

5) Rhythm and Syllables

OBJECTIVES

Students will determine the number of syllables in lines of a song.

Students will demonstrate the ability to apply what they learn about rhythm and syllables to their own songs.

VOCABULARY

rhythm, syllables

PREPARATION

- Make copies of **Rhythm and Syllables Worksheet**.
- (optional) Locate audio or video versions of “You Are My Sunshine.” A number of artists have recorded this song, including Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Jimmie Davis, The Civil Wars, Mississippi John Hurt, and Willie Nelson.

STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone

FREE WRITE (5 minutes)

DISCUSS HOMEWORK (4 minutes)

Divide the class into pairs to share their journal entries. Students should identify the subject and theme of their partner’s journal entry, supporting their conclusions with textual evidence.

BRAINSTORM (1 minute)

Prompt: In your journal, spend one minute defining rhythm and naming places where you hear rhythm.

ACTIVITY (35 minutes)

1. Offer a reminder that songs are a combination of words and music. For lyrics to fit with music, songwriters need to learn about these terms and concepts:

- **Rhythm** is a pattern of sounds and silences.
- **Syllables** are the parts that a word is naturally divided into when it is pronounced.
- Songwriters pick words and phrases that fit within a consistent pattern of syllables. In short, they make their words fit a rhythm.



(L–R): Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Waylon Jennings, and Bill Walker. Ray Charles’ album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* was one of the top country music albums at the height of the civil rights movement in 1962.

2. To illustrate the importance of lyrics that match a rhythm, read or sing the following lyrics aloud. Then read the second set of lyrics with the added syllables. Students should be able to hear that something about the rhythm sounds wrong.

THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER *Francis Scott Key*

And the rocket's red glare
The bombs bursting in air
Gave proof through the night
That our flag was still there

And the rocket's red glare
The bombs exploding all over the place
Gave proof through the night
That our flag was still there

WE WILL ROCK YOU *Brian May (of Queen)*

We will, we will rock you
We will, we will rock you

We will, we will rock you
We will, we will beat you really bad

TEACHER TIP

Allow students to have fun with this activity. Let them add syllables to other lyrics so that they sound funny. Make the point that songwriters can squeeze in words, if need be, but that certain phrases fit better than others.

3. Distribute the **Rhythm and Syllables Worksheet**, but before assigning it, you may wish to play a recording of “You Are My Sunshine.” Students may enjoy listening to several versions. To reinforce the idea of rhythm, allow students to clap or tap their feet along to the beat.

Review the worksheet directions:

With a partner, count the number of syllables in each line of the songs. Then write down the number of syllables in each blank.

After students have completed the worksheet, point out that the first verse has the same number of syllables in every line as the second verse. (**Note:** Count the syllables as they would be pronounced when spoken. For example, “every,” is normally pronounced with two syllables: “evry.”)

Discuss the following:

- What happened when you added an extra word to one of the lines?
- Why would most lines of the verses need to have the same number of syllables?
(Answer: to fit the rhythm of the song.)

TEACHER TIP

Students might mistake the rhythm of lyrics for the rhythm or beat of a song, particularly when thinking of rap or hip-hop songs that are driven by intricate or intense beats. Students might focus on creating a beat rather than on creating lyrics that fit a beat. While a song's beat and its lyrics are interrelated, students should focus on the lyrics for this activity. Students particularly focused on the beat may find it helpful to create a simple beat in their heads first and then write lyrics to that beat. Stress that the lyrics are the important part of this activity.

Fitting lyrics uniformly into a certain rhythm is an integral part of songwriting. While students will not master this skill in just one lesson, it is essential that they understand:

- Each line of the verses should have about the same number of syllables.
- Each line of the chorus should have about the same number of syllables.
- It is acceptable to have up to three more syllables in a line if it happens in a pattern; for example, it can be considered a pattern if lines one and three have five syllables and lines two and four have eight syllables, or if the last line of every verse has two more syllables than the other lines of the verse.

4. If time allows, students should begin on their homework assignment in class. This will give you the opportunity to make sure students are on the right track.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTION OPPORTUNITY

Reaching out to teachers in other disciplines will help supplement student understanding of rhythm from a variety of viewpoints. The following subjects provide opportunities for connection:

- Music: meter, rhythm, phrasing
- Math: patterns
- Literature: meter, poetry

Note: Math and music teachers could collaborate in a lesson about the mathematical aspects of rhythm and time signatures in music.

HOMEWORK

Read the following prompt for students to complete as a journal entry:

In your journal write a part of a song that uses what you learned today about rhythm and syllables. This writing (and all the writing you do in this unit) could become part of your final song, or you could use it just as practice.

Your verse or chorus should have four lines and should follow one of these syllable patterns:

Option A

Line 1: 8 syllables
Line 2: 8 syllables
Line 3: 8 syllables
Line 4: 8 syllables

Option B

Line 1: 6 syllables
Line 2: 8 syllables
Line 3: 6 syllables
Line 4: 8 syllables

Option C

Line 1: 6 syllables
Line 2: 6 syllables
Line 3: 6 syllables
Line 4: 8 syllables

For extra practice, try writing one of each.

WORKSHEET

Rhythm and Syllables

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. With a partner, count the number of syllables in each line of the songs below, and then write that number in each blank.

You Are My Sunshine*Jimmie Davis***VERSE** The other night dear _____

As I lay sleeping _____

I dreamed I held you in my arms _____

But when I awoke, dear _____

I was mistaken _____

So I hung my head and I cried _____

VERSE I'll always love you _____

And make you happy _____

If you will only say the same _____

But if you leave me _____

To love another _____

You'll regret it all some day _____

2. Add a few words to one line of each verse. How does this affect the line's fit with the others?
