



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1997 Volume V: The Blues Impulse

---

## Finding the Rhythm of Blues in Children's Poetry, Art and Music

Guide for Curriculum Unit 97.05.04  
by Jennifer Blue

The curriculum unit will focus upon slavery in the U.S.A. along with the blues ideology. My intention for devising this unit is to help children discover the blues aesthetic as a form of artistic expression. The unit will evolve in a language-based classroom. All projects are geared to achieve the goals of language acquisition and development, and artistic expression and interpretation. Therefore, all related activities will center around poetry, art, and music related to migration, slavery in the U.S., and African American culture.

The blues can be considered a survivalist coping mechanism with origins in slavery. The blues are almost always sad songs. Yet behind the sadness there is almost always laughter and strength. The blues has its primary expression in musical form. However, one can **find** the blues expression revealed in other forms of artistic representation.

Students will be exposed to a wealth of poetry and literature reflective of slavery and the blues. As a response to the literature, children will follow the many structured steps of the writing process. Students will create their own literary pieces that embrace the blues ideology.

Another component of the unit is the Visual Art section. Students will observe paintings and drawings from Artists Jacob Lawrence (Migration Series) and Tom Feelings (The Middle Passage). These paintings and drawings are reflective of the slave trade in America. Students will discover how line, color, and shape play important roles in communicating messages through art. The students will also describe the mood of the selections and attempt to create their own artwork that will capture the mood of a slave plantation. Students will inevitably discern that art can reflect feeling and moods as much as words do.

Music is a significant element in this unit since the blues has its principal expression in musical form. Students will listen to selections from Billie Holiday, Cassandra Wilson, and Wynton Marsalis. These artists have successfully captured the essence of the blues. Young learners may not completely comprehend all of the lyrics. However, listening to the rhythm of the music can certainly set a mood which the students can discuss.

All components of the unit will be intertwined in a production where students will perform their poetry or prose while their art work is displayed. Students will **find** the rhythm and lyricism of the blues in music, art, and literature in addition to understanding the demoralizing effects of slavery.

(Recommended Language Arts, Social Studies, Music, Visual Arts, grades 1-4)

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>