5 | Rhythm and Syllables

OBJECTIVES
Students will examine the connection between the number of syllables in a line of a song and the song’s rhythm.
Students will demonstrate the ability to apply what they learn about rhythm and syllables to their own songs.

STANDARDS
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4

VOCABULARY
rhythm, syllables

PREPARATION
• Make copies of “Where the Green Grass Grows” Lyric Sheet.
• Locate audio or video version of “Where the Green Grass Grows” performed by Tim McGraw.
• For advanced students, make copies of “Spotlight on Syllables” in the Appendix.

FREE WRITE (5 minutes)

DISCUSS HOMEWORK (4 minutes)
Divide the class into pairs to share their creative writing from Question 2 in the homework. Students should identify the theme and message of their partner’s journal entry, supporting their conclusions with textual evidence.

BRAINSTORM (1 minute)
Prompt: In your journal, spend one minute defining rhythm and identifying where you hear rhythm.

ACTIVITY (35 minutes)
1. Offer a reminder that songs are a combination of words and music. For lyrics to fit with music, songwriters need to learn about these terms and concepts:
   • Rhythm is a pattern of sounds and silences.
   • Syllables are the parts that a word is naturally divided into when it is pronounced.
   • Songwriters pick words and phrases that fit within a consistent pattern of syllables. In short, they make their words fit a rhythm.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTION OPPORTUNITY
This lesson is an excellent time to connect with other teachers to supplement student understanding of rhythm. The following subjects provide opportunities for connection:
   Music: meter, rhythm, phrasing
   Math: patterns, fractions
   Literature: meter, poetry

Note: Math and music teachers could collaborate in a lesson about the mathematical aspects of rhythm and time signatures in music.
2. To illustrate the importance of lyrics that match a rhythm, read or sing the following lyrics aloud. Then read the second set of lyrics with the added syllables. Students should be able to hear that something about the rhythm sounds wrong.

**Star-Spangled Banner — Francis Scott Key**

And the rocket’s red glare And the rocket’s red glare
The bombs bursting in air The bombs exploding everywhere
Gave proof through the night Gave proof through the night
That our flag was still there That our flag was still there

**Beat It — Michael Jackson**

Just beat it (beat it) beat it (beat it) Just beat it (beat it) beat it (beat it)
No one wants to be defeated No one wants to lose when they get in a fight

**We Will Rock You — Brian May (of Queen)**

We will, we will rock you We will, we will beat you really bad

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**TEACHER TIP**

Allow students to have fun with this activity. Let them add syllables to other lyrics so that they sound funny. Make the point that songwriters can squeeze in words, if need be, but that certain phrases fit better than others.

3. Discuss the purpose of the rhythmic choices that songwriters make by using the following questions as a starting point:

- How does the rhythm of the songs in the previous exercise connect with the meaning of the lyrics?
- How does the rhythm the writer chooses affect the mood of the song?

4. Distribute the **“Where the Green Grass Grows” Lyric Sheet.**

- Ask students to count the syllables for the first verse and write the total at the end of each line. **Note:** Count the syllables as they would be pronounced when sung. For example, “every,” which has three syllables, would usually be sung with two syllables: “ev’ry.”
- Pair up students to count the syllables for the remainder of the song. (They won’t need to count the second and third choruses since they are identical to the first.)
- Initiate a class discussion on the pattern of syllables, pointing out that, while the pattern might not be identical from verse to verse, it is usually close to the same.
TEACHER TIP

Students might mistake the rhythm of lyrics with the rhythm or beat of a song, particularly when thinking of rap or hip-hop songs that are driven by intricate or intense beats. Students might focus on creating a beat rather than creating lyrics that fit a beat. While a song's beat and its lyrics are interrelated, students should focus on the lyrics for this activity.

Fitting lyrics uniformly into a certain rhythm is an integral part of songwriting. While students will not master this skill in just one lesson, it is essential that they understand:

• The verses and chorus should follow a pattern of syllables.
• It is acceptable for lines to have a varied number of syllables as long as the lines can be easily spoken within a uniform beat. In other words, each line of the song should fall into a rhythm. A way to check this is to count syllables. A good guideline is to keep the syllable count in each line of a verse or chorus within approximately four syllables of the counts in the other lines of the verse or chorus.
• A word can be sustained for extra syllables, if need be; however, students should test it by reciting it out loud.
• A pause, or a “rest,” can count as a syllable; however, students should try reciting it to see how it sounds.

5. If there is extra time, allow groups who have finished the worksheet to rewrite words to the first verse of a popular song, maintaining the same rhythm.

For advanced work on rhythm, see “Spotlight on Syllables” in the Appendix.

HOMEWORK

Give students the following prompt:

Choose three songs to analyze. Locate the lyrics in an Internet search. You may choose songs that you like, songs that you dislike, or a combination of both. Then complete the following assignments:

1. In your journal, copy the first verse and the chorus of each song. Number the lines, and then count and write down the number of syllables in each line. For example:

   **Song 1**
   - Verse
   - Line 1: 8 syllables
   - Line 2: 8
   - Line 3: 8
   - Line 4: 8
   - Chorus
   - Line 1: 4 syllables
   - Line 2: 4

   **Song 2**
   - Verse
   - Line 1: 6 syllables
   - Line 2: 8
   - Line 3: 6
   - Line 4: 8
   - Line 5: 9
   - Line 6: 4
   - Chorus
   - Line 1: 8 syllables
   - Line 2: 8
   - Line 3: 8
   - Line 4: 8

   **Song 3**
   - Verse
   - Line 1: 6 syllables
   - Line 2: 6
   - Line 3: 6
   - Line 4: 8
   - Line 5: 8
   - Chorus
   - Line 1: 6 syllables
   - Line 2: 6
   - Line 3: 6
   - Line 4: 8

2. From this exercise, what did you learn about the kinds of syllable patterns you like or dislike?

3. Write a verse and chorus that uses each of the three patterns you discovered. This writing (and all your writing for this unit) could become part of your final song or you could just use it as practice.