

## LESSON PLAN

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### Writing the Blues

By Erika Luckert

*In this lesson T&W writer [Erika Luckert](#) invites students to explore the music genre of blues through contemporary rap and poetry.*

**Grade:** 8

**Genre:** Poetry

**Common Core Standards** (Refer to the [ELA Standards > Writing > Grade 8](#) and the [ELA Standards > Reading: Literature > Grade 8](#))

- ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.
- ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.5: Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

**Lesson Objective:**

- Explore the blues through contemporary rap, poetry, and student writing

**Guiding Questions:**

- What are the blues?
- How can music and writing help us to overcome adversity?

## LESSON

### Warm-up:

Ask students to brainstorm things that get them down—that make them feel blue. Brainstorm big things and little things, things in your personal life, and things in the wider world.

When students have brainstormed several examples, discuss with the class:

- What do we mean when we say we're "feeling blue"?
- How do you cheer yourself up when you're feeling blue?

### Main Activity:

One way to cheer yourself up when you're feeling blue is to listen to the blues!

Introduce the Blues by giving some background info, or calling on existing student knowledge:

"The blues has many definitions; it is a type of music, a musical form, a harmonic language, an attitude towards playing music, a collection of sounds. Mostly though, the blues is a feeling; whether it's happy, sad, or somewhere in between, its intention is always the same: to make you feel better, not worse, to cheer you up, not bring you down. Playing the blues is like getting vaccinated. When you get a vaccination for smallpox, for example, the doctor gives you smallpox in a little dosage. Then your body produces the defenses to fight the disease. Similarly, if you want to get rid of the blues, you play the blues.

"The blues was born out of the religious, work, and social music of African Americans in the South during the late 1800s. It has since become the foundation of American popular music, including rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, country, and all periods and styles of jazz."

—From *Let Freedom Swing*, a resource guide developed by Jazz Academy at Lincoln Center

The blues also exist in rap and in poetry too! We're going to look at examples of both.

### Mentor Text 1:

[Kendrick Lamar](#) is an American rapper and songwriter. His album *DAMN* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2018, the first time this prestigious award had been given to a musician in a genre other than classical or jazz. Lamar is also known for his part as both producer and performer for the *Black Panther* soundtrack. This song, "County Building Blues," was released as a single in 2015.

Play "[County Building Blues](#)" for students. You may also want to provide a printout of the lyrics for them to follow along.

Ask students:

- What are some of the things that get him down, that make him feel blue?
- How does he stay determined and push through?

*Note: it may be helpful to give students background info on John Coltrane, who is mentioned in the song. Coltrane was an American jazz saxophonist and composer in the 50s and 60s. He was awarded a special posthumous award from the Pulitzer Prize Board in 2007, in recognition of “his masterful improvisation, supreme musicianship, and iconic centrality to the history of jazz.”*

### **Mentor Text 2:**

This next example of the blues is a poem by Elizabeth Alexander.

Read “[Blues](#)” aloud.

Ask students:

- What are some of the things that get her down, that make her feel blue?
- How does she cheer herself and push through?

### **Writing Task:**

Write your own blues poem about something that gets you down. Make sure that your poem is also a cure for the blues—that it could help a person cheer up and push through!

*Note: While students write, if you want to infuse a bit of blues into the class, you might play Coltrane’s 1962 album, Coltrane Plays the Blues.*

### **Closing:**

Ask students to share their blues poems.

### **Materials:**

- Speaker to play Kendrick Lamar’s “County Building Blues”
- Copies of mentor texts
- Writing materials for students

**Multi-Modal Approaches to Learning:** Verbal-Linguistic, Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Musical