

A LETTER TO TUPAC

LESSON PLAN

LESSON INFORMATION

Grade Levels: 8-12

Subject Area: Language Arts/Music

Duration: 30 minutes

LEARNING

In 1992, when Tupac Shakur was 20 years old, he composed an essay inspired by Patrick Henry's impassioned 1775 speech before the Second Virginia Convention, which helped ignite the Revolutionary War. Tupac's essay is a radical act of empathy—across race, time, and distance—in which he applies Henry's credo ("give me liberty or give me death") to the enduring inequalities of 1990s America.

Essential Questions:

- How do ideas change when expressed in a persuasive essay versus a song lyric?
- Does any of what Tupac wrote then still apply today?
- In what ways is the spirit of the Revolutionary War inspiring to Tupac? In what ways is the spirit of Tupac inspiring to you?

Learning Objectives:

- Compose a creative lyric within established parameters.
- Assess the social and political contexts that inspired one of hip-hop's most significant artists
- Analyze the similarities and differences between expressing ideas in a persuasive essay and expressing those same ideas in rap lyrics.

Media and Materials Needed:

- Paper and a writing implement
- A copy (and transcript) of Tupac's Essay
- A transcript of 8-bars of Tupac's song "Wordz of Wisdom"

Key Terms:

- Musical Bar: A segment of time in music containing a set number of beats that helps structure rhythm.
- Rhyme: Two or more words that share the last stressed vowel sound and all the sounds following that vowel—such as in the words "demonstrate" and "exonerate."
- Style: The qualities that define how writers or performers express themselves.
- Diction: The choice of words in speech and writing.

STANDARD ALIGNMENT

National Core Arts Standards (Music):

MA:Cr1.1.HSII: Strategically utilize generative methods to formulate multiple ideas, refine artistic goals, and increase the originality of approaches in media arts creation processes.

MA:Cr2.1.HSII: Apply a personal aesthetic in designing, testing, and refining original artistic ideas, prototypes, and production strategies for media arts productions, considering artistic intentions, constraints of resources, and presentation context.

MA:Cr3.1.HSII: Consolidate production processes to demonstrate deliberate choices in organizing and integrating content and stylistic conventions in media arts production, demonstrating an understanding of associated principles, such as continuity and juxtaposition.

National English Language Arts (ELA) Standards:

CCRA.R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCRA.W.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCRA.SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies:

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with, and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

California Arts Standards:

Prof.MA:Cr1.1: Use identified generative methods to formulate multiple ideas, develop artistic goals, and problem solve in media arts creation processes.

Prof.MA:Cr2.1: Apply aesthetic criteria in developing, proposing, and refining artistic ideas, plans, prototypes, and production processes for media arts productions, considering original inspirations, goals, and presentation context.

Prof.MA:Cr3.1: Consolidate production processes to demonstrate deliberate choices in organizing and integrating content and stylistic conventions in media arts productions, demonstrating understanding of associated principles, such as emphasis and tone.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Competencies:

Self-Awareness: The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.

Social Awareness: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

Relationship Skills: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups.

INSTRUCTIONS

This exercise invites students to work closely with this singular artifact from the exhibit. It asks them to engage with Tupac's thinking and his art, absorbing his ideas and expressing them in the form of a brief lyric of their own composition—written in response to Tupac's essay and, if they chose, addressed to Tupac himself. Students will work together in small groups to analyze the essay and compose a short lyric inspired by Tupac's own language.

1. **READ** Tupac's two-page essay as a group and reflect both on the substance and the style of his argument. What are his key claims? What rhetorical techniques does he employ to make those claims more powerful? Elect a group member to take notes as you discuss.

2. **BUILD** a bank of important words and phrases (e.g., “rebels,” “thirst for liberty,” “coming of age,” etc.). You will be using them in the next step of the activity.
3. **WRITE** a brief (eight bar/eight line) rap verse inspired by the language and message of Tupac’s letter. For guidance on structure, consider the following lines from Tupac’s song “Words of Wisdom,” recorded around the same time as he wrote the letter:

This is for the masses, the lower classes, ones you left out
Jobs were given, better living, but we were kept out
Made to feel inferior, but we’re superior
Break the chains in our brains that made us fear ya
Pledge allegiance to a flag that neglects us
Honor a man that refuses to respect us
Emancipation Proclamation? Please
Lincoln just said that to save the nation

ASSESSMENT

- Students work together to compose a lyric that follows a rhyme pattern.
- Students demonstrate reading comprehension by using language from Tupac’s letter in their song lyrics.
- Students can explain some of the ways that the chosen means of communication—an essay or a song lyric—impact an audience’s perception of the ideas being expressed.

ATTRIBUTIONS

This lesson plan was written by Adam Bradley.

Adam Bradley is bestselling author, a professor of English and African American Studies at UCLA, and founding director of the Laboratory for Race & Popular Culture (aka, the RAP Lab). Adam pioneered the study of rap lyrics as poetry and has worked with some of the leading artists in popular music. As a curator, he has collaborated with museums across the country and the globe to launch exhibitions of art and culture. Most recently, he co-curated “Hip Hop America: The Mixtape Exhibit” (2023-2025) at the GRAMMY Museum. As a writer at large for the New York Times’s T Magazine, Adam tells impactful stories in long-form essays. He is the author of six books, including *Book of Rhymes*, *The Anthology of Rap*, and the national bestseller *One Day It’ll All Make Sense*, a memoir he wrote with the rapper and actor Common. Adam lives in Los Angeles.

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APPENDIX A - TUPAC LETTER

TRANSCRIPTION

"Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death"

p. 1

As a Jr. High student reading about the perils of the American Revolution I understand what Patrick Henry meant when he uttered these words I think every young black male and minority youth in general can relate greatly to that proven by the fact that I never forgot who Partick Henry was. Because even as a youngster I understand his thirst for Liberty; and now as a young black male coming of ager in a world who promises my extintion [sic] before the turn of the century, I too want to cry out those same works. ~~But then when little boys & girls of South Center went~~

As the poor, downtrodden, "little people" took from the shelves, hangers and isles of stores they could never afford I felt like the colonists must of feltas they saw Americans dressed like Indians throwing valuable barrells [sic] of tea into the Boston Waters. What would the media call them? Gang bangers surely wouldn't fit such an act. They were patriots they were Rebels they were Right and now in 1992 no matter what u [sic] believe we are patriots we are Rebels we are Right and when they jury issued the not guilty verdict it sounded a lot like Marie Antionette's let them eat cake speech, Amerikkka, we have to take responsibility for our mistakes. It can't prosecute the suspects in the Reginald Henry case without first persecuting not only those "police officers" who beat Rodney King but the ones who beat me and every other minority in the inner city and every activist and every homosexual and every victim of Amerikkka's in the closet oppression.

p. 2

Malcolm X once said something to the effect of u [sic] can't stabe me 4 inches in my back pull 2 inches out and expect gratitude we cannot begin to heal until we first identify the wound & take responsibility and then and only then can we rebuild our nation And yes I said our nation because after 400 yrs [sic] and unmeasurable amount of dead black bodies later we have earned our Right to be Amerikan [sic]. The Amerikkkan [sic] tradition continues through us. The tables have turned, ~~mainstream~~ If u are asking the question why did they...? Then u R [sic] now resembling Great Britain large & undominable as she seem when the Rebels are finished with being oppressed the revolution will be begin. What happened during the riots was merely a preview and coming attractions if Amerikkka [sic] doesn't recognize her forgotten colonists, this them it will take more than marches to heal the wounds It will take imagination, 4 another human being and respect for the sickness this country has let go unchecked After being trapped in the gutters and ghettos of Amerika [sic] we are now ready 2 be First class citizens no string attached we've died like americans [sic] overseas and cannot live like american here in our country We as adults will never see the finish effects of years of re-education but we doom our babies to our consequences if we dont [sic] as mothers, fathers, preachers, police, gang bangas [sic], and teachers don't hold our children with the truth about our mistakes All ~~men~~ people R created equal! These words must be lived by if not we will all die by the words of Patrick Henry

Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death

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As the poor, downtrodden, "little people" took from the shelves, hangers and isles of stores they could ~~never~~ afford I felt like the colonists must of felt as they saw Americans dressed like indians throwing valuable barrels of tea into the Boston waters. What would the media call them? Going bangers surely would not fit such an act they were Patriots they were Rebels they were Right and Now in 1992 no matter what u believe ~~we are~~ ~~we~~ **ARE** Rebels we are Right and when the Jury issued the not guilty verdict it sounded alot like Marie Antoinette's let them eat cake. Speedin' America we have to take responsibility for our mistakes. I can't prosecute the suspects in the Raymond Henry case without first persecuting not only these police officers who beat Rodney King but the ones who beat me and every other minority in the inner city and every activist and every homosexual and every victim of American's in the closet oppression.