



Behind the Scenes of Country Music's Biggest Night™

What Makes a Classic?

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- **analyze** the structure and content of a song
- **identify** the songwriter's use of figurative language
- **create** an infographic explaining key aspects of a song
- **explain** how historical and social context shape the songwriter's purpose and word choice

GRADE RANGE

6–12

DURATION

2–3 class periods of 45–60 minutes each

LESSON OVERVIEW

What has the greatest impact on the popularity of a song? From its origins in bluegrass to its influence on rock and pop, Country Music has had a rich history and a wide-reaching impact on American culture. In this activity, students will use their understanding of storytelling and figurative language to analyze some of the greatest songs of Country Music.

Throughout history, people have used music to build community, inspire, comfort, and pass on stories. But what makes a song a classic? Students will determine which is more impactful: music or lyrics? Students will select a category of the CMA Awards and examine the winners over time. Which has a greater impact on a song's success? Is it the catchy beats and interesting melodies of the music or the complexities and beauty of the lyrics that make a song successful? Students will use the power of persuasion to share their thoughts.

In the Virtual Field Trip post-viewing activity, students examine the impact of melody, harmony, and rhythm on a song's success. Consider using the Virtual Field Trip Educator Guide with students prior to engaging students with this lesson. This lesson will highlight the lyrics of a song, focusing in on structure and content. One of the hallmarks of Country Music is its rich storytelling. It is known for complex and dynamic tales and beautiful descriptive language, making it a great connection to literacy and writing in the classroom.

DRIVING QUESTION

What makes a song a classic?

NATIONAL CONTENT STANDARDS

National Literacy Standards

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g. a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

National Arts Standards

Responding: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Connecting: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

National Coalition for Core Arts Standards

4.1.2 Demonstrate and explain personal interest in, and knowledge about, and purpose of varied musical selections.

4.2.3 Demonstrate knowledge of music concepts (such as tonality and meter) in music from a variety of cultures selected for performance.

4.2.5 Demonstrate understanding of the structure and elements of music (such as rhythm, pitch, form, and harmony) in music selected for performance.

7.2.2 Describe how specific music concepts are used to support a specific purpose in music.

8.1.2 Demonstrate knowledge of music concepts and how they support creators'/performers' expressive intent.

KEY VOCABULARY

- lyrics
- chorus
- refrain
- verse
- bridge
- metaphor
- simile
- hyperbole
- personification
- onomatopoeia
- tone
- theme

MATERIALS

- Laptop or device connected to the internet
- Chart paper and markers or access to a whiteboard or chalkboard
- Access to graphic editing or presentation software like Discovery Studio, Canva, Google Slides, Keynote, or PowerPoint
- 2 copies per student of the SIFT Song Lyric Analysis Sheet OR another poetry analysis strategy of your choice
- Copies of Award winning song lyrics (age appropriate)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

One of the biggest debates among music lovers has always been over which is more important to the success and "greatness" of a song: the music or the lyrics? Even among musicians, it's difficult to come to a consensus. Some people believe that a catchy beat is what makes a song memorable, while others swear a song without good lyrics lacks soul.

"A good song has to have a great melody, and the lyrics have to touch my heart. Now if it's just a little toe-tapper, got to make me feel good somehow or another, or when I sing it I can't make you feel good." —Reba McEntire

"Lyrics are so important, but they're really underrated." —Billie Eilish

Everyone seems to agree that a song can be considered a "classic" if it is an excellent example of the genre. A classic song appeals to listeners over generations, and its appeal stands the test of time. While some people may say each song has its own unique reason to be a classic, the lyrics often play a major role in how listeners relate to and remember it. This activity will focus on the lyrics of a song. As genre-smashing musical superstar Taylor Swift once said, "Poetry and lyrics are very similar. Making words bounce off a page." After all, what is a song but a poem set to music?

Poetry Analysis

There are many different strategies for analyzing poetry, and they usually involve a nifty mnemonic to help students remember the steps. If you have a strategy with which your students are already familiar, incorporate that into your Country Music lyric study for this activity. Allowing students to use strategies they already know frees them up to delve deeply and focus on the content of the analysis. Consider giving students the opportunity to select the strategy that they find the most applicable for their lyrics. Most of these strategies have common elements, consider which correlates best with your classroom and students' skills. Below are some strategies that students may be familiar with:

- TPCASTT (Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude/Tone, Shift, Title, Theme)
- TWIST (Tone, Word Choice, Imagery, Style, Theme)
- SOAPSTone (Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, Tone)
- SOLID (Syntax, Organization, Literary Devices, Levels of Discourse, Imagery, Diction, Detail)
- SIFT (Symbols, Images, Figurative Language, Tone/Theme)

Included in the Educator Resources is an example of how to use the SIFT strategy.

Another important aspect of poetry analysis is the structure, which many of these strategies do not touch on. Song lyrics are structured very similarly to poems; they may just have different vocabulary to describe their parts! Poems are generally written in stanzas (or what students often call "poem paragraphs"). In songwriting, these groups of phrases

are more often known as verses and choruses. As your students are analyzing their poems for themes, ideas, and figurative language, direct them to identify and label the following elements of a song's structure:

- verse—a group of lines that form a unit in a poem or song. In Country Music, there are often three distinct verses, and many songwriters use them to tell a complete story.
- chorus—the part of a song that is repeated after each verse, often sung by several people together for effect; it is typically catchy and emphasizes the themes of the song.
- bridge—a contrasting section of the song that helps to build drama and tension before returning to the main theme of the song and a resolution; it usually does not follow the pattern of the main verses or chorus.
- refrain—a phrase that is repeated for effect throughout a song.

Teacher Preparation

- Ensure students have a device connected to the internet.
- Set up two collaboration areas on opposite sides of the classroom room with chart paper, markers, or whiteboards/chalkboards. Consider hanging a small sign on the board in each area to designate "Music" and "Lyrics."
- Select an award-winning Country Music song and prepare to demonstrate how to analyze poetry for your students. You might use the SIFT method described in the Teacher Background. If so, make copies of the SIFT Song Lyric Analysis Sheet for your students.

SESSION FLOW

ENGAGE: VOTE WITH YOUR FEET

- Begin the session by engaging students and activating their prior knowledge by having them use the instructional strategy [Vote with Your Feet](#). This informal polling strategy encourages active learning.
- Ask students to share what they think makes the most impact: music or lyrics?

Teacher Note: *These questions could be asked as a whole-class or small-group discussion. Another option would be to pose these as journal questions to give students time to think on their own before discussing.*

- Direct students to vote with their feet on whether music or lyrics are more important to the greatness of a song. They will make their choices known by moving to the side of the room labeled "Music" or "Lyrics."
- Have students discuss why they made their choice. What is it about music or lyrics that makes them so vital to the success of a song?
- Direct students to create a concept map to show their thinking and provide evidence to support their choice. Students may use the Concept Map Capture Sheet or create a freeform map using the chart paper or whiteboards available to them.
- Ask students to return to their seats for a whole-class discussion.
- Have representatives from each group explain their concept maps and try to persuade the other group.

EXPLORE

Guide students to explore the idea of song lyrics as a form of poetry and storytelling by having students identify the structural and figurative elements of a Country Music classic.

- Display or provide students with a copy of the lyrics to one award-winning Country Music song.

Teacher Note: *Choose an age-appropriate song that your students are likely to relate to.*

- Discuss the relationship between song lyrics and poetry while encouraging students to think analytically about structure and language as they go through the activity.
- Guide students through analyzing and annotating the song lyrics using whichever poetry analysis strategy with which they are familiar. One option is the SIFT method that is outlined in the [Educator Resource](#). Have students use the *SIFT Song Lyrics Analysis* capture sheet to guide them and give them a place to write their observations. Alternatively, have students use highlighters and pens/pencils to label the elements of poetry they identify within the song and annotate their observations. Demonstrate how to identify the following:
 - Structure, including the verses, chorus, and any bridges or refrains
 - Figurative language, like metaphors, similes, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, or personification
 - Particularly vivid phrases or words
 - Tone of the song, as indicated in the lyrics, not the music
 - Theme, message, or plot of the song

Teacher Note: *If time permits, play the song for the class after the students have had the opportunity to analyze the lyrics. Facilitate a class discussion around how the music complements the lyrics and whether or not it supports the overall theme of the song.*

INVESTIGATE

Facilitate students' investigation of structure, theme, tone, and figurative language in songwriting by allowing students to select, research, and analyze the lyrics of one of the winners of the CMA Awards "Songwriter of the Year."

- Direct the class to the [CMA Awards Past Winners and Nominees^{\[1\]}](#) website.
- Have students explore the "Songwriter of the Year" category and select one award-winning song to investigate. Students may work individually or in pairs.
- Ask students to find the lyrics to the song and direct them to listen to the song while reading the lyrics.
- Explain that many Country Music songs are ballads that relate stories. They have an entire plot contained within their verses. If students' songs are these types, encourage them to think about the songs as a story and find the parts of the plot.
- Instruct students to identify and label relevant parts of the song's lyrics and use the SIFT Song Lyrics Analysis Sheet to make note of important details. Students can use a digital document or a physical printed copy of the lyrics for their annotations, depending on available resources and learning preferences. Students should look for the following:
 - verses
 - refrains
 - chorus

^[1]CMA Awards Past Winners and Nominees <https://cmaawards.com/past-winners-and-nominees/>

- bridges
 - tone
 - theme
 - similes
 - metaphors
 - hyperbole
 - onomatopoeia
 - particularly distinctive or powerful word choices
- Have students research the historical and social context of the song. Guide them to explore the following questions. They can record their findings using a note-taking method of their choosing or the *Historical and Social Context* capture sheet.
 - When was the song written and by whom?
 - What historical events occurred prior to the writing of the song that may have impacted the author?
 - Were there any social issues surrounding the writing of the song? If so, were they deliberately mentioned in the lyrics of the song?
 - Did social or historical issues guide the tone or theme of the lyrics?

Teacher Note: *Remind students to verify and cite their sources.*

CREATE

Give students the opportunity to create an infographic to demonstrate their understanding of the elements of song lyrics in Country Music songs.

- Introduce or review the basics of an infographic with your students. Emphasize that all good infographics:
 - Tell a story with words and images
 - Summarize main ideas
 - Present key details and facts in an organized and clear way
 - Reflect elements of good visual design, like readable fonts, contrasting and pleasing color combinations, and use of white space
- Direct students to create an infographic showing the key features of their chosen song. Explain that students must use the SIFT Song Lyrics Analysis Sheet and *Historical and Social Context* capture sheet to analyze the song and gather information. They will then include the relevant facts in their infographic.
 - Basic information about the song like title, author, the year that the artist won “Songwriter of the Year,” the year the song was written, the performer of the song, and the album on which the song was released
 - The structure of the song, including the number of verses, chorus, any bridges or refrains, etc.
 - Key phrases from the song that make it memorable. These are often parts of the choruses or refrains from the verses, but they do not have to be
 - Examples of figurative language in the lyrics
 - The overall tone of the song (as is evident in the lyrics, not the music)

- The theme or main message of the song
- A summary of the plot if the song has one
- **Digital Option:** Students can create their infographic digitally using a program like [Discovery Education Studio](#), Canva, PowerPoint, Google Slides, Keynote, or another digital tool. Students can extend their product scope going beyond using a static image for their infographic creation. They can make their infographics dynamic by adding hotspots with extra information, links to external resources, and/or media.
- **Non-digital option:** Have students create a one-pager or poster of their infographic using the materials you have on hand.

REFLECTION

Display student work around the classroom, on a class wiki, or class website. To make in-classroom displays interactive, have students attach QR codes to their infographics so students can listen to the songs described. Have students examine the infographics and song lyrics on display. Have students use the Gallery Walk strategy or allow students to explore independently. Afterwards, guide students in a whole-class discussion about the work they completed. Have students consider the following:

- What commonalities did you notice in the lyrics of the songs? Are there any common themes, tones, or writing styles that you can point out?
- Did the social or historical context of the songs often influence the lyrics?
- What qualities did each song possess that led to its author winning "Songwriter of the Year"?
- How are song lyrics like poetry?

MUSIC LESSON CONNECTION

Consider connecting with a Music Educator for this lesson extension.

In 1975, all of the nominees for single of the year at the CMA Awards were top five hits on the Billboard Hot 100. Four of the songs even reached the number one place on the chart:

- "Before the Teardrops Fall" by Freddy Fender **won the CMA Award*
- "Rhinestone Cowboy" by Glen Campbell
- "Thank God I'm a Country Boy" by John Denver
- "Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song" by B.J. Thomas

Have students listen to each song and determine what it was about the music or lyrics that gave it a wide appeal. After, research what was happening in 1975 that might have influenced their placement on the charts. Finally, explore other songs popular that year and find similarities and differences.

SIFT Strategy

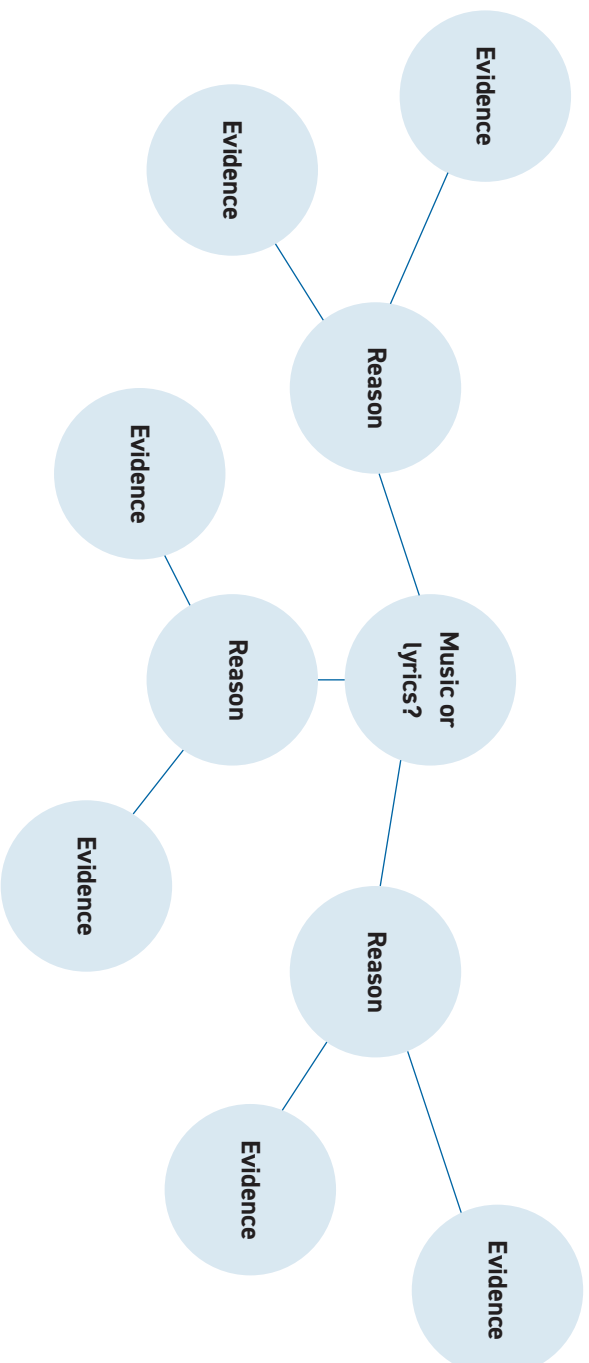
This strategy includes the basics that students should look for when examining a poem. It is ideal for poetry novices, and has them identify and describe elements of poetry and language that are commonly found in Country Music lyrics.

- **Symbols**—Students should examine the title and text of the lyrics and look for symbolism. A symbol is an object that represents something more abstract, like a feeling. For example, roses often symbolize love, while lilies often remind people of death.
- **Images**—Students should identify particularly descriptive sensory details in the lyrics. These might include images that appeal to the reader’s or listener’s senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. For example, a song might describe in great detail the clashing of thunder, the sound of rain falling on a tin roof, and the earthy, clean smell after a storm.
- **Figurative Language**—Students should identify and analyze figurative language in the lyrics, like:
 - **similes**—a phrase that compares one thing with another very different thing in order to make something more dramatic or vivid. For example, “as brave as a lion,” or “sweet as pie.”
 - **metaphors**—a phrase that regards one thing as another, symbolic thing. For example, in Elvis Presley’s famous song “Hound Dog,” he describes his ex as a hound dog that just won’t leave him alone, and in Kenny Rogers’ “The Gambler,” he describes life as a poker game.
 - **personification**—attributing human characteristics to non-human objects or the representation of an abstract idea in human form. For example, a song might proclaim the sun as “smiling” down on the singer or describe death as a person (or in one case, a train!).
 - **hyperbole**—an exaggerated statement that isn’t meant to be taken literally. For example, a songwriter might declare that they think about someone every second of every day.
 - **onomatopoeia**—a word that is spelled like it sounds or is reminiscent of the sound. For example, sizzle, vroom, or pop.
- **Tone & Theme**—This one actually sneaks in two separate elements of poetry:
 - **Tone**—the general character or attitude of a work, similar to the tone of someone’s voice. Word choice, syntax, repetition, and figurative language all contribute to a poem’s overall tone.
 - **Theme**—a main subject or idea that exists throughout the entire poem or song. There is a joke that Country Music themes can be boiled down to love, friendship, and trucks! Rest assured, the Country Music classics your students will be exploring are some of the finest examples of modern poetry and songwriting. Whether subtle or obvious, students will encounter a wide range of themes that make these songs appeal across the generations.

**Have students use the SIFT Song Lyric Analysis Sheet included or direct them to highlight and annotate their physical copies of the songs.*

Concept Map

Use this as a starting point for your concept map. Add more branches and bubbles as needed.



SIFT Song Lyrics Analysis

Country Music is known for its beautifully descriptive storytelling and evocative lyrics. As genre-smashing musical superstar Taylor Swift once said, "Poetry and lyrics are very similar. Making words bounce off a page." After all, what is a song but a poem set to music? Use this sheet to analyze Country Music song lyrics with the SIFT method. Then look for elements of the song's poetic structure and answer the questions below.

Song Title:

Songwriter:

Album:

Year:

Performer:

	Example and Location	Explanation
<p>S—Symbols Objects that are used to represent abstract ideas</p>		
<p>I—Images Descriptive language that appeals to the senses</p>		
<p>F—Figurative Language Similes, metaphors, personification, onomatopoeia, and hyperbole</p>		
<p>T—Tone The general character and mood</p> <p>and Theme The main subject or message of the song</p>		

Song Structure

How many verses are there?

How often does the chorus repeat?

Is there a bridge? How does the bridge bring a change in tone?

Are there any refrains? How often do they repeat, and how do they add to the tone and theme of the song?

Historical and Social Context

When was the song written and by whom?

What historical events occurred prior to the writing of the song that may have impacted the author?

Were there any social issues surrounding the writing of the song? If so, were they deliberately mentioned in the lyrics of the song?

Did social or historical issues guide the tone or theme of the lyrics?

Infographic Rubric

Turn your song analysis into an informative, interesting, and neat infographic. Be sure to include all the content collected on the *SIFT Song Lyric Analysis Sheet* and the *Historical and Social Context Capture Sheet*. Be sure to cite your sources! Infographics should:

- Tell a story with words and images
- Summarize main ideas
- Present key details and facts in an organized and clear way
- Reflect elements of good visual design, like readable fonts, contrasting and pleasing color combinations, and use of white space

Score Value	Creates an infographic that tells a story	Includes a complete song analysis and research	References and cites a variety of sources	Collaborates with team
4	All the required elements are included in a professional, informative, and interesting infographic	A complete and insightful song analysis is outlined in the infographic, with interesting research to give historical and social context	Three or more credible sources are consulted for information and appropriately cited	The team works together and communicates throughout the entire activity
3	All the required elements are included in an informative and neat infographic	A complete song analysis is outlined in the infographic, with research to give some historical and/or social context	Two or more credible sources are consulted for information and appropriately cited	The team works together but may have some issues with communication
2	Some of the required elements are included in an informative and neat infographic	A complete song analysis is outlined in the infographic	One source is consulted and appropriately cited	The team struggles to communicate and work together
1	Few of the required elements are included OR the infographic is sloppy	A song analysis or historical and social context are not presented	No sources are cited, or sources are not cited properly	The team does not communicate or work together