

Teaching Conceptual Frameworks, Critical Thinking, and Academic Writing By Connecting Song Chorus to Thesis Statement.

http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes_lp019/lp11_chorus.html

Lessons designed and written by Kelly Riley for LitTunes

*And I turned twenty-one in prison doing life without parole.
No-one could steer me right but Mama tried, Mama tried.
Mama tried to raise me better, but her pleading, I denied.
That leaves only me to blame 'cos Mama tried.*

Background and Rationale:

Most modern songs incorporate a chorus that is repeated throughout the song. In many cases, the chorus of a song — like a thesis statement in academic writing — acts as a unifying force that holds together the ideas presented in each of the verses as it puts forth a statement about the song's overall meaning. The chorus usually conveys the songwriter's purpose for writing the song. A song's chorus serves as a guide to help the listener understand the songwriter's purpose and message.

Examining a song and applying a classification system devised by the class can help students construct meaning as well as form an opinion on the function and purpose of a particular chorus. It is a logical process of academic investigation that quite naturally leads to the study of the thesis statement. Such skills empower students and help them gain new evaluation perspectives.

☀ **EDITOR'S NOTE:** Teacher Riley continues her discussion of the chorus-to-thesis-statement connection in a companion document, "**Notes for the Teacher**," which is available for download on the LitTunes webpage. She provides an indepth analysis of three types of statements — analytical, expository, and argumentative — that can be identified in these lessons. The document includes "Notes on Terminology" based on her classroom experience, "Evaluation Criteria" developed by students, and other valuable tips to help teachers make the most of these lessons.

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Type of Activity:

Whole class, small group, and individual

Approximate time:

Five 50-minute class periods

Grades:

10th, 11th, and 12th

Objective:

The overall goal of this five-lesson series is to help students develop conceptual frameworks and critical thinking skills that will empower them to compose strong and effective thesis statements for their own writing. The lessons may also open the door to enlightening discoveries and discussions about the strategic use and abuse of rhetorical devices and the differences between academic and other modes of writing.

By encouraging students to make connections between the function and purpose of a song's chorus and an academic paper's thesis statement, these lessons will foster the development and application of critical thinking skills. Later, students will experiment with transferring such skills to academic writing.

The lessons are designed to allow students to work independently, collaborate in small groups, and share their discoveries as a whole class. Students will listen to several pop tunes in order to examine, analyze, and evaluate the function of each song's chorus in relation to its verses. They will categorize the different purposes or ways a chorus can function within a song, then develop criteria for determining whether a song's chorus achieves its purpose. They will discuss an essential question: Does the chorus function effectively or ineffectively? Finally, students will apply their terminology/classification system and their evaluation criteria to thesis statements in order to determine the similarities and differences between these two devices.

Materials:

☀ MP3 player or CD player with speakers or headphones. All students should be able to hear the demonstration songs, and students should be given the option to share their self-selected song with group members.

☀ Handouts featuring the lyrics for each of the demonstration songs. Lyrics to "Born To Run" and "My Hometown" by Bruce Springsteen, "Redemption Songs" by Bob Marley, "True Colors" by Cyndi Lauper, "Mama Tried" by Merle Haggard, "Hope" by Twista and Faith Evans, and "The Bare Necessities" from Disney's *The Jungle Book* are available for download on the webpage.

☀ Handouts of the homework assignment, "Song Chorus — Independent Work," available for download on the webpage.

☀ The teacher should consider making a guide sheet to help students begin thinking about the function and effect of a song's chorus. The guide sheet can be adapted from "Notes for the Teacher."

☀ Another suggestion: Provide handouts on writing an effective thesis statement and copies of student-authored essays for thesis examination, categorization, comparison, and evaluation. You can download the handout "Creating a Thesis Statement" on the webpage.

Setup:

Teachers should ensure that their students are familiar with and have some experience participating in Socratic Circle (Copeland, 2005) seminar discussions prior to participating in these lessons.

LitTunes has a primer about the Socratic Circle technique. It can be downloaded on the webpage.

For the first lesson, the classroom should be setup for a Socratic seminar. For the remaining lessons, the classroom should be setup in a way that works for small groups but that can easily transition into a whole-class collaborative discussion.

Procedure:

Day One:

Arrange students for a Socratic seminar. Assign half the students to the inside circle and half the students to the outside circle. The inside circle will listen to and discuss the first two songs while the outside circle evaluates the performance of the inside circle. Then students should rotate — in other words, the inside circle will become the outside circle and vice versa. The second inside circle will then listen to and discusses the next two songs. For each song, students will discuss the meaning of the song, the purpose of the song, and the function or role of the chorus. Students might also discuss the intended audience, writer's or artist's point of view, and relevant cultural or historical contexts.

Song Suggestions:

- ☀ Bruce Springsteen's *Born To Run* and *Hometown*
- ☀ Bob Marley's *Redemption Songs*
- ☀ Cyndi Lauper's *True Colors*
- ☀ Merle Haggard's *Mama Tried*
- ☀ Twista and Faith Evan's *Hope*
- ☀ *The Bare Necessities* from the soundtrack
- ☀ *The Jungle Book*
- ☀ Gillian Welch's *Elvis Presley Blues* or *Annabelle*

Homework:

Students are directed to select a song to examine and discuss within a small-group setting during the next class. Students should be advised to select a song that is appropriate for a school setting and that contains an obvious chorus. Students will also need to complete a homework assignment, “Song Chorus — Independent Work.” The assignment sheet is available for download on the webpage.

Day Two:

Students should be given time at the beginning of class to complete their independent work. The rest of class should be devoted to small-group work with the teacher acting as guide, mentor, and facilitator. Students will share and discuss their songs with their group members. They will then use their recent experiences examining song choruses to develop key terms to help them categorize the different ways a chorus can function (or the different purposes a chorus can serve) within a song. They will also need to list some criteria suggestions that could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a song’s chorus. The teacher should move from group to group, acting as a guide, mentor, and facilitator.

Day Three:

After the students have worked in small groups and devised both categories and evaluation criteria, it is important to come together as a class to share each groups’ ideas and perspectives. Each group should be given a chance to call out their ideas as the teacher records them on the whiteboard. The teacher should ask students to clarify terms or ideas that seem vague or unclear. Inevitably, the terminology of each group will be unique, but the majority of their ideas will be similar.

After all of the students’ ideas are recorded on the board, the class should work together (with the teacher as mentor and guide) to make connections between and among these ideas. The goal of this collaborative exercise is for the class to create common terminology, categories, and evaluation criteria based on the ideas generated by the small groups.

Day Four:

It is important to revisit the demonstration songs that were introduced at the beginning of the lessons. Have the students put their newly developed terminology, categories, and evaluation criteria to work as they examine, classify, analyze, and evaluate the choruses of the demonstration songs. Gaining practice applying these terms will help them when they begin to work with thesis statements. Direct the students to work in their small groups. At the end of the period, students will share their process, experience, and findings with the class. The teacher should provide feedback for each group by recognizing accomplishments and offering some suggestions for improvement.

Day Five:

Students work in small groups to apply the terminology- categories and evaluation criteria to the analysis of an anonymous, student-authored, academic essay. After the students finish, each group member should write a short reflective paper describing their thoughts on the similarities and differences between a song's chorus and an academic essay's thesis statement.

For homework, students should be asked to apply the class's terminology/categories and evaluation criteria to one of their own essays.

Summary:

This assignment asks students to closely examine the role and function of a song's chorus and to explore the commonalities between song choruses and essay thesis statements. The five lessons help students develop critical thinking skills and important conceptual frameworks using song lyrics, a form of writing that students are passionate about and feel confident discussing.

The knowledge gained from these lessons will give students confidence in their thinking and analytical skills and provide foundational concepts for understanding thesis statements. Through their participation in individual and group work, students will recognize the significance of the chorus and gain a rich understanding of the different functions a chorus can have. They will also discover how a chorus' effectiveness is directly related to a songwriter's intended purpose. Students will learn to use classification systems to construct meaning and use criteria to evaluate effect. Finally, students will use their knowledge to understand the importance and function of a thesis statement as well as recognize the ways in which thesis statements differ based on the author's intended purpose.

Enrichment:

Use this assignment to introduce students to rhetorical devices such as appeals (logos, pathos, and ethos) and fallacies (band-wagon, straw-man, begging-the-question). Working with choruses should get them thinking about the importance of purpose, audience, context, language, genre, and other academic and literary devices.

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Kelly Riley teaches English language arts, grades 9 and 11, at the Agee-Lierly Life Preparation Services Center (ALLPS) on the campus of Fayetteville High School in northwest Arkansas. Prior to teaching high school English, Kelly taught basic writing and composition 1, 2, and 3 at the college level. She also served as a teaching mentor, a writing-center tutor, and an academic tutor for college athletes.

Kelly remains devoted to her quest to uncover magic elixirs, spells, and tonics that will revive students and restore them to their true form — that of heroic learning warriors. If you would like to contribute some of your magic to her collection, or would like access to some of the special lessons and activities she currently employs to further her quest, you are urged to contact her.

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**This document was adapted
from the online LitTunes lesson plan at this address:**

http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes_lp019/lp11_chorus.html

*LitTunes was launched on November 12, 2007.
We invite you to come back often as LitTunes
grows and develops. We also invite you to participate.
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