

Activity Plan

<i>Title</i>	The Poetics of HipHop
<i>Subject</i>	Theatre: Responding
<i>Author</i>	ArtsEdge: Theresa Sotto <i>Original Writer</i> Jen Westmoreland Bouchard <i>Adaptation</i>
<i>Grade level</i>	Grades 9-12
<i>Time duration</i>	60-120 mins
<i>Overview</i>	Analysis of hip hop music and lyrics can provide students with a greater understanding of rhythm, form, diction, and sound in poetry. Students will analyze form in Shakespearean sonnets, then analyze hip hop music to determine common characteristics between the Bard's work and the music of hip hop artists. Students will reinforce their understanding of the connections between hip hop and poetry through close analysis of the works of the poet Nikki Giovanni and hip-hop artists Jurassic 5, and through the creation of their own poetry.
<i>Objective</i>	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify the rhyme scheme in Shakespeare's sonnets and in hip hop lyrics.• Discuss several poetic terms, including rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, meter, and form.• Analyze meaning and craft of hip hop lyrics and poetry by Nikki Giovanni and Saul Williams.• Detect use of poetic characteristics in hip hop lyrics.• Discuss the commonalities between hip hop music and poetry.• Write their own poems, incorporating new poetry terminology.
<i>Materials</i>	Materials Resources

Activities and procedures

Audio

- [Ego Tripping](#)
- [Work it Out](#)

Image

- [Sonnet 18](#)

Printable

- [Vocabulary - The Poetics of Hip Hop](#)
- [Assessment Rubric - The Poetics of Hip Hop](#)
- [Assessment Rubric - The Poetics of Hip Hop](#)

Video

- [Demetrius](#)

ENGAGE

1. Lead students in a discussion of sonnets.
 - Distribute copies of "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day" ([Sonnet #18](#)) and display through the Resource Carousel above.
 - If students are not familiar with the form, explain to them that Shakespeare adapted the sonnet form from a previously existing form, the Petrarchan sonnet.
2. Ask students to figure out the rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet.
 - Explain to students that Petrarch was responsible for making the sonnet form famous; his work *Canzoniere* was read across Europe and soon reached England, shifting in form along the way.
 - Explain that the Petrarchan rhyme scheme was *AB AB CD CD -- CDE CDE*. Shakespeare's sonnet, as revealed by the rhyme scheme, is comprised of three quatrains and a concluding couplet.
 - This form allowed for a freer association of images from quatrain to quatrain that comes to a resolution in the concluding couplet. Fortunately for sonnet writers in England, the Shakespearean sonnet worked to their advantage: whereas rhymes are more easily created in the Italian language, words in the English language do not allow for as many rhymes.

BUILD KNOWLEDGE

1. Ask students to name different forms of poetry and write them on the board (i.e., free verse, sonnets, sestinas, odes, etc.). Ask students if they listen to hip hop then ask them if they think hip hop is a form of poetry.

2. Discuss with students what hip hop and poetry have in common.

- Some characteristics to point out: careful attention to rhythm in lyrics, as well as end rhyme, slant rhyme, internal rhyme, alliteration, and assonance; use of repetition for emphasis; manipulation of language to convey powerful emotions and messages (sometimes controversial and/or personal); choice of diction based on audience.
- Write each characteristic discussed on the board. You may wish to pass out the [Vocabulary](#) handout located within the Resource Carousel.

3. Explain to students that Shakespeare wrote using vocabulary popular during his day, and similarly, hip hop artists incorporate "urban" slang in their lyrics.

- Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter, rap artists often write in sixteen-bar stanzas, normally followed by four-to-eight-bar hooks. (See Jerry Quickley's essay, "hip hop poetry" in *The Spoken Word Revolution* for more info).
- Hip hop is actually a kind of poetry. Ask students to think about hip hop they have listened to, and whether or not it follows the typical, sixteen bar stanza, or if it breaks from that tradition.

4. Refer to the poetry characteristics written on the board and point out that there is much to be learned about poetry from hip hop. Play the performance of Nikki Giovanni's poem, "[Ego Tripping](#)" from the Resource Carousel above.

- Pass out copies of and display Nikki Giovanni's poem "Ego Tripping."
- Divide students in groups, and have them brainstorm which poetry characteristics can be found in Giovanni's poem, citing specific examples (this can also be accomplished as individual homework).
- If appropriate, review the definitions of each characteristic with your students using the poetry terminology handout.

5. Discuss the meaning of Giovanni's "Ego Tripping". Who is the "I" in the poem? Depending on students' knowledge of ancient history, you may choose to spend some time defining the references to legendary figures and images, including Nefertiti, the sphinx, Hannibal, the pyramids, Noah, etc.

6. List the supernatural elements in the poem (i.e., "sowing diamonds," "created the Nile," "crossing the desert in three hours," etc.) and point out that the exact origins of Nefertiti and the pyramids are in dispute. Ask students why they think the speaker of Giovanni's poem claims to have birthed Nefertiti and constructed a pyramid. Ask

students what all of the images/figures have in common. Talk about the empowering and all-embracing nature of the poem.

7. Ask students to share with the class the characteristics of hip hop that they found in Giovanni's poem. Discuss students' findings and explain how the writers' word choices and syntax enhance meaning. Some examples include the following:

- How the repetition of the word "so" in the line "I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal" works to build momentum and emphasize the speaker's praise of self for surviving unfair challenges
- How the alliterative use of a "soft" syllable like "s" in the line "as we sailed on a soft summer day" mimics the smooth travel of sailing on calm waters, particularly as compared to the "hard" consonants of "d" and "p" and "t" in the line "I stood proudly at the helm.
- How the rhythm in the line "I walked to the fertile crescent and built the sphinx" imitates the movement of the speaker; the speaker is walking for eight long syllables and creates the sphinx in three syllables, with "built" and "sphinx" as two stressed syllables, thereby emphasizing the weight of the god-like action of building the sphinx. In other words, the line "I walked to the fertile crescent and built the sphinx" has a very different pacing and rhythm than, for example, "I walked to the crescent and created the astonishing sphinx."
- How the rhyme in "so ethereal so surreal" works to create a fluid rhythm and move the poem forward.
- How phrases such as "I am bad" and "I am so hip" work to link the images of ancient history with a modern-day time, thereby speaking to a modern-day audience.

8. After discussing the poem, reinforce how rhythm in poetry and hip hop can be closely aligned. Re-listen to the performance of the poem in the Resource Carousel above.

APPLY

1. Play Jurassic 5's "[Work it Out](#)" for students using the Resource Carousel above.
2. Read an excerpt of the "Work it Out" lyrics with students.
 - Display through the Resource Carousel or distribute. Have students identify the rhyme scheme used by the hip hop artists. Discuss how the song successfully flows and has a driving beat and "head-bopping" rhythm.
 - Take one stanza of the song and examine the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Notice how the lyrics often

consist of iambs, just as Shakespeare wrote in iambs in his sonnet.

3. While the music is playing, ask students to consider how they would describe hip hop to someone who has never heard it before.

- Tell them to write down any word or group of words they can think of that would help describe the music, including made-up, onomatopoeic words (words that imitate sounds) that may evoke certain rhythms, a driving beat, or "scratching".
- Explain that the word "hip hop" is actually one example of an onomatopoeic word.

4. Refer to the list of hip hop/poetry characteristics discussed in the last class period. Have students point out the poetry characteristics in "Work it Out" and discuss the effect of rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and so on in Jurassic 5's song. Talk about themes of building a relationship and working through problems with your partner.

5. Tell students to write their own creative work on the theme of "overcoming challenges," being sure to pay attention to the sound and rhythm of the language they use. Ask students to complete a draft of their poem for homework.

Conclusions

REFLECT

1. Watch [Demetrius Amparam's performance](#) of his poem, "Better" from the *American Playlist* performance at the Kennedy Center.
2. Have students prepare performances of their poems paying particular attention to rhythm, meter, and the other concepts discussed in this lesson.
3. Have students break into groups to rehearse their poems.
4. After the class comes back together, have students perform their poems for the class.

ASSESSMENT

In conjunction with the [Assessment Rubric](#) that may be found within the Resource Carousel, assess the students based on the following criteria:

- Identified examples of hip hop characteristics in Giovanni's "Ego Tripping".
- Demonstrated understanding through insightful and frequent participation in class discussions.
- Wrote a poem that incorporated poetic elements discussed in Williams and Giovanni's work.

Have students assess their peer's work using the above Peer Assessment Rubric.

Adaptations

Extend the Learning

Challenge students to write lyrics to a hip hop song, encouraging them to set it to music if they wish.

Show students video clips of slam poets performing at the Kennedy Center in [Slam: KC](#).

You could also watch [Marc Smith](#) in a live performance on the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage Web site. Video clips are preferable due to the expressive body movements of the poets, but good audio clips would provide students with examples of inflection and tone.

Links and Websites

Teacher Background

Teachers should familiarize themselves with the texts discussed in the lesson as well as the genre of hip hop in general.

Teachers should listen to and watch all media associated with this lesson to ensure it conforms to the school's community standards.

Some resources that will provide teachers with insight to hip-hop music, poetry, and culture:

Print:

- Anglessey, Zoe, ed. *Listen Up! Spoken Word Poetry*. New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999.
- Cuddon, J.A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms: Literary Theory*. Revised by C.E. Preston. 4th Edition. London: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Eleveld, Mark, ed. *The Spoken Word Revolution*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003.

Media:

- Blackalicious. *Nia*. Quannum Projects, LLC. 2000. CD.
- Common. *One Day It'll Make Sense*. Relativity. 1997. CD.
- Devlin, Paul. *SlamNation*. 1999. Videocassette or DVD.
- Jurassic 5. *Power in Numbers*. Interscope Records. 2002. CD.
- Mos Def. *Black on Both Sides*. Rawkus (Uni). 2002. CD.
- Talib Qweli. *Quality*. MCA. 2002. CD

Prior Student Knowledge

Students may have some general knowledge of hip hop, but this is not necessary.