A. _____

B. _____

WORKSHEET

Songwriter Quotes

Name: _____ Date: _____

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.

1. “The blues are the roots and the other musics are the fruits. It’s better keeping the roots alive, because it means better fruits from now on. The blues are the roots of all American music. As long as American music survives, so will the blues.” —**Willie Dixon**
2. “White or black. Rich or poor. If you ever had your heart broken, you have the right to sing the blues!” —**Big Mama Thornton**
3. “The blues has lasted because the blues is about reality. Life is blue. Life ends. Sorrow is certain. Pain can’t be avoided. The blues lays it out. But as you sing the blues, and as you listen to the blues, something happens to you. In the middle of songs that have some of the saddest stories ever told, you feel more alive than ever. That’s the strength of the blues. That’s the miracle—watching the blues chase the blues away.” —**Jimmy Scott**
4. “If I was a rich man, had all the money I needed, and suddenly all that money left, my feeling would be what they call the blues.” —**Henry “Mule” Townsend**
5. “We write according to the facts of life, everyday life. If you live and die here, you got a part of the blues in you. Something you have to get up to do, it don’t work, that’s what the blues is all about. I think a person will have the blues as long as he lives, but some people just don’t want to bring it out like we do.” —**Buddy Guy**
6. “... The original blues songs are deep, emotional melodies, bespeaking a troubled heart.” —**Bessie Smith**
7. “There are happy blues, sad blues, lonesome blues, red-hot blues, mad blues, and loving blues. Blues is a testimony to the fullness of life.” —**Corey Harris**
8. “There’s a lot of things that give you the blues, that give me the blues, that give any man the blues: It’s somewhere down the line that you have been hurt someplace. I mean, it’s no certain type of hurtin’, but you have been hurt someplace and you get to playin’ the blues that reaches. And so that’s why when I sing the blues, I sing it with the big feelin’. I really means it.” —**John Lee Hooker**
9. “The blues? It’s the mother of American music. That’s what it is—the source.” —**B.B. King**

MY DEFINITION OF THE BLUES