

## **Dissecting Lyrics**

*Lisa Katzer*

*Samuel H Daroff Elementary School*

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### **Overview**

A generated thought has no social impact unless put into some medium of behavior; spoken language has social impact whenever someone else is present (Katz, 5).

This curriculum unit is a two week program of “Dissecting Lyrics” for fourth or fifth grade students. I will utilize rap music to teach Pennsylvania state standards. The main focus is to develop student vocabulary and listening skills, as well as learning and understanding figurative language. We will also concentrate on finding meaning and awareness of the world, socially, culturally, and politically. I believe this is possible with rap lyrics. It is my hope, and has always been a goal, to connect with my students and make their learning more meaningful.

From my eight years of experience in urban schools, I have found that the best way to manage and get the attention of my class is to create a loving, nurturing, and fun environment. Making these interpersonal connections with the students is essential to teaching and students’ learning. For the students that I have a hard time reaching I believe music may bridge the gap.

Source materials will include lyrics from compact disc jackets, books, and from the internet. As a final project students will write poetry and lyrics for songs. We will mark the end of our two week exploration with a celebration in which students will display, and perform, the work that reflects our two weeks immersed in Hip-Hop.

### **Rationale**

My therapy is music (Jay-Z).

It is my intention to use mainly Will Smith's music in my Hip-Hop Curriculum Unit. I have always admired Will Smith's commitment to making music for kids that is appropriate and fun. I feel it necessary to "keep it clean" for the well-being of my students. They need to know that it is unnecessary to use inappropriate and demeaning language to make a point and create music.

I currently teach fourth grade in West Philadelphia at a K-8 school that feeds into Overbrook High School. The fact that Will Smith is originally from West Philadelphia, and more specifically, is an Overbrook High School alumnus, also gives my students another personal connection which leads to more meaning and authenticity. Ideally Will Smith will visit our school to witness our progress. In order to make this possible I will have to use my friend and family connections. I will contact a cousin who could possibly get me in touch with Will Smith's manager or personal relation representative. If that channel turns up cold I will contact a family friend who is involved with the Greater Philadelphia Film Office. Other possible avenues of communication could be through radio stations, local DJs, and other Philadelphia music executives. If for some reason Will Smith is unable to attend, the class will instead write letters to Mr. Smith explaining our studies and sharing their progress (their poetry, lyrics, essays). It is possible that through a correspondence he may be persuaded to drop in to meet us when he is visiting Philadelphia.

I have been teaching in the Philadelphia school district for several years and one of the most common discussions is about our state test scores and student achievement. One major deficit is student vocabulary. Students often answer questions on the state tests incorrectly because of one or more unknown words. It is my hope that reading, writing, and listening to rap music will broaden student vocabulary. Context clues will play an important part of their growing vocabulary.

Our study of rap music and hip-hop culture will focus on the figurative language artists use. These artists do not just write simple and complex sentences that rhyme, they use the English language and its many intricate parts to create reflective songs. They use figurative language to compare ideas and thoughts. They use puns and alliteration to play with words. My students will learn the differences between simile, metaphor, idiom, hyperbole and personification and will be able to use them all. We will identify them in others' music and write them into our own.

Listening is another skill that I intend to develop in my unit. According to one popular saying, "You may hear me but it does not mean you are listening to me." "You hear with your ears and listen with your heart." When I tell my students that listening and hearing are two completely different things they first think I have gone mad but at some point come to understand what I have in mind. I want to begin my unit by playing music so that students may understand the difference between just hearing and actually listening.

It seems apparent that a lot of my students do not really understand the narratives of the artists. They like the beat, they know the songs are popular, but do they really

know what is being said? The amazing thing about rap and hip-hop are the stories being told and the connections being made, socially, culturally, and politically. For example in the song *Summertime* by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, a line spits, “back in Philly we be out in the park, a place called the Plateau is where everybody goes.” In this line they mention a popular hang out that most Philadelphians know. Hip-Hop artists are extremely bright and bring a wide range of references into their music. I know this because of how they can connect popular culture with amazing beats and translate it into huge hits. In learning the meaning of their favorite songs, my students will become better thinkers and investigators of language.

My unit will also contain lessons of history and current events. In so many songs the artists speak about serious, and sometimes not so serious, events in history or situations in the current media. For example Jay-Z and Kanye West mention President Bush, the Kennedys, Britney Spears, and other popular figures of the news and headlines, in their lyrics. I want my students to study and share current events or important times in history that have meaning to them. From their study of historical and current events they will build a strong foundation of knowledge of the world in which they live. They will then use this new knowledge to write their own lyrics and poetry.

## Background

### *Willard Christopher Smith Jr. (1968-present)*

Will Smith is originally from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and grew up in a middle class West Philadelphia neighborhood fifty percent populated by Orthodox Jews. He experienced diverse social circles, attending schools that were mostly white while having mostly black playmates. He was liked by everyone and was a natural charmer which led to his first nickname, *Prince*, which eventually became *Fresh Prince* because at the time *fresh* was a popular word for cool (Berenson 22). Will Smith’s early influences were Eddie Murphy and Grandmaster Flash, both of whom influenced his smooth semi-comic style at the age of 12. At age 16 Will met Jeff Townes, a.k.a. *DJ Jazzy Jeff*. The story of how they met varies depending on who you hear it from or where you read it, but one thing that remains is their meeting was life-changing for both young men (Berenson 17). Jeff Townes had been in the music business since he was 10, mixing and scratching in his family’s Southwest Philadelphia home. Together they formed their group in 1985 and in 1986 they had their first hit, *Girls Ain’t Nothing But Trouble*, from their debut album, *Rock the House*. They continued on to further success together until 1993. After their split Will continued to make music, star in a television sit-com *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and in many blockbuster movies (*Independence Day*, *Men in Black*, *Ali*, *I Robot*, *I am Legend*). DJ Jazzy Jeff continued to produce Will’s solo albums.

### *Figurative Language*

Similes are much easier for students to identify and create than other forms of figurative language, which is why the study of figurative language will start here. A simile is a comparison of two things, one abstract and the other concrete, and is indicated by *like* or

as. Some examples; “Slow as molasses” “Pretty as a picture” “Jump like a rabbit” and “Run like the wind”. Idioms are groups of words with intended meaning that are tricky to decipher, for example “kicked the bucket”, “spilled the beans”, and “out in left field”. Metaphors are strong comparisons that are literally false and therefore must have some other (figurative) meaning. For example, “My car is a lemon.” Because idioms and metaphors have to be interpreted figuratively and not literally, many students have a hard time learning them. (Tompkins 2002 204) Hyperbole and personification are two other figures of speech. A hyperbole is an intentional exaggeration (“big as a house”) while personification regards things and ideas to human behaviors (“the whisper of the wind”). In the song *Nightmare on My Street*, for example, we have “He’s burnt up like a weenie”, “It was burning in my room like an oven”, “I was bugging”, and “Fred got mad and his head started steaming.”

### *Listening*

Listening has long been a neglected part of language arts instruction (Tompkins 2002 279). Researchers have found that we listen approximately 50% of the time, and talk, read, and write the other fifty percent (280). In order to listen you must also pay attention and assign meaning. Students listen differently depending on the purpose, just as readers and writers read and write differently depending on their purpose (281). There are four types of listening: discriminative (to distinguish sound), aesthetic (for enjoyment), efferent (to understand), and critical (to evaluate) (282). I believe that my students are fairly good at aesthetically listening to music; it is in the other three areas that I am not so confident of their skills. Discriminative listening means that the listener can distinguish among sounds, notice rhyming words, recognize alliterations, puns and figures of speech (282). An efferent listener takes care to understand the message while a critical listener evaluates the message. To be an efferent listener one must be able to summarize the main ideas (283). A critical listener must also find the major points but they are able to judge the message to make their own opinion (284). In the end all students will be well rounded listeners who take pleasure in, are on familiar terms with, comprehend, and assess music.

### *Vocabulary*

Most children start school knowing about 5,000 words and continue to learn 3,000 words per year (Tompkins 2002 209). All children need constant experiences with language to become more knowledgeable about the meaning of words, literally and figuratively. Understanding vocabulary is about choosing the correct word to express the intended meaning. Decoding or identifying words is just part of learning vocabulary: its main focus is meaning. It is essential that students understand the meaning of words in order to listen, read, write, and express themselves. Students will not be able to understand the messages intended by the artists unless they know vocabulary.

### *Making Meaning*

As educators we often ask ourselves, “How can we motivate our students to be more involved and interested in their education?” I believe finding meaning is the solution.

When teachers use authentic, meaningful text (of which rap lyrics might be an example) students are more apt to pay attention and involve themselves in their learning. The skills that will help to develop making meaning are summarizing, identifying details, comparing and contrasting, and using context clues (Tompkins 1997 142). Summarizing and identifying details go hand in hand. The focus is to find important ideas and be able to write or present the information in a condensed essay. When students compare and contrast they are better able to categorize ideas. This is important because they can then explain what ideas are and what they are not. Context clues are an essential skill that every good reader needs no matter their age. It is a skill that requires constant attention and practice. These skills are required by the Philadelphia Core Curriculum and will be reinforced through this curriculum unit.

### **Objectives**

In this unit students will listen to music to take pleasure in, be on familiar terms with, comprehend, and assess music. Students will become well rounded listeners who understand purpose for listening and gain the ability to find important details from just listening.

Students will understand the narratives and learn the meaning of their favorite songs. They will build a strong foundation of knowledge of the world in which they live by studying and sharing current events or important times in history. Students will communicate their ideas and understand the ideas of others.

The class will use idea charts to summarize, find meaning, make connections, and understand the artists' simple and complex ideas. From which they will write their own lyrics and poetry from gathered ideas and created idea charts. In the end the students will present what they have learned in the form of poetry and/or music.

The students will also identify figurative language in music and learn the differences between simile, metaphor, idiom, hyperbole and personification and be able to use them in their writing. They will identify figures of speech throughout the Literacy curriculum and strengthen their knowledge of the English language.

Students will read, write, and listen to rap music to broaden student vocabulary and create a Hip Hop word wall. The word wall will be a tool for the entire class to refer to when they are reading, writing, and listening. The connections made by studying rap music will transcend each students' belief that learning can be fun.

### **Strategies**

This curriculum unit will begin like any other lesson or unit, tapping into prior knowledge. The teacher will give a brief introduction of the unit and ask the students what they know about the topic. Students will brainstorm and the whole class will share their ideas as the teacher records them on a chart. There will be a specific place in the classroom where all work, charts, and collected ideas will be displayed and kept.

The beginning lessons will concentrate on building listening skills. The class will listen to music and be introduced to the four types of listening. They will identify the type of listening they are doing and will continue to do so throughout the two week unit. As music plays students will write one or more details that they hear. After the song has played we will gather their ideas and create an idea chart. Later on we will use these

charts to summarize, find meaning, make connections, and understand the artists' simple and complex ideas.

Next we will concentrate on vocabulary. The teacher will have words prepared to study and can also collect unknown words for the students to find. The teacher will present mini-lessons with regards to root words and affixes, antonyms and synonyms, multiple meaning words and ultimately figurative language. The class will create a Hip-Hop word wall. Each day while immersed in Hip-Hop small groups will identify an unknown word, use strategies to define the word, and then present and add it to the Word Wall.

The main concentration of this unit will be on figurative language. There will be five individual lessons on each figure of speech where the students will listen, identify, and use simile, metaphor, idiom, hyperbole and personification. At this point the students will start to collect their ideas in a Hip-Hop folder that will eventually supply the source material for their poems and/or lyrics.

By this point the unit will be coming to an end and the last two lessons will focus on the meaning of the songs. There will be history mini-lessons and homework assignments to note and share current events. In their portfolio of collected ideas and work the students will write their own poetry and lyrics during the final two days of this curriculum unit. In the end each student will contribute one poem, essay or song that will be published in a collective Hip-Hop book.

## **Classroom Activities**

### Lesson 1

#### Four Types of Listening

#### Time

One – 60 minute period; each day, for four days-10 minutes.

#### *Objectives*

To learn different types of listening

To use and identify each type of listening

#### *Standards*

##### *1.6 Speaking and Listening*

- A. Listen to others.
- B. Listen to a selection of literature (fiction or non-fiction).
- D. Contribute to discussions.
- E. Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.
- F. Use media for learning purposes.

#### *Materials*

CD player, compact discs of *DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince*, compact disc of our Literacy program, Grateful Dead CD, chart paper, markers, paper, pencils, portfolios.

### *Introduction*

The teacher will have prepared chart paper with the four different types of listening. She/he will introduce and have the students write the information to put into their Hip-Hop portfolio. The teacher will play four different pieces of their choosing on the compact discs from his/her materials and the students will identify which type of listening they are doing for each. A few songs to choose from Will Smith's collection could be; *Miami*, *Nightmare on My Street*, *Parents Just Don't Understand*, or *Summertime*.

- What do you hear in each piece?
- Can you listen in more than one way for any piece?
- Where and when do you listen outside of school? What kinds of listening are you doing in these situations?

### *Developmental Activities*

- 1) Play different pieces of music; have the students work in groups of four and decide what kind of listening they are doing. They should be able to explain which kind of listening they are doing and provide evidence of it. It may also help, or make it more interesting, if each group has the four different types of listening on poster paper so they can hold them up when the pieces are played. Each of the four students should "be" one type of listening. The teacher can monitor who is involved and it will also motivate students to participate.
- 2) Use this activity as a warm-up throughout the two week curriculum unit to review, revisit and create concrete understanding of listening. Each day the students should "be" a different type of listening. This will also help get the students' attention to begin other lessons.

### *Closure*

"Become an Expert"

After playing and listening to eight to ten different pieces the listeners will regroup to explain themselves and become an expert on their particular type of listening. All of the "discriminative", "aesthetic", "efferent" and "critical" listeners will form groups to report out. They will explain, give examples, and connect to one other type of listening.

### *Differentiated Instruction*

Students who are not independent workers will have the support of their two small groups. When developing an understanding and becoming an expert the group members will provide the assistance they need.

### *Assessment*

From the start of the lesson until the end the teacher will monitor and keep running records of who is involved and participating. This lesson should not be given heavy weight in grading the students. The teacher needs to be aware of who is working and who is not, as well as taking note of who still needs help understanding the concepts. The more experience the teacher provides throughout the two weeks, the better the students will grasp the different types of listening.

## Lesson 2 Building Our Hip-Hop Vocabulary

### *Time*

One 30 minute period: 10-15 minutes each day thereafter

### *Objectives*

To build student made Hip-Hop Word Wall  
To expand student knowledge of vocabulary

### *Standards*

#### 1.1 *Learning to Read Independently*

C. Apply the knowledge of phonics, syllabication, word analysis (prefixes, suffixes, root words), context clues, and dictionary use to decode and understand new words during reading.

E. Identify and correctly use words (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, homophones, homographs, words with roots, suffixes, prefixes, and categories of words) to acquire a reading vocabulary. Use a dictionary and thesaurus.

F. Determine meanings of unknown words from knowledge of vocabulary and context clues in various subject areas.

### *Materials*

3x5 cards, markers, tape, paper, pencils, portfolios.

### *Introduction*

Post four words on chart paper (monotony, transformed, subtle, and reminisce) from the song *Summertime* by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince. Ask students if there are any prefixes, suffixes or root words they recognize in any of the four words posted. If the students can not come to any conclusion in regards to roots and affixes ask the class to find context clues within the lyrics that could help define the unknown words. Record responses on the chart paper in a four column chart. The first column is for the vocabulary word, the second is for any affixes and root words, the third column is for the context clues, and the last column will be where the definition will be posted.

### *Developmental Activities*



- 1) Provide the students each with the lyrics to *Summertime* by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince. Ask the students to find 3-5 words they do not know, recognize, or have never seen before. Instruct the students to add them to their chart and identify roots, affixes, and context clues. They can work individually, in pairs, or small groups.
- 2) Guide the students to create definitions from the information they have gathered in their chart. Explain that there is no wrong answer but that some answers can be better than others.

### *Closure*

Once the students have identified and tried to define their words have each group share with the entire class. Provide feedback to each reporter and add any new words to the class chart. After the students have identified 5-8 new words they can work in pairs to write a vocabulary word onto a 3x5 card and post it onto the Hip-Hop Word Wall. There should be enough words collected (the original 4 plus the students' additions) so that pairs of students can take ownership and create words for the word wall.

### *Differentiated Instruction*

Any students who have difficulty working independently have the option of working in a group. Alternatively, they can identify 1-2 words they do not know. Also they can either find roots and affixes or context clues. The teacher should monitor these individuals.

### *Assessment*

Keeping a running record of participation and completed work is essential. Throughout the week students should be encouraged to add words to the Word Wall at appropriate times. As they add to the wall they should label each word with their name and group members. At the end of the two weeks that teacher will be able to see who was involved, did well, and understood the process of uncovering the meaning of unknown words.

## Lesson 3

### Learning Figures of Speech

#### *Time*

One 45 minute period

#### *Objectives*

Understand simile and metaphor.

Utilize figurative language.

#### *Standards*

1.3 *Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature*

A. Read and understand works of literature.

B. Explain the use of literary elements within and among texts. Identify literary elements in stories including theme and point of view.

D. Identify the effects of sound and structure in poetry (e.g., alliteration, rhyme, verse form).

F. Read and respond to a variety of nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama

### *Materials*

Chart paper, markers, song lyrics, paper, pencils, and portfolios

### *Introduction*

Create a chart titled “Figures of Speech”. Have the students write it on a piece of paper for their portfolios. Explain that they will add to this list as the week goes on. Ask the students what they know about simile and metaphor. Most likely a couple of students will know something; the teacher can post their definitions on the chart. Hand out lyrics to *Nightmare on My Street* and *Brand New Funk* by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince. Ask the students to read the first four lines of *Nightmare on My Street* a couple of times taking turns in groups of two, three or four. Explain to the class that you want each group to find one simile (scared as hell, burnt up like a weenie). Have each group share what they found. Then ask the class to read the next four lines and find a metaphor (a nightmare on my street). Again, have each group share what they found.

### *Developmental Activities*

- 1) Ask the students to read the next sixteen lines of *Nightmare on My Street* and identify any similes or metaphors.
- 2) At this point in the unit the teacher can ask the students to write their own similes and metaphors using any new vocabulary, familiar rhythm and rhyme, and even mimic the ideas, beats and lyrics of DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince.

### *Closure*

Give the students an opportunity to perform (share) what they have found and create in the way of similes and metaphors. Typically metaphors are more difficult so give support and ask the other students to help as well.

### *Differentiated Instruction*

Have students work in heterogeneous groups in which the more confident ones help the others. Also the teacher may want to pull struggling students into a guided group where they can work directly with the teacher, identifying and writing similes and metaphors.

### *Assessment*

All work from this activity should be placed in the students’ portfolios and used in creating their final essay, poem, or song.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

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- Katz, Albert N. *Figurative Language and Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. This book is not easy to read. It is written from the psycholinguistic viewpoint. The author presents reason and rationale for figures of speech, mostly metaphors. There is discussion of cognition, memory and language as well.
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- Tompkins, Gail E. *Language Arts: Content and Teaching Strategies, Fifth Edition*. . Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2002. This textbook mirrors the constructivist (meaningful and genuine) approach to teaching and learning that explains almost everything you need to know in order to teach literacy. It focuses on literature focus units, literature circles, reading and writing workshops, and theme cycles.
- Tompkins, Gail E. *Literacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Balanced Approach*. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall, 1997. Another textbook which helps implement a balanced approach to teaching literacy. There are four parts plus an appendix of resources. The first part explains literacy and how to become a valuable teacher. The second part describes how readers and writers make meaning. The third explains how to organize the classroom for instruction. The last part is a collection of strategies for teaching literacy.

## **Appendix-Content Standards**

The School District of Philadelphia Core Curriculum

### **1.1 Learning to Read Independently**

C. Apply the knowledge of phonics, syllabication, word analysis (prefixes, suffixes, root words), context clues, and dictionary use to decode and understand new words during reading.

- E. Identify and correctly use words (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, homophones, homographs, words with roots, suffixes, prefixes, and categories of words) to acquire a reading vocabulary. Use a dictionary and thesaurus.
- F. Determine meanings of unknown words from knowledge of vocabulary and context clues in various subject areas.

### **1.3 *Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature***

- A. Read and understand works of literature.
- B. Explain the use of literary elements within and among texts. Identify literary elements in stories including theme and point of view.
- D. Identify the effects of sound and structure in poetry (e.g., alliteration, rhyme, verse form).
- F. Read and respond to a variety of nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama.

### **1.4 *Types of Writing***

- A. Write poems, plays, and multi-paragraph stories.

### **1.5 *Quality of Writing***

- A. Write with sharp, distinct focus identifying topic, task and audience.
- B. Write using well-developed content appropriate for the topic.

### **1.6 *Speaking and Listening***

- A. Listen to others.
- B. Listen to a selection of literature (fiction or non-fiction).
- D. Contribute to discussions.
- E. Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.
- F. Use media for learning purposes.

### **1.7 *Characteristics and Functions of the English Language***

- B. Know how to identify types of formal and informal speech (e.g., dialect, slang, electronic messaging).