

Discovering Rhythm, Improv, Jazz, and Poetry

How does the musicality of words apply to poetry?

Grades 9-12 Lesson: Discovering Rhythm, Improv, Jazz, and Poetry

Grade Band: 9-12

Arts Subject: Music, Literary Arts

Other Subject: English & Literature

SUMMARY

In this 9-12 lesson, students will analyze the sound, rhythm, and improvisation of jazz music. They will explore the works of Yusef Komunyakaa, Sonia Sanchez, and Langston Hughes. Students apply musicality and sound elements to original poems.

PREPARATION

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Discuss and identify literary terms including: *rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, form, free verse, stream of consciousness, lyricism, and imagery*.
- Apply an in-depth understanding of jazz characteristics such as improvisation, lyricism, rhythm, and assonance to their own creative work.
- Analyze meaning and craft of poetry by Yusef Komunyakaa, Sonia Sanchez, and Langston Hughes.
- Identify common characteristics of jazz music.
- Discuss the commonalities between jazz music and poetry.

Standards Alignment

National Core Arts Standards

[MU:Re7.2.E.1a](#) Explain how the analysis of passages and understanding the way the elements of music are manipulated inform the response to music.

[MU:Cn10.0.E.1a](#) Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

[MU:Cn11.0.E.1a](#) Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

[MU:Re7.2.C.1a](#) Analyze aurally the elements of music (including form) of musical works, relating them to style, mood, and context, and describe how the analysis provides models for personal growth as composer, performer, and/or listener.

Common Core State Standards

[ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3](#) Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

[ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4](#) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.



[ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5](#) Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

[ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3](#) Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4](#) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

[ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.5](#) Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

Recommended Student Materials

Editable Documents: *Before sharing these resources with students, you must first save them to your Google account by opening them, and selecting “Make a copy” from the File menu.*

Check out [Sharing Tips](#) or [Instructional Benefits](#) when implementing Google Docs and Google Slides with students.

- [Exquisite Corpse](#)
- [Slide: Exquisite Corpse Examples & Instructions](#)
- [“Schoolboys with Dog, Winter”](#)
- [Rubric: Free Verse Poetry](#)

Videos

- [Immanuel Wilkins Quartet](#)
- [East River Jazz Collective](#)
- [The Philadelphia Jazz Orchestra](#)
- [Betty Carter’s Jazz Ahead](#)

Digital or Print Text

- [The Air of the Water](#)
- [“Tenebrae”](#)

Websites

- [The Met, Surrealism](#)
- [“Dream Boogie”](#)
- [“Heritage”](#)

Teacher Background

Teachers should familiarize themselves with poets Yusef Komunyakaa, Sonia Sanchez, and Langston Hughes. Review the history and process for the game [Exquisite Corpse](#).

Book Recommendations

Feinstein, S. and Komunyakaa, Y. *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*. Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Komunyakaa, Y. *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries*. Edited by Radiclan. Clytus. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003.

Student Prerequisites

Students should be familiar with the artistic/literary genres of jazz and poetry.

Accessibility Notes

Modify handouts and give preferential seating for visual presentations. Allow extra time to complete the writing assignments.

INSTRUCTION

Engage

1. Tell students they will be learning about common devices used by poets. Poets carefully consider the sound of the words on the page—the musicality of the poem. Tell students they will listen and analyze music to help them develop their listening, writing, and critical poetry reading skills. They will analyze poems that are influenced by jazz music, which are often great examples of innovative explorations of sound, rhythm, and improvisation.

2. Warm-up students to the concept of “improvisation.” Generally, improvisation refers to creating and/or performing an artistic piece without preparation. Jazz musicians improvise by creating fresh melodies that coincide with the chord structure of a tune. They may already have an idea of how the song will go, but the specific melodies would be created on the fly (and often on stage!). Writers may improvise by writing whatever comes to mind in a “stream of consciousness” manner (a transcription of a writer’s thought process), comprised of all the strange connections the mind makes without forethought.

3. Prepare for a quick round of [Exquisite Corpse](#), a game developed by Surrealist artists. Divide students into groups no smaller than three and no larger than eight. Pass out a blank sheet of paper to each student. For more on Surrealism, see [The Met. Surrealism](#).

4. Explain the instructions for Exquisite Corpse. Tell students they will be drawing a body, but each person will only draw a portion of the body. Encourage students to be creative. For example, there are no rules stating that the body should stick to human form. See the [Slide: Exquisite Corpse Examples & Instructions](#) for specific details. When complete, the paper can be opened to see how the class “improvised” to create interesting and imaginative art.

Build

1. Lead students in a “Poetry Jam Session,” a collaborative writing activity that will further illuminate the concept of improvisation. Tell students that they will be playing a type of “stream of consciousness” game. Immediately after they read a line that contains a vivid image, they should write down the first line that comes to mind. This line should contain a vivid image that was triggered by the image contained in the previous line. Encourage students to be

as wild or surreal as they want in writing their line. Get the ball rolling by revealing a line you've already written on the board, such as *"swaying like the branches of a weeping willow"* or *"kangaroo in a party hat"* or any other image that would conjure up a specific visual in students' minds. Students should immediately write their line. When finished, they should pass the paper to a neighbor. That student should write a line inspired by the previous student's image, then fold the paper so that the previous line cannot be seen. Tell students to pass the paper again and continue with the preceding steps until at least eight lines have been written.

2. Ask students to share the collaborative poems they created. Discuss how the poems leap from image to image in imaginative yet correlative ways. *Ask students: What can you infer about what one student may have been thinking in order to come up with their line? What are the possible relationships between images written by two different people?*

3. Discuss how in jazz, musicians may riff off of each other's melody when improvising solos. Play a clip of [Immanuel Wilkins Quartet](#) on Millennium Stage. Listen to how the musicians are able to expand and complicate a melody or theme by listening to another member of a group play a solo and responding to them through their own solo.

4. Explain to students that some poets write in an improvised fashion (or in a "stream of consciousness" way), illuminating the way a poet responds to different objects, events, people, or ideas and how they find connections between them. Show examples from the work of French Surrealist writer Andre Breton's [The Air of the Water](#), a cycle of love poems. Discuss how this technique illuminates the way many things in the world are interconnected. We learn from our experiences and can apply what we've learned to different situations, a phenomenon that can lead writers to profound metaphors.

5. Have students read the poem "[Tenebrae](#)" by Yusef Komunyakaa or "[Schoolboys with Dog, Winter](#)" by William Matthews. While Matthews's poem does not carry the same jazz imagery as "Tenebrae," you can discuss the way Matthews moves from image to image, using the repetition of *"It's dark"* and *"It's good"* to carry the reader through the poem.

6. Ask students to read the first stanza of "Tenebrae" to themselves, then read it aloud for the class. Begin with a close reading of the first sentence *"You try to beat loneliness/ out of a drum,/ but cries only spring/ from your mouth."* Note how the word *"beat"* has two meanings: the literal beating of a drum and the attempt (and failure) to overcome loneliness. Discuss the possible connections between the first, second, and third sentences in the poem. *What does loneliness have to do with the image of the dancers "weaving a path of songs to bring you back"? Back to what?*

7. Tell students that Komunyakaa wrote "Tenebrae" as a tribute to jazz musician and educator, William Roberts. Roberts was a talented and respected musician who committed suicide. Note the attempt at healing in the poem. Discuss how in the third and fifth sentences,

there are attempts at escape through song and music. However, the fourth sentence, *“sometimes/ our hands hang like weights/ anchoring us inside/ ourselves,”* reflects loneliness.

8. Discuss the effect of each stanza beginning with the line “You try to beat loneliness/ out of a drum.” How is this repetition similar to the act of drumming itself? Komunyakaa referred to these lines as the “tonal muscle” of the poem and “the refrain that tied everything down.” Discuss how in music we are used to hearing repeated refrains or melodies. Often the main melody in jazz acts as a recurring theme in a piece of music, and the other sections of a piece work to “riff” off of, expand on, or veer away from the main melody. But the main melody usually comes back.

9. Assign the rest of “Tenebrae” to students. Ask them to closely read the rest of the poem, looking for connections between images within a stanza, and be prepared to share their findings.

Apply

1. After the class finishes their discussion of “Tenebrae,” provide students with an overview of jazz characteristics. Point out that they have already discussed one common characteristic of jazz music—improvisation. Other important characteristics are syncopated meter, lyricism (in art, a quality expressive of feeling or emotion), and a sense of movement. Also, jazz instrumentation is often comprised of the following: drums playing rhythm; piano, brass instruments, and/or woodwinds playing melody; string bass or bass guitar playing low notes providing harmony (though also sometimes playing the melody).

2. Play a selection of your favorite jazz music for the class or explore jazz musicians performing on the Kennedy Center’s Millennium Stage, [East River Jazz Collective](#), [The Philadelphia Jazz Orchestra](#), and [Betty Carter’s Jazz Ahead](#). Explain that syncopation is a type of rhythm characterized by the shifting of accents (or stress) from what are normally strong beats to weak beats. In jazz, beats 2 and 4 are most often accented (1 - 2 - 3 - 4) whereas in European classical music, for example, the accent is on beats 1 and 3 (1 - 2 - 3 - 4). Tap out the rhythm of the jazz music being played for students, tapping harder when the beat is accented. To show contrast, play a selection of classical music.

3. For five minutes, play a favorite jazz selection again. Tell students to listen to the sounds they hear and “free write” whatever comes to mind based on the sounds. Tell them it’s okay to make up their own words if appropriate and that their writing doesn’t have to make “logical” sense. Just write. *Ask students: Is it possible to mimic the rhythm and sounds of jazz in poetry?* If students are challenged to think of examples, *ask: How can you translate the sound of cymbals from music to words?* It may look like this: “tiss tiss tiss.” If rhythm is added, the words could be “tiss-tiss-tiss-pop tiss-tiss-tiss-pop.” Compare this example to the words “his gin fizz sopped with this big mop.” Note how the words that communicate a drink that was spilled and

cleaned up have a similar rhythm as the nonsense words, *“tiss-tiss-tiss-pop.”* Set student work aside for the time being.

4. Pass out Sonia Sanchez’s “Tapping” (available in The Jazz Poetry Anthology) and discuss which characteristics of jazz are evident in Sanchez’s poem. This activity can also be done using Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Slam, Dunk, & Hook.” Ask students to point out which parts of the poem they believe are the most lyrical or carry the most emotional weight.

5. Point out to students that there is a repetition of the line beginning with “when i” that acts as a kind of refrain that is similar to the repeated refrain of “you try to beat loneliness out of a drum” in “Tenebrae.” Not only is Sanchez including music vocabulary in the poem (i.e., “chromatic,” “lyrics,” “horn,” etc.), but also has attempted to mimic the sound of jazz through language.

Ask students for examples, such as *“when I cross kick/scissor locomotive.”* Point out that the musical sounds are accomplished by subtle rhyme and repetition. The poet has repeated the hard “k” sound in “cross kick” and then incorporates assonance (repetition of similar vowel sounds) in “kick/scissor.” Also explain that when single syllable words that end in consonants are used in a string (“when i dance my spine in a slouch”), there is the effect of a punchy rhythm.

6. Pass out “[Dream Boogie](#)” by Langston Hughes. Allow students time to synthesize the poem. Discuss the characteristics of jazz and lyricism of the poem, particularly pointing out that underneath the “happy beat,” there is an underlying sadness. Discuss how this theme is echoed in Komunyakaa’s “Tenebrae.”

7. Compare the rhythm in “[Dream Boogie](#)” to Countee Cullen’s “[Heritage.](#)” Discuss the difference between free verse and poetic forms such as the sonnet. Poetic forms may limit the writer in terms of which words she may choose because the writer is trying to work within a predefined form. In some cases, the writer chooses a word for a line that does not successfully communicate an idea or feeling as another word in order to meet certain rhyme or rhythm criteria.

8. Explain that both Hughes and Cullen were Harlem Renaissance writers. While Cullen worked within traditional poetic structures such as the 14-line sonnet, Hughes incorporated jazz and blues rhythms into his work, wanting to embrace his African American heritage in ways avoided by many of his peers who wanted to gain success in the white literary world.

Reflect

1. Assess students’ knowledge with an original poem that incorporates stylistic elements found in the works of Hughes, Sanchez, and Komunyakaa. Review the [Rubric: Free Verse Poetry](#) with students. The poem should be written in free verse and reflect a sense of

movement from the beginning to the end. Students can refer to the free verse writing exercise conducted earlier in the lesson and use excerpts from that piece if they choose. It should employ at least three of the following: *improvisational leaps in image, paying careful attention to the sound of words (including assonance, alliteration, and rhyme), lyricism, a line or the beginning of a line that acts as a refrain.*

2. Spend the next class period workshopping and discussing student work. Provide constructive feedback to students and allow time for peer editing.

3. Have students read their completed poems aloud in a poetry reading. Engage students in a discussion about the elements found in the poems.

Credits

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