



Hip-Hop Lesson 1

What is Hip-Hop?

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GRADES: 6-8, 9-12

TIME: Two to four 50-minute sessions

SUBJECT AREAS: Language Arts, Cultural Studies, Social Studies, Music

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

In this lesson, students will:

- define hip-hop and describe its four main elements.
- become familiar with the roots of hip-hop music and culture, in socio-economic and geographic context.
- make connections between personal/community identity and hip-hop culture.
- think, write, and speak intelligently about the differences between mainstream popular rap and hip-hop as a culture.

SKILLS: Expressing and supporting opinions in writing and discussion; analytical listening; critical thinking; public speaking; independent research

MATERIALS:

- Computer(s) with internet access and speakers
- Chalkboard and chalk or whiteboard/butcher paper and markers
- Audio recording and playback device

I. INTRODUCTION

Write these quotes on the board:

“The thing about hip-hop is that it’s from the underground, ideas from the underbelly, from people who have mostly been locked out, who have not been recognized.”

-Russell Simmons, co-founder of Def Jam Recordings

“Rap is a gimmick, but I’m for the hip-hop, the culture.”

-Method Man, hip-hop artist, member of the Wu-Tang Clan

“Hip-hop is a vehicle.”

-Talib Kweli, hip-hop artist, founding member of Black Star

Students choose a quote, copy it down, and then free write. Have the students write for five minutes straight in reaction to the quote. Afterward, everyone shares what they wrote. This can be done by verbally sharing or by passing each person's paper to another person to read. If it's a shy class, use anonymous writing. Ask students to leave names off their papers, then collect them and randomly pass the papers back out so each student reads one out loud.

Use this activity to get students talking about what they know about hip-hop. Questions to guide this conversation could be:

- Do you like hip-hop? Why or why not?
- What is hip-hop? What is rap? Are they different?
- Why do you think hip-hop started?
- What are the stereotypes about hip-hop?
- What role does the media play in teaching us about hip-hop?

II. LISTEN TO KEXP DOCUMENTARY #1 *Kool Herc Invents Hip-Hop* and #2 *Afrika Bambaataa Creates Culture*, both in the *Masters of Turntablism* series

III. DISCUSS QUESTIONS

1. Where did hip-hop come from?
2. Who invented hip-hop, and under what conditions?
3. What is "the break"?
4. Does hip-hop bring people together, or does it divide them? How?
5. What was Kool Herc's message to successful rap stars? Do you agree or disagree with him?
6. In what way did Afrika Bambaataa create a culture?
7. How do popular definitions of hip-hop differ from the way artists in the documentaries define hip-hop?

IV. GIVE AN OVERVIEW OF HIP-HOP HISTORY

-The culture, music, and lifestyle known as hip-hop began in the Bronx in New York City. At house parties and community centers DJs mixed songs from different records together. They started extending short drum breaks into longer dance mixes by switching between record decks. Bronx DJs experimented with touching and moving vinyl records with their hands. They also used electronic sounds coming from other places, like Europe. A famous example is Afrika Bambaataa's use of Kraftwerk's 1977 *Trans-Europe Express*.

-In 1973 DJ Kool Herc DJed his first party in the South Bronx. The South Bronx was a poor neighborhood isolated from the rest of New York. One factor in this isolation was construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway, which created a scenery of rubble in neighborhoods it ran through. Young people of color found their own way to make these bleak surroundings positive and beautiful. They spray-painted and danced on

cardboard they laid on the ground. Hip-hop parties were positive alternatives to gang violence.

-Kool Herc, who became known as the father of hip-hop, formed the basis of hip-hop music by experimenting with instrumental breaks of funk, soul, and R&B songs. In the following years hip-hop pioneers such as Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, and Grandmaster Caz start DJing at parties across the Bronx.

-The story of Afrika Bambaataa—for example, his life-changing trip to Africa that resulted in his name change and his efforts to transform the South Bronx community—shows how the emergence of hip-hop is connected to identity, race, and place. Reformed gang member Bambaataa defined the four elements of the hip-hop scene. The four elements of hip-hop culture are:

DJing – The art of spinning records at a dance party, picking out songs in a crowd-pleasing sequence. Also the art of touching and moving records with your hands. Cutting (using volume control to drop in a section of music from one turntable into music from another turntable) and scratching (the sound a DJ makes by putting his hand on the record and rubbing the vinyl under the needle in time with the music) are two popular DJing techniques.

Breakdancing – A style of dancing that includes gymnastic moves, head spins, and backspins. Young people who were into dancing to the breaks at Bronx parties started calling themselves B-boys and B-girls, and their style of dancing came to be known as breakdancing. B-boys, B-girls, and members of the Zulu Nation made breakdancing popular.

Graffiti – Visual art, an expression of youth culture and rebellion in public spaces. The first forms of subway graffiti were tags, or signatures of someone's nickname or crew (group of artists that work together). It has evolved into elaborate scripts, color effects, and shading.

MCing – MC are initials for “master of ceremonies.” MCs originally hosted parties and introduced tracks to the dancing audience. Eventually the term was used to describe rappers. Rapping is the art of saying rhymes to the beat of music. It comes out of the African-American oral tradition of using rhyming language to ridicule your friends or enemies in a clever way. In the early 1970s, this developed into street jive, a type of half-spoken, half-sung urban street talk. Rapping also has roots in Jamaican toasting, a type of lyrical chanting.

-Bambaataa also formed the Universal Zulu Nation, a hip-hop awareness group that organized cultural events for youth. The group was an alternative to gang activity for many young people. Over time, the Zulu Nation has spread internationally as a hip-hop awareness movement guided by certain spiritual principles.

-The Sugar Hill Gang recorded the first popular commercial rap recording, “Rapper’s Delight,” in 1979. This song was many Americans’ first brush with hip-hop.

-In the 1980s the hip-hop scene expanded and entered the mainstream in the U.S. Kurtis Blow, Grandmaster Flash, Public Enemy, and NWA released albums. The first West Coast rap albums came out. The films *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* were released. Def Jam Recordings was established. Two big steps in making hip-hop mainstream were Run-DMC’s release of its version of Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way” and the group’s nomination for a Grammy. MTV and the radio started to have rap-specific programming with *Yo! MTV Raps!* and *Mr. Magic’s Rap Attack* on the New York FM radio station WHBI.

-Two noteworthy women in the hip-hop world in the 1980s were Wendy Clark and Queen Latifah.

-At the end of 1980s hip-hop started getting some negative press. Politicians and media personalities painted a picture of commercial hip-hop as music that taught immoral values.

-In the 1990s gangsta rap, a type of rap that describes life in inner-city neighborhoods, became commercially popular in the U.S. Even though many people criticized it, this music spoke to youth who could identify with its themes of anger, rebellion against authority, and apathy. Companies who could profit from young consumers caught onto this trend and linked up their products with popular rap music. Some hip-hop fans see the commercialization of hip-hop music as selling out and compromising hip-hop’s original message.

-Breakdancing, rapping, scratching, and graffiti art all became part of youth culture’s vocabulary. Looking at the roots of hip-hop, we see a powerful example of human creativity. A group of deprived kids managed to create an entire culture and art-form with the limited resources they had.

V. ACTIVITIES – CHOOSE ONE OR TWO

1. Visual Images of Hip-Hop Culture. Watch one of these videos and reflect on them as a class.

-Afrika Bambaataa Planet Rock, 4:00
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lDCYjb8RHk>

-Temple of Hip-Hop, 7:13
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ukuac6wCWQ&feature=player_embedded

Alternative address: <http://www.templeofhiphop.org/>

2. Artistic Brainstorm: Hip-Hop in Society. Draw a large triangle on the board. At each point of the triangle, write one of these categories: CONTEXT, IDEAS, PEOPLE. In the middle of the triangle, write HIP-HOP. Explain that the goal of this brainstorm is to gather as many vivid adjectives as possible about hip-hop and to re-cap the most important things we've learned. CONTEXT includes the structures or systems that hip-hop came out of. Responses under this category might include historical facts, geographical places, or urban policies. The IDEAS category could include artists' understandings of hip-hop, media stereotypes, or the students' own beliefs about hip-hop. PEOPLE includes important people in hip-hop such as artists, people who shape our ideas about hip-hop, and consumers of hip-hop. In the center of the triangle the class will list hip-hop's essential elements in order to create a working definition of hip-hop.

Ask for a couple volunteers to write on the board and another volunteer to get the brainstorm started. Each person to speak will pass off the conversation by calling out another person's name or passing off an object. The writers should use different colors and ways of representing what classmates say to create a visual collection of ideas on the board.

3. Hip-Hop Controversy. Find an example of a politician or TV personality's criticism of rap music and have the class come up with a rebuttal in light of what they have learned about hip-hop. One famous early example is the criticism surrounding Ice-T's song "Cop Killer," and Tipper Gore's editorial, "Hate, Rape and Rap," (Washington Post, January 8, 1990) where she says that rap glorifies violence and teaches children to hate. Here are a few excerpts from her article:

...As someone who strongly supports the First Amendment, I respect the freedom of every individual to label another as he likes. But speaking out against racism isn't endorsing censorship. No one should silently tolerate racism or sexism or antisemitism, or condone those who turn discrimination into a multimillion-dollar business justified because it's 'real.'...

...Alvin Poussaint, a Harvard psychiatrist who is black, believes that the widespread acceptance of such degrading and denigrating images may reflect low self-esteem among black men in today's society. There are few positive black male role models for young children, and such messages from existing role models are damaging. Ice-T defends his reality: "I grew up in the streets-I'm no Bryant Gumbel." He accuses his critics of fearing that reality, and says the fear comes from an ignorance of the triumph of the street ethic. A valid point, perhaps. But it is not the messenger that is so frightening, it is the perpetuation-almost glorification-of the cruel and violent reality of his 'streets.'

Children must be taught to hate. They are not born with ideas of bigotry- they learn from what they see in the world around them. If their reality consists of a street ethic that promotes and glorifies violence against women or discrimination against minorities-not only in everyday life, but in their entertainment-then ideas of bigotry and violence will flourish. ...

*Note: “Cop Killer” and Gore’s article contain offensive language and sensitive topics that might not be suitable for the classroom. The teacher should use discretion in presenting the material. Other variants of this activity could be:

-Stage a debate between two (or a few) positions: Rap is harmful to society./Hip-hop is a positive force.

-Read a short newspaper article, such as the television review “Breaking down Hip-Hop” by Sarah Rodman (Boston Globe, February 17, 2007). Use arguments made in the article to provoke discussion.

VI. ASSIGNMENTS – CHOOSE ONE

1. Read the Hip Hop Declaration of Peace (<http://www.declaration-of-peace.com/>). The Declaration recognizes hip-hop as an international culture of peace and a positive force in the world. People that helped create it include Afrika Bambaataa, KRS-One, Pop Master Fabel, Harry Allen, and Ralph McDaniels. It was signed by 300 hip-hop activists, pioneers, and UN delegates, along with organizations such as Temple of Hip Hop and UNESCO. The Declaration was presented to the United Nations organization in 2001.

Choose your favorite principle, or the one that sticks out to you the most, and read it out loud to yourself a few times. Come up with one question about that principle that you want to ask your classmates. Practice saying the principle, followed by the question, so that you will be ready to speak for about 2 minutes in front of the class. Make sure to think about things like tone, tempo, breathing, emphasis, and avoiding filler words. In class, we will record an audio-collage of everyone reading their principle and question. We will play the recording back and pause in between each student’s presentation to discuss each one.

2. On the internet, research a hip-hop artist or group that offers a unique point of view. Choose one of the artist’s songs, listen to it, and read the lyrics. Write a 1-2 page journal entry in reaction to the song. Prepare a 5-minute presentation for the class where you will play a short clip of the song and summarize what you wrote in your journal entry. Make sure to include at least one visual, as well as your sources. Be ready to answer a few questions from your classmates about your presentation.

3. Find a recent article about hip-hop online. In light of the discussion in class, talk about how hip-hop is presented in the article. Write no more than one page and be ready to give a 5-minute presentation to the class about it. Your presentation should include some kind of media: music, pictures, or videos.
4. Get together with 2 or 3 of your classmates and attend a hip-hop-related event together in your community. It can be a concert, a spoken-word event, a museum exhibit, a film screening, or another activity related to hip-hop. Be creative and resourceful in figuring out what you can do. If there aren't any events going on near you, then come up with an alternative way to experience hip-hop. You might get together and listen to a hip-hop album all the way through, or go on an online hip-hop adventure together. You can choose any activity that allows you to explore some aspect of hip-hop culture—be creative! Submit a short (no more than one page), formal proposal to your teacher that explains how what you are going to do can be considered hip-hop. Make sure your teacher approves the activity. After the event discuss together what you thought of it, and write a review of the event, no more than 500 words. Make sure to include a title and a rating. You might want to check out some reviews online as a guide.

RESOURCES:

Websites

- Caro, Robert A. "The City-Shaper," originally published 5 January 1998 in The New Yorker. <http://www.robertmosesnyc.com/NYer.html>
- Chang, Jeff. Can't Stop Won't Stop. <http://cantstopwontstop.com/>
- DaveyD's Hip Hop Corner. <http://www.daveyd.com/>
- PBS Independent Lens, "Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes"
<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/hiphop/>
About Hip-Hop Timeline
<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/hiphop/timeline.htm>
Issue Brief: Hip-Hop http://cdn.itvs.org/hip_hop-issue-brief-hip-hop.pdf
- Temple of Hip Hop. <http://www.templeofhiphop.org/>
- Zulu Nation. <http://www.zulunation.com/>

Books, Articles, and Films

- Arnold, Rick., Bev Burke, Carl James, D'arcy Martin, and Barb Thomas. 1991. Educating for a Change. Toronto, ON: Between the Lines and the Doris Marshall Institute for Education and Action.
- Bell, Lee Anne, Barbara J. Love, and Rosemarie A. Roberts. 2007. "Racism and White Privilege Curriculum Design," in Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice. Routledge.
- Bynoe, Yvonne. 2006. Encyclopedia of Rap and Hip-Hop Culture. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.

- Caines, Jade. 2007. "It's All about the Benjamins: The Marriage between Hip Hop, Adolescence, and Consumerism," in The Hip-Hop Education Guidebook Volume 1. New York: Hip-Hop Association.
- Chang, Jeff. 2005. Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-hop Generation. St. Martin's Press.
- George, Nelson. 1998. Hip Hop America. Viking Press.
- Gore, Tipper. "Hate, Rape and Rap," The Washington Post. 8 January 1990.
- Kitwana, Bakari. 2003. The Hip-hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture. Basic Civitas Books.
- Rodman, Sarah. "Breaking Down Hip-Hop," The Boston Globe. 17 February 2007.
- Spady, James G., H. Samy Alim and Samir Meghelli. 2006. Tha Global Cipa: Hip-hop Culture and Consciousness. Black History Museum Press.
- Style Wars. 1984. Directed by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant.
- Wild Style. 1983. Directed by Charlie Ahearn.

LEARNING STANDARDS:

International and National

- International Society for Technology in Education Standard 1, Creativity and Innovation –Students demonstrate creative thinking, construct knowledge, and develop innovative products and processes using technology.
- International Society for Technology in Education Standard 3, Research and Information Fluency – Students apply digital tools to gather, evaluate, and use information.
- National Association for Media Literacy Education Core Principles

State

- Washington State Communication EALR 1, 2, and 3 – Student uses listening and observation skills and strategies to gain understanding; uses communication skills and strategies to interact/work effectively with others; uses communication skills and strategies to effectively present ideas and one's self in a variety of situations.
- Washington State Arts EALR 4.4 – Student understands how the arts influence and reflect culture, place and time.
- Washington State Social Studies EALR 5 – Student understands and applies reasoning skills to conduct research, deliberate, form, and evaluate positions through the processes of reading, writing, and communicating.
- California standards for Media Literacy, English-Language Arts Content Standard 1.7 (Grades 9 & 10) – Use props, visual aids, graphs, and electronic media to enhance the appeal and accuracy of presentations.
- California standards for Media Literacy, English-Language Arts Content Standard 1.10 (Grades 11 & 12) – Evaluate when to use different kinds of effects (e.g. visual, music, sound, graphics) to create effective productions.

Local

- Seattle Public Schools Essential Reading Standards for Language Arts 9-12 – R11 Textual Synthesis
- Seattle Public Schools Oral Language Essential Standards LA 9-12 – Listening closely and participating productively; classroom discussions and collaboration; exchanging information and speaking effectively; presentation of ideas and information.