

Waiting for a Train: Trains in Country Music and American Life

Curricular Connections:

Language Arts-

Develop and extend reading vocabulary.

Determine word meaning using root words, prefixes, and suffixes.

Social Studies-

Understand global economic connections, conflicts, and interdependence.

Explain the economic impact of improved communication and transportation.

Explore the impact of technology on social, political, and economic systems.

Explore how the unintended consequences of new technologies can impact human and non-human communities.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will identify trains as a song theme in country music by examining song lyrics.
- Students will explore trains as a mode of transportation to understand their purpose and how they are similar to and different from other forms of transportation.
- Students will research the history of the train to explore its evolution and impact on American life and country music.

Grade Level: Adaptable for K through 12

Prep Time: None

Teach Time: Two hours or two one-hour class periods

Vocabulary: blues, brakeman, freight train, metaphor, passenger train, simile, theme, train, transport, transportation

1. **Define the lesson vocabulary words with your students.** Consider including them in weekly spelling and vocabulary assignments.
2. **Share the following with students.**

Most songs are about ideas that many people can relate to, such as family, home, and love. These ideas or themes are found across all styles of music, from rap to rock to opera, because they are ideas most people understand. Trains are a popular theme in country music. Artists such as Country Music Hall of Fame members the Carter Family, Johnny Cash, and Jimmie Rodgers help us learn more about the theme through their songs about trains. Trains and train tracks also make good metaphors, in songs and in poems, for events in life.

Teacher Tip: Visit www.countrymusichalloffame.com to learn more about these Country Music Hall of Fame members.

3. **Discussion Questions:**

Have you ever ridden on a train? What was it like? If not, what do you think it would be like? Have you ever read about trains in books or seen them on television or in movies? Do you know any songs about trains? Why do you think people might write songs about trains?

4. **Read the following lyrics from the song “Cannonball Blues.”** The Carter Family recorded this song twice. The lyrics below come from a 1935 recording. You may wish to write the lyrics on the board or on a slide so that students can read along.

“Cannonball Blues”

Oh listen to the train
Coming down the line
Trying to make up
All of her lost time
From Buffalo to Washington

You can wash my jumper
Starch my overalls
Catch the train
They call The Cannonball
From Buffalo to Washington

My baby’s left me
She even took my shoes
Enough to give a man
These doggone worried blues
She’s gone, she’s solid gone

Yonder comes a train
Coming down the track
Carry me away
But it ain’t gonna carry me back
My honey babe, my blue eyed babe

I’m going up north
I’m going up north this fall
If luck don’t change
I won’t be back at all
My honey babe, I’m leaving you

"Cannonball Blues" by A.P. Carter
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The Carter Family recorded this song in 1930 as “The Cannon-Ball” and in 1935 as “Cannon Ball Blues.”

5. **After reading the lyrics aloud, look at a map of the United States and locate Buffalo, New York, and Washington, D.C.** How many miles are there between the two cities?

6. Consider the following questions, which can be discussed as a class or in small groups.

- Why do you think the train is referred to as “The Cannonball” in the song?
- Why do you think people might be excited to see trains?
- How do you think the performers feel about what they are singing? Happy? Sad? Regretful? Mad? How can you tell?
- This train is traveling between two cities, Buffalo and Washington. If you were going to ride a train somewhere, where would you go? Could you travel by train? Why or why not?
- This song was published in 1930. What was going on in the United States around this time? How would this impact trains and railroad travel?

Teacher Tip: There are many country songs about trains. Consider finding the following recordings at the library or online, and playing them for your class. These songs are all recorded by members of the Country Music Hall of Fame.

- “Wabash Cannon Ball”- Roy Acuff
- “Orange Blossom Special”- Johnny Cash
- “Bringing in the Georgia Mail”- Flatt & Scruggs
- “Waiting on a Train”- Jimmie Rodgers

7. Share the following with students.

Jimmie Rodgers was one of the first stars of country music, and also one of the first inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame. He is pictured on this poster. Jimmie had an enormous impact on country music. Many people including Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash cite him as an influence on their music. Before he became a performer, Jimmie worked on trains as a brakeman. Because of this, he was given the nickname “the Singing Brakeman.” He sang many songs about trains.

Teacher Tip: To help students explore the wide variety of songs about trains, instruct them to research, online, songs about trains by artists from different time periods or genres. Have students consider why trains could be used as a simile or metaphor in songs and poems?

8. Research, as a class, different types of trains and how train technology changed through time.

9. Share the following with students.

The train had an enormous impact on country music. Musicians such as Jimmie Rodgers worked on the railroad side by side with other musicians. This provided opportunities to share their music. As a result, different styles of American music influenced one another. For example, the

style and sound of the blues influenced the sound of country music and vice versa. In addition, trains made it much easier to transport both goods and people from one place to another. Sound recordings were invented in the early 1900s and were transported to people and stores across the country by train. This allowed many more people to buy records.

10. **Consider the extension activities below.** The first is a simpler exercise, while the second is appropriate for advanced students.

A. **Explore different types of transportation.** Trains are a form of transportation that serves many different functions. First, discuss with students the meaning of the word *transportation*. Invite them to share their own definitions and then look at the root of the word transportation-*transport*. Have students come up with a synonym for the word transport that will help them better understand the concept of transportation. One possible synonym is *to carry*.

Ask students to come up with a list of words to describe trains. They can work as a whole class or in small groups to create a word web with the word *train* at the center. They should also think about different types of trains. Two distinct types of trains are *passenger trains* (subways, light rails, airport trains, high-speed trains) and *freight trains*. After completing the word web, have students discuss different items that trains can transport.

Ask students to brainstorm other types of manmade transportation. Examples may include cars, buses, boats, airplanes, helicopters, or bicycles. After completing the list, discuss when it would be appropriate to use each method of transportation. Consider travel time, cost, distance, and type of territory covered. Students can also discuss different ways to use their own muscle power to move from place to place (walking, running, biking, and swimming are all examples).

B. The U.S. transcontinental railroad, which was completed in 1869, connected the West to the East by providing a transportation route from California to the Mississippi River. Divide the class in half and have one group research the positive effects of the transcontinental railroad on America and have the other group research negative effects. Students can use books and the Internet. After compiling information, ask each group to share what they have learned.

C. Create a timeline to display in the classroom indicating major transportation inventions and major events in American history.

Visit the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum

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