

5) Rhythm and Syllables

OBJECTIVES

Students will examine the connection between the number of syllables in a line of a song and the song's rhythm.

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

STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4

VOCABULARY

rhythm, syllables

PREPARATION

- Make copies of “**Bridges**” Lyric Sheet.
- Locate audio or video version of “Bridges” performed by Mickey Guyton.
- For advanced students, make copies of “Spotlight on Syllables” in the Appendix.

FREE WRITE (5 minutes)

DISCUSS HOMEWORK (4 minutes)

Divide the class into pairs to share their creative writing from Question 2 in the homework. 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 identifying 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.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTION OPPORTUNITY

This lesson is an excellent time to connect with other teachers to supplement student understanding of rhythm. The following subjects provide opportunities for connection:

Music: meter, rhythm, phrasing

Math: patterns, fractions

Literature: meter, poetry

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

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. Discuss the purpose of the rhythmic choices that songwriters make by using the following questions as a starting point:
- How does the rhythm of the songs in the previous exercise connect with the meaning of the lyrics?
 - How does the rhythm the writer chooses affect the mood of the song?
4. Distribute the “**Bridges**” **Lyric Sheet**.
- Ask students to count the syllables for the first verse and write the total at the end of each line. **Note:** Count the syllables as they would be pronounced when sung. For example, “every,” which has three syllables, would usually be sung with two syllables: “evry.”
 - Pair up students to count the syllables for the remainder of the song.
 - Ask students to compare the second and third verse to the first verse. Underline or highlight any words that slightly change the rhythm and add more syllables.
 - Initiate a class discussion on the pattern of syllables, pointing out that, while the pattern might not be identical from verse to verse, it is usually close to the same. Also point out that when there are more (or fewer) syllables, the rhythm also changes.

TEACHER TIP

Students might mistake the rhythm of lyrics with 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 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.

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:

- The verses and chorus should follow a pattern of syllables.
- It is acceptable for lines to have a varied number of syllables, as long as the lines can be easily spoken within a uniform beat. In other words, each line of the song should fall into a rhythm. A way to check this is to count syllables. A good guideline is to keep the syllable count in each line of a verse or chorus within approximately four syllables of the counts in the other lines of the verse or chorus.
- A word can be sustained for extra syllables, if need be; however, students should test it by reciting it out loud.
- A pause, or a “rest,” can count as a syllable; however, students should try reciting it to see how it sounds.

5. If there is extra time, allow groups who have finished the worksheet to rewrite words to the first verse of a popular song, maintaining the same rhythm.

For advanced work on rhythm, see “Spotlight on Syllables” in the Appendix.

HOMEWORK

Choose three songs to analyze. Locate the lyrics in an online search. You may choose songs that you like, songs that you dislike, or a combination of both. Then complete the following assignments:

1. In your journal, copy the first verse and the chorus of each song. Number the lines, and then count and write down the number of syllables in each line. For example:

SONG 1*Verse*

Line 1: 8 syllables

Line 2: 8

Line 3: 8

Line 4: 8

Chorus

Line 1: 4 syllables

Line 2: 4

SONG 2*Verse*

Line 1: 6 syllables

Line 2: 8

Line 3: 6

Line 4: 8

Line 5: 9

Line 6: 4

Chorus

Line 1: 8 syllables

Line 2: 8

Line 3: 8

Line 4: 8

SONG 3*Verse*

Line 1: 6 syllables

Line 2: 6

Line 3: 6

Line 4: 8

Line 5: 8

Chorus

Line 1: 6 syllables

Line 2: 6

Line 3: 6

Line 4: 8

2. From this exercise, what did you learn about the kinds of syllable patterns you like or dislike?
3. Write a verse and chorus that uses each of the three patterns you discovered. This writing (and all writing for this unit) could become part of your final song or you could just use it as practice.

LYRIC SHEET

Bridges*Victoria Banks / Emily Doty / Mickey Guyton / Karen Kosowski*

You're on your side and I'm on mine
 And in between this great divide
 There's fire in the streets
 People on their knees

Holding bibles and breaking glass
 Guns and armor, tears and gas
 If smoke is all we see
 How we supposed to breathe?

What if we took these stones we've been
 throwin'?

What if we laid 'em down?
 What if we forget all that we know and
 Make some common ground
 What if I reach for you, you reach for me, and
 close the distance?
 What if that space between changed if we
 started building
 Bridges, bridges, bridges

I know you're scared and so am I
 But that don't mean we shouldn't try
 It ain't just black or white
 It's down to wrong or right

What if we took these stones we've been
 throwin'?

What if we laid 'em down?
 What if we forget all that we know and
 Make some common ground
 What if I reach for you, you reach for me, and
 close the distance?
 What if that space between changed if we
 started building
 Bridges, bridges, bridges

We're gonna need more than prayers and
 wishes
 To build those bridges, bridges, bridges
 It's gonna take way more work to fix it
 Gotta build those bridges, bridges, bridges

We gotta take these stones we've been throwin'
 We gotta lay them down
 We gotta forget all that we know and
 Make some common ground
 What if I reach for you, you reach for me, and
 close the distance?
 What if that space between changed if we started
 building
 Bridges, bridges, bridges
 Bridges, bridges, bridges
 Gonna build those bridges, bridges, bridges
 Bridges, bridges, bridges



Texas native Mickey Guyton released her debut EP, Unbreakable, in 2015. Her single "Black Like Me" was nominated for Best Country Solo Performance at the 2021 Grammy Awards.