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## **Rap as a Modern Poetic Form**

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## **Introduction**

I have long been interested in rap music as a cultural expression of our times. Rap music shows us the world as seen through a particular (and continually changing and evolving) segment of American society-it is a form that is now being received by the population at large. I have always been astonished at the creative and novel use of language apparent in rap music. I remember thinking more than ten years ago, while listening to my first rap song: if this is not poetry, what is?

I work in the Creative Writing Department of Cooperative Arts and Humanities Magnet School. Being in a magnet school, our students take their traditional classes and also have a two-period (94 minute) “arts block” each day, wherein they focus on their chosen art. Students in the Creative Writing Department take a variety of courses, such as Screenwriting, Myth and Fantasy, Poetry, Short story, and Journalism. In the coming year, I will teach Journalism and Publishing & Portfolio.

As a magnet school, we have students bussed in from numerous towns in the Greater New Haven area. Our school has a majority of African American and Hispanic students. Many of my students listen to rap music. Young people naturally respond to the rhythms and rhymes in rap. They learn, sing, and dance to poetic structures without even knowing it! My intention is to work backward with them-to take the enthusiasm they have for rap and begin to show them how rap is actually an evolution of poetic form-to try to get them excited about structure, meaning, and creative expression. I intend to have students write and listen to rap songs, but also to engage them in the development of many forms of poetry, some of which may seem to them remarkably similar to rap.

My main goal is to make poetry relevant for students’ lives. As Salman Rushdie said in a 1990 speech, entitled “Is Nothing Sacred?” “...literature is an inquiry, great literature, by asking extraordinary questions, opens new doors in our minds.” I believe the task is to develop students’ ability to explore the world of feelings, perceptions, and ideas that poetry can bring to them.

But I want to take my students beyond form. I want to help my students understand how common themes in rap are indicative of the problems, as well as the empowerments, that can be seen in our urban cultures today. I want to teach students about poetic form and structure, so I can help them express their content in cohesive, clear, and meaningful ways. Students will be encouraged to develop their critical thinking, reading, and writing skills. This unit is also intended to encourage healthy and meaningful creative expression and to help students develop confidence and a voice with which to be active and empowered leaders in their communities and in their lives.

## **Special Considerations**

1. What is the relevance of this unit to students who are not interested in rap music (those who are interested in Goth, Techno, Rock, or other musical genres)? Though the unit is focused on rap as poetry, it can be argued that most music has poetic elements. There are a few exercises built

into the unit that invite students to work with any lyrics they like, so different students won't feel their interests are being minimized.

2. Language and content of rap music. As I understand it, some schools permit contextual profanity to be discussed, but I'm sure many don't. You can check with your administrator to be sure. You may want to send a permission slip out to parents at the beginning of the unit to let them know that you may be showing films or poems that have certain content or language. If you want to use specific songs that have troublesome words, you might choose to substitute asterisks for letters in inappropriate words (example: Isn't this a f\*\*\*\*\* great way to get around swear words?). Though I won't present any work in this unit that is considered inappropriate for high school students (in terms of swearing, misogyny, sexuality or extreme violence), I would suggest that you get this question out in the open with your students. Instead of talking about specific examples of "bad" language, talk about WHY the students think so many rappers use this type of stuff in their songs. This can become a good segue into the political issues behind rap and behind poetry of the past as well.

3. What if students want to write raps (or anything) with questionable language or content in their journals, or to present or to hand in? Personally, I would encourage them to write whatever they like in their journals, knowing that I alone will see it. However, they should know that when they want to present work to the class or to hand work in to me for a grade, the work should follow the rules listed above (no swearing; no misogyny; no references to graphic violence or sex).

4. Grade levels: Young people can go through quite a lot of maturation between their freshman and senior years of high school. Some of the exercises will work better with different ages of students. I'll leave that up to each teacher to decide.

5. Music in class: You may want to consider allowing students to play music as they do their writing assignments (if you and other students are comfortable with it, great; if not, perhaps students can use headphones) in order to keep them thinking about rhythm, etc. as they write.

6. A lot to teach: You may find that eight weeks is not enough time to realistically introduce and teach all the material in this unit. You may choose to focus on certain activities and stretch them out if you have more than eight weeks, or you may choose to drop certain activities and focus on the ones you feel your students will benefit from most.

7. Student knowledge of poetry: It will help if this unit is taught after students have a working knowledge of the basics of poetry. The unit will introduce some basic poetic elements, such as rhyme, rhythm, meter, repetition, symbols, similes, metaphors, allusions, alliteration, and assonance. If your students already have a working knowledge of these elements, they will be able more quickly to go about analyzing rap songs as poetry. If not, you may need to lengthen weeks one and two in order to teach more about the basics of poetry.

## **A Bit About Rap Music**

When I began my research for this unit, I looked for the ways in which poetry helped to produce rap, but surprisingly, I found that most people feel that rap does not have direct roots in formal poetic forms and movements. However, most sources do acknowledge rap as a new poetic form (for example, see Handbook of Poetic Forms). While rap music did not necessarily get its start in the world of poetry, it does indeed have many similarities to a number of poetic forms, which lend themselves to exercises you will find in this unit. These exercises will allow you to use rap to expose your students to more traditional forms of poetry. As Tom Terrell states in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, "Revolutions-whether social, political or cultural-do not happen in a vacuum; they are in actuality the end products of a string of connect-the-dots factors and events." Let's examine some of these factors and events.

## Rap vs. Hip Hop

First, let me attempt to define the words "rap" and "hip hop." Kurtis Blow says: "Rap is talking in rhyme to the rhythm of a beat. Hip-hop is a culture, a way of life for a society of people who identify, love, and cherish rap, break dancing, DJing, and graffiti." Tom Terrell says in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*: "Hip Hop: Disturbing to the mind yet irresistible to da feet."

## A Brief History of Rap

The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, and others spoke about African American and urban life with a percussion backdrop in the early 1970s. New York City, particularly Brooklyn and the Bronx, was home to a large Jamaican community. Jamaican DJ's (DJ Kool Herc has been credited as the first) mixed sounds from several turntables. This became a rap trademark. The Sugarhill Gang popularized this technique with "Rapper's Delight" in 1979. Grandmaster Flash's 1982 single, "The Message," is considered by many to be one of the first rap songs. The Sugarhill Gang and Grandmaster Flash helped to get rap from the streets onto the radio. Blondie sang "Rapture" in 1989, pointing the way toward rap. Later, Run-D.M.C. collaborated with Aerosmith and brought rap to a wider (and whiter) audience. Then came the Beastie Boys, Russell Simmons, Def Jam records, Run-DMC, Eminem, and so many others who helped popularize the form.

Hip hop is said to be a reaction to the emptiness of disco, which came after blues, soul and funk. Of course, the beat (the drum) is an essential element in rap, and that beat comes from ancient and modern African traditions. There is no clear "history" of rap music, but rap may be said to have some of its roots in and connections to a number of oral traditions and poetic and musical movements. For instance, many cultures throughout history (such as Japanese battling haiku; French Bouts Rimés; and German spontaneous poetry competitions; British and American poetry slams) have used poetry in competitions, as do today's "battle rappers." In a battle rap, opponents use rap-style rhymes to insult each other.

Rap music has been compared with the oral tales told by African griots. As Senegalese musician and singer Baba Maal put it, a griot "listens and talks to the people and tells what is going on in the society, both the good and the bad." This is how a group of people can know their history. Rhythms, rhymes, and messages in rap can be successfully compared with the speeches of African American preachers and political activists, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, and Mohammed Ali. The Beat movement may also have been an influence in the development of rap, as both have a tendency toward autobiography and the confessional mode, filled with feeling and commentary about socio-political affairs that affected the poet's generation.

Rap has some of its linguistic roots in street jive and in the words of the street poets of Brooklyn. The energy and some subject matter of blues and early rock and roll can also be detected in today's rap songs. Some

people credit The Last Poets as the first rappers, because they put their political messages into poetic form and set them to the sounds of congas and other percussive instruments. Rappers use a lot of word play and made-up words, as do poets. You can find the use of “ebonics” throughout rap (see “The Rap Dictionary” at to learn more). In terms of language, rappers often use “signifying” to communicate multileveled meanings in their work. Signifying has historically referred to the way in which subjected cultures develop a way of using the “masters’” language in order to gain independence, or a voice of their own. Signifying is a way people in a weak position play with language to trick more powerful people who will not understand the hidden meanings.

Freestyling (as improvisational rapping is called) can be compared with French theatrical tirades and tirades found in Shakespeare. You can find exaggerated, boastful rhetoric in Act 3; Scene 1 of Henry IV Part One, which can be compared with some of today’s rap lyrics. In addition, technological advancements have helped the form to grow quickly. For example, the advent of drum machines has made it relatively simple for rappers to add a rhythmic beat to their raps, and sampling equipment has allowed rappers to appropriate the work of others.

### *A Crash Course to Help You Prepare to Teach This Unit*

If you’d like to learn more about rap music, I recommend “The Vibe History of Hip Hop.” To learn about slam poetry, watch the film “Slam Nation.” To refresh your knowledge of poetic terms and forms, read “The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Terms” by Ron Padgett, and “Poetry for Dummies” by The Poetry Center. For resources about beat poetry, The Last Poets, and more, see the Teachers Bibliography at the end of this unit.

### **Unit Correlation with District Performance Standards**

This unit fulfills many parts of the following High School Academic Performance Standards as designed by the New Haven Public School System: Content Standard 1.1; 1.2;1.3; 2.1; 2.2; 3.1; 4.2; 6.2. Specifically, the unit is designed to help students:

1. Participate in daily discussions relating to materials read.
2. Develop language and communication skills.
3. Compose narrative, personal and expressive selections, responses to selections read.
4. Exhibit comprehension by responding to a variety of texts through oral, visual, artistic, musical and technological formats.
5. Access, interpret and convey information.
6. Read and comprehend text that is abstract and removed from personal experience.
7. Read purposefully to make connections between separated sections of text.
8. Recognize that many pieces of literature have multiple interpretations.
9. Select and read materials about students’ multicultural heritage and traditions as well as those of other cultures.
10. Recognize social and historical changes through their study of literature.
11. View technology, media and other sources that reflect cultural and curriculum-related topics.
12. Write daily and maintain a portfolio with their best work to demonstrate growth.

## Strategies

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This unit is designed to be delivered over an eight-week period. The unit is broken down into eight weekly sections (each week consisting of five 45-minute periods). The fifth day (Friday) of each week is designed to be a fun day that is a culmination of what students have learned during the previous days' lessons.

Students will keep a journal that tracks their progress throughout the unit. Students will be expected to fully participate in all activities. By doing so, they will develop the following skills: writing, analyzing, revising, listening, performing, collaborating, evaluating, discussing, and brainstorming.

I will present curricular activities that can be used alone depending on the grade/ability level of your students, as well as how much time you have available. I will include a multimedia approach (film, novel, poetry, dance, music, writing, slam) to enable the students to learn in a variety of ways and to be stimulated.

## Materials List

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In order to instruct this curriculum unit, you must have access to the following items:

- Blackboard or easel to write on
- Computer with Internet access
- Computer or boom box that can play CDs
- Copies of the poems, rap songs, and videos specified in the unit (of course, you should feel free to substitute or add your own music and poetic resources)
- Handouts that give detailed information regarding each of the poetic terms or elements students will study
- Students need a special notebook or journal to write in each day
- Snacks for Fridays (optional but recommended!)

## Classroom Activities

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### Week One: Rap as Spoken Word Poetry What is Poetry?

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Days 1-4:

Introduce the unit: Tell students they will be studying the ways in which rap music is a modern poetic form; In what ways it is indeed poetry, and how rap relates to other forms of poetry. They will be learning about the roots of rap music, and beginning a daily journal about the songs and poems we study.

Ask if anyone knows the history of rap music. Tell them some of the history (as outlined “A Bit About Rap Music” above) and mention some of the connections to poetry, oration, civil rights, etc.

Give students a copy of the lyrics to the song “I Know I Can” by Nasir Jones (Nas). Then play the song. (Note: Please feel free to use any rap song here and anywhere throughout the unit-the more current the better.) Have students read along with the song and then write in their journals (alone or in pairs): Based on what they have already learned about poetry, have them write about the ways in which the lyrics are poetry or not.

Tell students to bring in their favorite rap songs for tomorrow and continuously throughout this unit (remind them of the rules about what you’ve determined appropriate for the classroom in terms of language and content). If they can, have them bring the lyrics to the songs (you can find most rap lyrics online). Have students write about one of the songs they brought in. In what ways is this poetry?

Watch a video of “I Know I Can” by Nas. Have students write in their journals briefly about what they thought of the video. Do they feel it is poetry? Is it rap?

Discussion questions:

1. What are poems? How do we recognize them?
2. What are the uses of poetry? (Political act, expression of emotion, formulaic for remembering things, to tell a story, to rouse people to attention and action, to have fun, to play with language, other?)
3. Why does poetry continue to exist? And in what form(s) do we see it today?
4. What makes a poem or a song “good”?

Day 5:

Use the songs students brought in to have a dance party (with refreshments). Our school has a dance

department-it would be fun to have some of the dance students come in and get the party started.

## Week Two: Some Basic Technical Aspects of Poetry

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Here we learn some basics about poetry, so we can use these ideas to analyze and understand the ways in which rap is poetic.

Days 1-5:

Give students a handout with a glossary of poetic terms. I have included a glossary at the end of this unit which is excerpted from Susan Santovasi's Yale Teachers Institute unit entitled: "The Poetry We Sing: A Women's Perspective." Also give students a handout that has examples of key terms. You can use the following examples, or come up with your own.

**Assonance:** when a particular vowel sound is repeated.

Example: Notice the use of the "o" sound throughout these lines from "Red Lilies" by Barbara Guest. "Snow erupts from thistle/toe; the snow pours out of you."

**Alliteration:** when a particular consonant sound is repeated.

Example: Notice the alternating use of the "s" and "t" sounds throughout these same lines from "Red Lilies" by Barbara Guest. "Snow erupts from thistle/toe; the snow pours out of you."

**Allusions:** helps the reader recognize something-person, place, story, historical event-outside the poem. Today's music is full of allusions to television, other musicians, cartoons, famous people, even other rappers. Allusions can add layers of meaning to your poem. Look at these lines from "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five: "My brother's doin' bad, stole my mother's TV/Says she watches too much, it's just not healthy/ "All My Children" in the daytime, "Dallas" at night/Can't even see the game or the Sugar Ray fight".

**Symbols:** people use symbols to stand for things, whereas similes and metaphors are used to compare things. For example, a wedding ring is an actual object. But it can also be a symbol of love, commitment, or marriage. To use another example, a cross can stand for suffering or Christianity or faith. So if you use the word cross in a poem you can get a lot of meaning from just the one word.

**Similes:** explicit comparison. Often uses the word "like" or "as".

Example: His yell was like the whistle of a steam train/It grew louder and stronger as it came near.

**Metaphors:** metaphors make a comparison without using the word "like" or "as". Example: My love is not like a dying flower; My love is a dying flower.

**Repetition:** can help to stress or emphasize something important. Notice the effect of repetition in Ntozake Shange's poem "get it and feel good": "whatever good there is to get/get it & feel good/whatever good there is to get/get it & feel good/ get it & feel good"

**Rhyme:** there are a number of types of rhyme (including perfect rhyme-top/pop; and slant rhyme-amaze/please). There are end rhymes and internal rhymes (which occur within a line of poetry, not at the end of the line).

**Rhythm:** this is the natural rhythm found in all speech. Some syllables are stressed and some are not. Ron Padgett says, "Rhythm in writing is like the beat in music."

**Meter:** pre-established rhythmic patterns used in traditional poetic forms. For example, a very common meter is "iambic pentameter", which is a count of ten syllables with every other syllable stressed: For example, read this line from *Sonnets from the Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "How *do* I *love* thee? Let me *count* the *ways* ." (Of course, most poetry is not sing-song, but has some variation in the meter. The syllables in this line could be emphasized in a number of ways.)

**Theme:** what a poem is about.

**Onomatopoeia:** The naming of a thing by imitating a sound associated with that thing, such as: slash, beep, or zoom. Read these lines from Alfred Tennyson's poem "Come down, O Maid": "The moan of doves in immemorial elms,/And murmuring of innumerable bees."

**Punctuation:** Punctuation marks generally carry greater weight in poetry than in prose. Commas, periods, ellipses, dashes, and spaces all have an effect when it comes to creating rhythm (and affecting meaning) in a poem.

Discussion questions:

1. Define poetry. What makes poetry different from regular language? How is it the same?
2. Do you think a poet's job is harder or easier than a prose writer's job?
3. Explain what meter is. Wordsworth has noted that if the emotional content is tough, the meter can help regulate the emotions. How does this concept relate to rap music?

Day 5:

Give students a game to play. Have them work in pairs or in teams. Have them circle and label as many of the above poetic elements as they can in "The Abolition of ManCHILD" by Mars ILL (or any other rap you choose). Have refreshments and a prize for the team that can identify the most correct elements in the rap.

## **Weeks Three and Four: Rap's Poetic Relatives-Learning to Use Other Poetic Forms**

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Days 1-10 (with the exception of Fridays):

Over the next two weeks, students will learn how to identify (and write) six poetic forms that relate to rap

music: Skeltonic; Free Verse; Dramatic (Narrative) Poem; Lyric Poem; Cento; and Elegy.

## Skeltonic

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A skeltonic is a poetic form composed of short lines (of about 3-6 words). Each line rhymes with the next and the rhymes are continued as long as the poet wants. The pace is fast and this type of poetry is sometimes called tumbling verse. Many rap songs have this tumbling verse feeling, though the lines are often more than six words. In the following poem, note how poet Whitney Kelley pushes the use of end rhymes. Note the short lines, the rhythm and the use of slant rhyme (people/potential).

My Generation

By Whitney Kelley, Co-op junior

I have a need  
To help others succeed.  
It is my deed  
To cautiously lead,  
With dedication,  
My generation  
To higher education  
Through preparation  
For a competitive nation,  
Laying the foundation  
For moral cultivation  
Of intelligence.  
I have an immense  
Layer of patience  
For the ignorance  
Of a people  
Who have potential  
To be essential  
To the consequential  
Development  
And betterment  
Of the environment  
Of the community  
With the opportunity  
To enforce unity.

Now look at these lines from “Mama Said Knock You Out” by L.L. Cool J:

“The babies, we gotta teach em, and hold em/Send em to school, so we can teach em, and mold em/Shape em, and make em take form/Cause their mind is like a ball of clay when it's wet and warm”

Or these lines from “Hold Ya Head” by Tupac Shakur:

“Expose foes, with my hocus pocus flows/They froze/Now suckas idealize my chosen blows”

Have students write a skeltonic poem.

## Free Verse

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In this form, the poet is free to create his or her own rules to follow. This allows the poet to create the form of their poem to best match their intentions.

One of the most renowned free verse poems is “Song of Myself” by Walk Whitman:

“I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars,/And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,/And the tree-toad is a chef-d’oeuvre for the highest”

Have students write a free verse poem.

Dramatic Poetry (also called Narrative Poetry)

Tells a story with a clear beginning, middle and end. Here are a few lines from “The Clasp” by Sharon Olds:  
“She was four, he was one, it was raining, we had

colds,/we had been in the apartment two weeks straight,/I grabbed her to keep her from shoving him over on his/face, again, and when I had her wrist”. You can see how she is beginning to tell a dramatic story.

Have students write a dramatic poem.

## Lyric Poetry

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Lyric is a poetic form named after the lyre, an ancient Greek musical instrument. As the Greek poets recited poems, they used the lyre to accompany their words. Lyric poems express emotion. Basically all rap songs are composed in this way, emphasizing a beat behind and assisting the music.

Have students write a lyric poem (with musical accompaniment if possible).

## Cento

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Cento comes from the Latin word meaning “patchwork.” The cento is a poem made entirely of pieces from poems by other authors, with footnotes that credit the original authors. Many rap songs “sample” music and lines from other musical pieces, as well as from newspaper headlines, advertisements, etc. For example, Jay-Z says in his song “Takeover”: “Then I heard your album bout your tec on your dresser/So yeah I sampled your voice, you was usin it wrong/You made it a hot line, I made it a hot song”.

There are literally hundreds of songs (not only rap) that string together samples from previous songs. Here is an excerpt of a cento from a creative writing freshman Greg Grant: Why do they hate me and try to hold me down/I don’t smile no more; my life’s full of pain/The tears start flowing and my heart dips into despair/Y’all judge me before y’all even get to know me” Inspired by: Christopher Hillard, Shie, Sparkle, Rosalee Munoz, Hersh and J-Girl.

Have students write a cento.

## Elegy

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This is one of the most ancient forms of poetry. It expresses the sadness of death. The form has more to do with the content than with any specific structure. There is a good deal of rap content that has to do with death. For example, a number of elegy-type songs have been written about the deaths of Biggie and Tupac Shakur, who were murdered.

Here is an elegy by Dylan Thomas called “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night”:

“Do not go gentle into that good night,/Old age should burn and rave at close of day;/Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Have students write an elegy.

Day 5:

Poetry Reading: Have snacks (of course) and have students read their favorite poem(s) that they wrote during the week. If they are shy about reading their own work, they can read a poet that exemplifies one of the forms we studied.

Day 10:

Talk to students about what the word canon means in the context of the literary world. Ask them what literature has been required reading for them in school. Then, have each student create their own canon of rap and poetry (this does not have to be rap music only). They should list at least 10 works and write a sentence or two describing why the work should be considered a “classic.” Any type of lyric that can be considered poetic can be included. Here you can involve students who have musical tastes other than rap. Then have people share their lists and collaborate to create your own class canon.

## Week Five: Hip Hop Party-Getting into the Groove

### Days 1-4:

Using rap and poetry to focus on language awareness and skills. It is important to become adept at using language (words, punctuation, rhyme, rhythm, etc.) in order to be good at writing poetry. These are your tools to build your message.

1. Listen to a variety of historical raps and rap-like songs. Give the students a copy of the words to read along while they listen to the music. Some examples:

- "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugar Hill Gang
- "Rapture" by Blondie
- "The Message" by Furious Five
- "Planet Rock" by Afrika Bombaataa
- "Going back to Cali" by LL Cool J
- "Cantaloop" (Flip Fantasia) by US3

Have students write in their journals about what seems to make rap rap (content, form, beat, performer, etc.).

2. Class picks a word. Then run a contest to see who can think of the most ways to say the same thing (using words and phrases) in 15 minutes (perhaps work in teams).

3. Analyzing rap as poetry

Play a variety of songs that students have brought in. After each one, have students write in their journals for a few minutes to answer the following questions:

- a. What is this song about?
- b. What were the key words that convey the content?
- c. What is the importance of the beat?
- d. Did I like this song? Why or why not?
- e. Is this poetry? Why or why not? Be specific using terms and forms discussed in previous weeks.

Day 5:

Play the Language Game: Language is the raw material of the poet. Help students develop awareness of the habitual ways in which they use language, in order to allow them more choice. Have the students go around and each contribute a rule. (Here are the rules my freshmen class came up with: Must use proper punctuation. Cannot say “gonna,” “wanna,” “ain’t,” “um,” “like,” or “dude,”. Cannot use profanity or double negatives. They also suggested no whining and no making fun of others. The group then picks a topic, such as “school”. The first person makes up and says two sentences aloud, being careful to follow all the rules. Then the next person adds two sentences to the story, and so on. Keep score of mistakes on the blackboard and (if you like) have a prize for the person with the fewest mistakes.

## Week Six: The Power of Words-Battle Rapping

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Days 1-4:

In “Looking for Richard,” his documentary about Shakespeare’s “Richard III,” Al Pacino talks about how hard it is to understand Shakespeare’s lines. “They’re like poetry. It’s hard to grab hold of some rap slang, too. It’s hard to get hold of it until your ear gets tuned. You have to tune up.” Anthony DeCurtis says in *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, “The process of cracking the ever-shifting code of hip hop lingo is a huge part of the fun of listening to the music.”

1. Exercise: Work alone or in pairs. Take a rap poem (or use Jabberwocky) and replace slang with standard English. Then take a standard English poem and substitute slang words to make it rap. Share the results with the class. An example of replacing slang (or in this case made-up words) with standard English is as follows:

JABBERWOCKY (use the whole poem)

Lewis Carroll

`Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.

One possible translation:

It was brilliant and the slippery toads

Gyrated and tumbled in the waves;

The animals were all crazy,

And the small rats were outside.

2. Bouts Rimés game: Bouts Rimés (pronounced boo ree-MAY) is French for rhyming ends. This type of poem is created when one person gives a list of rhyming words to another person, who writes poetic lines ending with those rhyming words, in the same order in which they were given. For example, a person gives another person the words: dog, old, fog, and fold. The second person writes: I pity my dog/He’s weak and old/His mind’s like fog/His legs, they fold. Have each student contribute a pair of rhymes. All students (alone or in pairs/teams) must come up with a poem using all the rhymes in order. Share with class.

3. Discuss battle rapping: Battle rapping is often compared to a long standing ghetto game known as “the dozens,” in which two people go back and forth telling jokes about the other, seeing who can last the longest and remain the wittiest. Some people feel that battling may have caused the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. Biggie. Read the following poem about battle rapping written by a student, who has changed his ways:

“Not about that”

A message in the most polite way

By Theo Coleman, Co-op senior

Let’s get one thing straight

Battling was great

But the words are hate.

Then, no longer fake

Becomes serious

Other’s furious

Nobody can win

Death caused by a pen

Biggie and Tupac

Both of them got shot

For the words “Hip-Hop.”

It escalated

More and more hatred

Cannot erase it.

Just got to face it

Battling is wack

I’m “not about that.”

4. Watch a video of MTV battle rapping or a selective battle rap scene from the movie “8 Mile” with Eminem.

Day 5:

Have a positive battle rap. Two people start. Each participant must creatively compliment (in rhyme if possible) the person opposing them. (Students will likely find this more difficult than criticizing their opponent!) The winner takes on the next contestant. The class claps for the best. Have refreshments and a prize for the winner(s) if you like.

## **Week Seven: Finding your Voice and Getting Your Message out-The Last Poets**

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How can students use rap poetry to become griots for their times?

Days 1-4:

- Watch "The Last Poets" documentary (may take a day and a half). Though rap's beginnings are debatable, many people agree that it began with The Last Poets, who wrote rhymes played to drums and percussion to drive home social and political points. After The Last Poets, early rappers were DJs who played with music. The trend in the beginning was toward social action, now lyrics are filled with "gangsta" stuff. Ask the students to write in their journals about why they think this trend has happened and where they see it going.
1. Discuss how rap was influenced by The Last Poets. Write in your journals.  
Oration and social commentary/Positive rap/Have a message. Listen to famous orators (for example: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech). Give the students the words to read along to. Have them circle poetic words and elements. Have them circle key words that convey King's message. Listen to positive rap songs, such as "I Can" (excerpted below). Talk about the social importance of rap today. What is being said and why?

I Can

By Nasir Jones (Nas)

Be, B-Boys and girls, listen up  
You can be anything in the world, in God we trust  
An architect, doctor, maybe an actress  
But nothing comes easy it takes much practice

- Have students write down at least three topics that get them excited, get them mad, get them feeling hopeless, get them thinking of solutions. As a group, make a group list of the important issues of today.
5. Have each student pick a topic from the list. Write an essay or speech about it.
  6. Now make the essay or speech into a poem or rap.

Use the following raps and poems to generate discussion about social issues in poetry.

“It’s Like that” (excerpt)  
Run-D.M.C.

“War going on across the seas  
Street soldiers killing the el-der-lee  
Whatever happened to unity?  
It’s like that and that’s the way it is.”

Justice (P. 87 The Black Poets)  
By Langston Hughes

“That Justice is a blind goddess  
Is a thing to which we black are wise:  
Her bandage hides two festering sores  
That once perhaps were eyes.”

“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (excerpt)  
By Gil Scott Heron

The revolution will not go better with Coke.  
The revolution will not fight the germs that cause bad breath.  
The revolution WILL put you in the driver's seat.  
The revolution will not be televised,

Day 5:

Have students read their essays or poems to the class today. (Have snacks.)

## Week Eight: Crafting and Performing Your Poetry- Slam Poetry

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Days 1-4:

Watch the film *Slam Nation* (please be sure to watch this film before showing it to students. You may want to edit. There are parts of the film that have swearing, the use of the word

1. "nigger" and one quick shot of a woman lifting up her shirt). (You might also want to show the slam poetry performance at the end of the film *Slam*, though you'll come across the language problems mentioned above.)
2. Start to craft slam poems. Here is a poem to get them thinking:

Gaming

By Theo Coleman, 10th grade

I'm walking down Arch  
Headed to the park  
Sky getting dark  
Once I get there  
Girls are everywhere  
Fixing up their hair  
With their tight pants  
Standing on the slant  
In a fly stance  
See my dog Jay

Wearing all gray  
Partying away  
With these two chicks  
Both kind of thick  
Dancing by his hip  
But with no sounds  
I slowly turn around  
Face to the ground  
Greeted by a girl  
Hairstyle swirled  
With a little curl  
Catching eye site  
Body type right  
Game her I might  
She says my name is P  
I say my name is T  
So what's it gonna be  
I see you grilling me  
I really like your eyes  
They're like a sunrise  
Brightening up this night  
Shining on my life  
Making you the wife  
Is all that's on my mind  
And taking up my time  
So listen to this rhyme  
I wanna be your man  
I try to grab her hand  
She says I got a man'  
Well can we be friends  
She says it all depends  
If you got a Benz  
I shake my head no  
She says I gotta go  
And that is all I know.

3. Continue crafting. Use examples:

Poem by Corey O'Brien, Co-op High 10th grade

I think a painter is what I'll be  
Mix the black with the white  
On the canvas of life;  
Create the artistry  
The picture is humanity.

4. Have students switch poems and give constructive criticism to each other in order to help revise work. Homework: Work on perfecting your slam poetry for class tomorrow.

Day 5:

End the unit with a poetry slam. (Have snacks and invite others to be an audience if class feels comfortable.)

## **Assessment**

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Students will be graded on the following:

- Daily participation grade
- Homework assignments will be graded; especially those that are due on Fridays
- Weekly grade for showing that they made daily entries in their journals
- Participation in Friday performances and activities
- Other grades as deemed appropriate

## Annotated Bibliography

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([www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Palladium/8153/raphistory.htm](http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Palladium/8153/raphistory.htm)). Article about the history of rap music.
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## Online Resources:

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1. These sites (as well as a number of others) can provide you with lyrics to rap songs.  
[www.ohhla.com/all.html](http://www.ohhla.com/all.html) or [www.allthelyrics.com](http://www.allthelyrics.com).
2. Urban Think Tank Institute is a nonpartisan, community-based home for a body of thinkers in the Hip Hop generation. It publishes "Doula: The Journal of Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture" in which you can find thoughtful, well-written and current articles related to hip hop.  
[www.urbanthinktank.org/Articles.cfm](http://www.urbanthinktank.org/Articles.cfm).
3. Bill Moyers's PBS program "Fooling with Words." Web site with teaching resources.  
[www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/)

4. Famous speeches can be found on this web site, including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. <http://www.chicago-law.net/speeches/speech.html#12d>.
5. For a dictionary of rap terms, visit the Rap Dictionary at <http://www.rapdict.org/terms/a>. Created and updated by Patrick "Tricky" Atoon and Niels "Jax" Janssen, since 1992.

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