

1) What Is Songwriting?

OBJECTIVES

Students will explore their preconceptions about songwriting.

Students will gain knowledge about what it takes to write a song.

STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7

VOCABULARY

co-write

PREPARATION

- Make copies of **“Try a Song” Handout, Pre-Assessment rubric, and Songwriter Quotes Homework.**
- Make copies of **Pre-Unit Assessment Rubric** (in Supplemental Materials) to complete as you review each student’s work. This will be used, for comparison, at the end of the unit to assess each student’s progress.
- Reserve computers or computer lab for online research.

INTRODUCTION TO WORDS & MUSIC

Before starting the Words & Music lessons, share with students that throughout this unit they will be completing a variety of creative writing assignments. By the end of the unit, they will have generated lyrics that will be submitted to a professional songwriter, who will set some of the lyrics to music and perform a selection of them in a workshop and Q&A for the class.

SONGWRITING PRE-ASSESSMENT (10 minutes)

Students will start this lesson by completing the **“Try a Song” Handout**, a pre-assessment to measure what they already know about songwriting. Use the pre-assessment rubric from the Supplemental Materials to score your students’ work. Scores will be submitted to the Museum following the unit using the Online Teacher Evaluation at www.surveymonkey.com/r/WordsMusicTeacher. Subsequent lessons will begin with free writing, which will be formally introduced in the second lesson.

Share these instructions:

We are going to start by writing the words to a song. Before you write lyrics, answer the following questions in as much detail as you can: What makes a song? What are its parts? What do all songs have in common? Then spend five minutes writing lyrics. Don’t worry about whether you are doing it right or wrong. There are no wrong answers. Just do your best to get your ideas out onto paper. This should be your own song, not a song you know or have heard before.

TEACHER TIP

Students may feel overwhelmed with this activity. If they say they have no idea what to write or how to write lyrics, that is okay. This is just a warm-up activity; they are not expected to write a perfect song in ten minutes. As long as they get something down on paper, they should feel good about their work.

BRAINSTORM (2 minutes)

Prompt: In your journal, list as many of your favorite songs as you can in two minutes.

Give students 10–15 seconds to share one or two of their favorite songs with one another.

GROUP DISCUSSION (8 minutes)

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

- Who writes songs?
- Why do people write songs?
- Why do people like songs?
- What skills are needed to write a good song?
- What makes a good song?
- Are you familiar with any songwriters? If yes, share some of your favorites with your group.
- Have you ever tried to write a song?
- What makes songs the same as poems? What makes them different?

ACTIVITY (20 minutes)

1. Have students conduct online research on two or three of their favorite songs from their brainstorm lists.

For each song, they should research and record in their journals:

- Name(s) of the songwriter.
- Name of the performer.
- Two other songs by the songwriter, writing down the song title and performer of each song.

2. Allow students to share any surprising findings from their research. Draw out the following points:

- People who perform songs are not always the people who write them.
- Many songwriters write for a variety of artists and musical genres.
- People often **co-write** songs, which means that two or more people work together to write a song.

TEACHER TIP

Students may need guidance as they research the composers of their favorite songs. Some helpful tips for successful Internet searches include:

- Type the title of the song followed by the word “songwriter.” For example: “I Heard It Through the Grapevine songwriter.”
- Allmusic.com is an excellent source for finding song credits. Wikipedia is also acceptable for this informal research assignment.

WRAP-UP REFLECTION (5 minutes)

Ask students to answer the following questions in their journals:

What makes you excited about writing a song? What makes you nervous about writing a song?

HOMEWORK

Distribute the **Songwriter Quotes Homework** and review the instructions:

Read the following quotes from professional songwriters. In your journal, write one to two sentences on what each quote teaches you about what it takes to write a song. There are 14 quotes, so you should write at least 14 sentences. If you connect with a quote on a personal level, explain why in one of your sentences. After you have done this for each quote, synthesize what you have learned overall about songwriting into one to two paragraphs.

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

If time allows, it may be helpful to do the first quote together, as an example.

Source material for songwriting quotes can be found in the Appendix.



Brandy Clark included a dozen original songs on her acclaimed debut album, 12 Stories. The Band Perry, Miranda Lambert, and Kacey Musgraves have recorded her material, too.

WORKSHEET
Try a Song

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Answer the following questions in as much detail as you can: What makes a song? What are its parts?
What do all songs have in common?

PRE-ASSESSMENT

2. Try to write your own song in the next five to ten minutes. Don't worry about whether you do it right or wrong.
This should be your own song, not a song you know or have heard before.

SONG TITLE: _____

VERSE

CHORUS

VERSE

HOMEWORK

Songwriter Quotes

Name: _____ Date: _____

Read the following quotes from professional songwriters. In your journal, write one to two sentences about what each quote teaches you about songwriting. If you connect with a quote on a personal level, write a sentence to explain why.

After you have responded to all 14 quotes, synthesize the main points you have learned into one to two paragraphs.

1. “First of all, you have to trust yourself ... The other thing that you have to do—and you have to really be able to embrace it and accept it and really welcome it into your life with open arms—is failure. Be sure to welcome failure. Always say, ‘You’re OK with me, failure.’ Because then you have no fear.” —**Neil Young**

2. “I think the best songs are the most truthful and honest songs. And it's because it's stuff you can't actually say yourself.” —**Ed Sheeran**

3. “My advice to [songwriters]: I would recommend that they follow through if they have an idea. Follow through with it. Don’t quit halfway through like a baby. Go through the whole shebang and carry it through instead of quitting halfway.” —**Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys**

4. “ ‘You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me’ was inspired by Sam Cooke. I loved him. He had a song out at the time called ‘Bring It on Home to Me.’ It was a bluesy record, and I wanted to write something like that ... Imitation in songwriting is OK; it’s something I think every writer does.” —**Smokey Robinson**

5. “A pocket notebook is one of my main techniques. If I’m sitting on a plane or train, with nothing to do, I’ll leaf through it and see what’s there. I’ll read a headline in the newspaper and I’ll say, ‘That really hit the nail on the head’ ... If I’m lucky, I’ll say, ‘By gosh, that will make a good refrain for a song!’ ” —**Pete Seeger**

6. “I got in my head that my goal, as a songwriter, was to write songs for people who didn’t write songs—you know, somebody working at a bank or checking out groceries; the song that that woman, in particular, would write if she were to write a song.” —**Brandy Clark**

7. “Sometimes I’ll go out and say, ‘Whatever else I do today, I’m going to write down all the lines that seem interesting to me ...’ I’ll try to stay committed to that for a certain period of time. Because most of the time you don’t do that. The stuff that goes by, you think of and then say, ‘OK, I thought about it. Big deal. Who cares?’ Or you’ll hear something amusing and then forget that, too. Sometimes, I’ll make an effort to just go out and get that stuff and see if it means anything. And sometimes it does.” —**Bob Dylan**

8. “As a young songwriter, I put a lot of pressure on myself. I’d write a line and then aggressively backspace because I was like, ‘This isn’t a representation of you!’ or ‘This is weird!’ I felt like there wasn’t room for me to write a bad song or write something that didn’t necessarily fit with my vibe or whatever. I think if I were to go back I would be much easier on myself. Write all kinds of stuff, man ... ’cause I think that’s the only way you’re gonna learn about yourself as a writer.” —**Lorde**

9. “The rule is: Write bad songs, but write ’em. If you start writing bad songs, you start writing better songs, and then you start getting really good.” —**John Mayer**

10. “Some people don’t realize that [a song] needs to be edited. They think it’s good the way it is ... Some people think they’re done with a song when I think they should go back and revise it. Even sometimes I’ll think a song’s done, but I have friends I work with who will tell me to revise.” —**John Legend**

11. “When we [the Beatles] got to America, the first question was, ‘Who does the words? Who does the music?’ ... I said, I don’t know, [John Lennon] does them some days; I do them the other day. It depends really ... They said, ‘What’s your formula for hits?’ We said, ‘We hope we never find one, because it would get very boring.’” —**Paul McCartney**

12. “A good portion of being available to be a writer is that emotionally you keep yourself open as a human being, you keep yourself healthy, you get enough rest, you get enough good food. Because without that you won’t have enough energy, and writing takes an enormous amount of energy.” —**Janis Ian**

13. “I think anyone could do [songwriting]. I think a lot of people try to write songs that are a little out of reach. And they should just sit down and write what they know. And what they see.” —**Loretta Lynn**

14. “Songwriters, both lyricists and melody writers, are often plagued with the thing most often known as writer’s block ... I have found that the key to not being blocked is to not worry about it. Ever ... Trust that it will be there. If it ever was once and you’ve ever done it once, it will be back. It always comes back and the only thing that is a problem is when you get in your way worrying about it.” —**Carole King**

Extra practice: Pick two to four of your favorite quotes, and look up a few songs by these songwriters. Read the lyrics and listen to the songs, if you have access to them. Pay attention to what you like or dislike about the lyrics.