

# Elements of the Blues – Arts, Humanities and Language Arts Lesson Plans

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**Overview:** In this two day lesson, students learn about the basic musical elements of the blues, and they analyze common themes expressed by songs of this genre. In lesson one, students analyze the elements, styles, and history of the blues by reading an article and viewing a PowerPoint presentation. Next, students will transition to listening stations where they will complete music listening guides on three songs that illustrate two different genres of blues music. Finally, in order to demonstrate their knowledge of the blues, the students will create an annotated mural.

In lesson two, students will examine the political and social conditions that the Blues reveal and express their understanding through creative writing. Even though the Blues speak about utter despair, they also display resiliency and pride. James C.Cobb writes about the Blues as an “ethos of revolt” yet also as symbols of “community,” “sexuality/masculinity,” and “personal pride.” This lesson explores the Blues in terms of ambiguously negative and positive aspects of the human condition and encourages students to explore similar themes in their own writing.

**Essential Question:** What are the Blues?

## **Objectives:**

- 1) Students will know that the Blues developed in the Mississippi Delta.
- 2) Students will understand that the Chicago Blues evolved from the Delta Blues.
- 3) Students will be able to analyze the elements of music in a Blues song.
- 4) Students will be able to examine the differences between Delta Blues and Chicago Blues.

## **Resources:**

- Paper, pencil, markers, other media
- Student notes
- Music Listening Guide Copies
- PowerPoint: History and Styles of the Blues; Station Timer
- Cd's of Blues Music
- Article, “On the Blues and Tragedy” by Tim Gillespie
- Songs and Lyric sheets of the following songs: “Dry Spell Blues” by Son House, “Hardworking Woman” by Mississippi Millie, “Preachin’ the Blues” by Son House”, “Eyesight to the Blind” by Sonny Boy Williamson, Upheaval and Change: “If I feel tomorrow..” by Muddy Waters, “Bird Nest Bound” by Charlie Patton, Muddy Water’s “Flood”, “Love in Vain” by Robert Johnson, “Preachin’ Blues” by Robert Johnson, “Devil Got the Blues” by Lonnie Johnson, “Broken Levee Blues” by Lonnie Johnson, “High Water Everywhere” by Charlie Patton (npr.org)

## Lesson Plan Outline: Lesson One (Arts and Humanities Focus)

**Note:** As students are walking into the room, they will be assigned into groups of three that will sit at their own individual stations. This seating chart is required for the listening stations.

Opener: Students will read “On the Blues and Tragedy” by Tim Gillespie and answer ten questions posted on the projector. This article will give the students a good, concise overview of the Blues music.

Class work: 1) Lecture: Students will take notes on two slides that briefly outline the history of, the various styles of, and structural format of the Blues.

2) Transition to listening stations. Students will receive directions for their listening stations. At each station, students will have a cd player, an outline of the lyrics, and a listening guide handout. Students will listen to the song at their station and complete the listening guide provided. At the conclusion of 20 minutes, students will have one minute to transition to the next station. Students will visit three stations and complete the assignment previously mentioned. Each station requires the student to complete a new music listening guide.

Closure: Transition to a whole group explanation for an individual activity. Students will complete an Annotated Mural on the Blues. When introducing this assignment, show student examples (both good and bad) and distribute the grading rubric. Students will use the information from their notes and the previous activity to put the following information on a poster board:

### Annotated Mural

**Objective:** To gain a better understanding of the Blues by creating an Annotated Mural.

**Materials:** Paper, your notes, other media (markers, etc.)

**Assignment:** 1) Divide your paper into **five sections**:

- |   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| a) Characteristics of Chicago and Delta Blues | b) Influences on Dance      |
| c) Musical Form                               | d) Musical Instruments used |

e) **Fifth (center section):** Conclusion. *Note: The Conclusion section of this mural **has** to answer the essential question using **five statements** of supporting evidence. **Essential Question:** What is are Blues?*

2) In Sections A-D, you must use timelines, symbols, illustrations, quotes, and a limited amount of words in order to explain our four topics.

This assignment will be graded using the rubric provided.

**Authentic Assessment: Annotated Mural**

- Goal: The goal of the Annotated Mural is to have students analyze the distinguishing characteristics of the Delta and Chicago Blues to find the dominant aspects of Blues music.
- Role: Students will work individually to create their Annotated Mural.
- Audience: Eleventh grade Arts and Humanities students and their teacher.
- Situation: In this lesson, students have been introduced to the two main styles of Blues music: Delta Blues and Chicago Blues. This Annotated Mural requires that students look at the common characteristics between these two styles to create their own definition of the blues.
- Product or Performance: Annotated Mural
- Standards for Success: Students will be provided a grading rubric when they receive their assignment.

### **Lesson Plan Outline: Lesson Two (Language Arts Focus)**

**Topic:** What political and social conditions do Blues lyrics reveal, and how can we apply this genre to creative writing?

**Instructional Objective:** Through study of Blues lyrics and the time period in which they developed, students analyze how music both shapes and reflects political and social conditions from which they arose.

**Common Curricular Goal:** Interpret poetry and make historical connections that further enhance understanding.

**Anticipatory Set:** Start class by sharing a few traditional Blue ballads. For example, Booker T. Jones and William Bell's "Born Under a Bad Sign", Melvin B. Tolson's "Sootie Joe," Robert Johnson's "Love in Vain," and Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog." Ask students to journal: What do you notice about the style, structure, and themes of these lyrics? What are the similarities? The differences? What do you know about this style of music or its origins

### **Lesson Plan Procedure:**

- 1) Short lecture about the history of the Blues with information culled from James C. Cobb's chapter "The Blues Is a Lowdown Shakin' Chill" in the book The Most Southern Place on Earth and from a teaching colleague's article, "On the Blues and Tragedy" (Tim Gillespie).
- 2) Revisit the traditional ballads from the anticipatory set and discuss how those lyrics embody information learned in the lecture.
- 3) Divide class into six groups with each group responsible for reading, interpreting, and presenting information from a particular set of Blues lyrics. The six groups are based upon 1) daily life 2) religion 3) upheaval and change 4) male/female relationships, 5) commentary on the Blues, and 6) historical references.
- 4) After each group presents, the other students will try their hands at writing three-line Blues stanzas. Encourage students to borrow thematically from each presented set of lyrics while writing on their own experiences.
- 5) Share out these three-line stanzas and suggest that students use them in drafting their final assignment.

**Assessment:** Feeling the Blues? Turn that angst into a Blues song/poem. The content of your poem is pretty much up to you, but it probably shouldn't be about your awesome Friday night plans. After all, this is the Blues. Look to the poems we discussed in class for inspiration.

**The fine print.** Your poem must contain a minimum of 4 stanzas with 3 lines per stanza. It should also follow the standard twelve-bar, three-line stanza format with the first statement repeated in the second line and complimented or extended in the third line.

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**Group Directions:** Read the lyrics of both Blues songs aloud as a group and answer the following questions. Be ready to share this information out to the class.

- 1) In what ways are these songs a reflection of what you know about the history of the Blues?
- 2) Do these songs conform to or deviate from the standard twelve-bar, three-line stanza style with the first statement repeated in the second line and complimented or extended in the third?
- 3) What tropes or devices do these songwriters use to achieve their purposes? Are they effective?
- 4) Categorize these two Blues songs with an original name that reflects their shared themes (to modify this question for lower-level students, provide the students with the categories).
- 5) Once you've creatively categorized the songs, write a prompt inspiring your classmates to try their hands at writing three-line Blues stanzas.

**Daily Life:** "Dry Spell Blues" by Son House and "Hardworking Woman" by Mississippi Millie

**Religion:** "Preachin' the Blues" by Son House and "Eyesight to the Blind" by Sonny Boy Williamson

**Upheaval and Change:** "If I feel tomorrow.." by Muddy Waters and "Bird Nest Bound" by Charlie Patton

**Male/Female Relationships:** Muddy Water's "Flood" and "Love in Vain" by Robert Johnson

**Commentary on the Blues:** "Preachin' Blues" by Robert Johnson and "Devil Got the Blues" by Lonnie Johnson

**Historical References:** "Broken Levee Blues" by Lonnie Johnson and "High Water Everywhere" by Charlie Patton (npr.org)