

# Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music

Premiere Date: August 5, 2008

## Lesson Plan

Personal Narratives Inspired by Johnny Cash

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### OVERVIEW

This lesson plan is designed to be used with the 1969 documentary, **Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music**, which shows a collection of scenes from Cash's life and a number of concert performances. Since Cash's songs frequently reflected his life experiences, classrooms can use his music to inspire personal narratives.

POV documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, POV offers a [lending library of DVDs](#) that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE! Please visit our [Film Library](#) to find other films suitable for classroom use or to make this film a part of your school's permanent collection.

**Note:** This film includes some mild profanity. Please review prior to using the entire film in the classroom.

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Watch a concert performance and analyze song lyrics.
- Complete prewriting activities such as brainstorming, drawing a picture and using a graphic organizer to focus ideas and note sensory details.
- Draft a personal narrative that relates a childhood experience.
- Provide constructive feedback on peer narratives.
- Finalize a personal narrative and share it with the class.

**GRADE LEVEL:** 6-12

**SUBJECT AREAS:** English/Language Arts

### MATERIALS

- Method (varies by school) of showing the entire class an online video clip
- A map showing the location of Dyess, Arkansas
- Handout: [Song Analysis](#) (PDF file)
- Handout: A graphic organizer like [Story Map 2](#) (PDF file)
- Computers with access to the Internet

### ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED:

Two 50-minute class periods

### SUGGESTED VIDEO CLIPS

[Clip 1: Concert Performance: Five Feet High and Rising](#) (length 1:41)

Begin: Johnny Cash in concert, "I was a little boy." (20:02)

End: "Five feet high and rising." (21:43)

[Clip 2: Dyess, Arkansas](#) (length 1:53)

Begin: "They call it sharecropping." (57:50)

End: "It was a beautiful little place." (59:43)

[Clip 3: Johnny Cash's Childhood Home](#) (length 1:45)

Begin: Johnny walking up to the house. (104:51)

End: Johnny and family inside house. (106:36)

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### BACKGROUND

Johnny Cash (1932-2003) was a world-renowned singer and songwriter who grew up in Dyess, Arkansas. In 1937, excessive rains flooded Dyess,

including the farm where Cash's family lived. Residents were evacuated from their homes to the community center, which at one point housed as many as 1,500 people. The town lost electricity, telephone service and couldn't operate its water system, so a complete evacuation became necessary. Evacuees were first boarded onto buses which then took them to trains headed for Little Rock. This experience inspired Cash to write the song, "[Five Feet High and Rising](#)."

Cash often drew from his observations and life experiences to write music. He said, "If I didn't know about it, I didn't sing about it." His childhood also provided a foundation for his musical style. His mother taught him gospel music, the sound of nearby trains inspired a rhythmic signature for many of his songs and the family radio exposed him to country music pioneers. These sounds all served to stimulate Cash's creative talents and drive his prolific career.

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## ACTIVITY

### Day One

1. Tell students that music legend Johnny Cash grew up in a small farming community in Arkansas named Dyess. Show the class where the town is on a map and point out its proximity to the Mississippi River.
2. Explain that Johnny Cash's music frequently reflected his life experiences. Tell the class that you are going to play them a video clip from a concert where he sings about something that happened to him as a child. Then, pass out the [Song Analysis handout](#) and play the video clip, "[Concert Performance: Five Feet High and Rising](#)."
3. Have students work with a partner to analyze the song and complete their handouts. Feel free to play the video clip multiple times while students are working.
4. Tell students that they will now be using techniques like Cash used in his song to develop personal narratives about a childhood memory. Explain what makes a good personal narrative. Consider using the model of a personal narrative in the Resources section to review the elements of this form of writing.
5. Ask students to brainstorm three experiences from their childhood that might make good subjects for a personal narrative. Experiences might include a sickness or injury, preparing for a game or performance, achieving a milestone, facing a problem, a memorable vacation, etc. Have them conference with their partners to determine which experience would be the most interesting.
6. Each student should then draw a picture of that experience and complete a graphic organizer like "[Story Map 2](#)," using the picture he or she drew to list sensory details and focus ideas.
7. Students are now ready to begin writing the first draft of their personal narrative. This draft should be finished by the start of class for Day Two.

### Day Two

1. Have student pairs exchange drafts and provide feedback on how well the introduction gets the reader's attention and states the point of the narrative, the effectiveness of the supporting paragraphs in sequencing events and using sensory images, how well the conclusion explains why the experience was important or what was learned, correct use of grammar, etc.
2. Based on this feedback, students should revise their drafts and turn them in by the deadline that you set.
3. Share these narratives using one of these methods or an idea of your own:
  - Post the narratives on the walls around the classroom and have a "gallery walk" where students can circulate and read each other's work.
  - Allow time for students to present their narratives to the class orally.
  - Post the narratives to a blog and encourage students to submit comments.

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## ASSESSMENT

A student can be assessed on his or her:

- Completion of the Song Analysis handout.
- Completion of all prewriting activities, including creating a drawing and focusing ideas in a graphic organizer.
- Participation in partner work and peer editing.
- Quality of writing and grammar in the personal narrative (sample [personal narrative assessment rubric](#))

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## EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS

- Give students the option of writing a song about their experience from childhood instead of drafting a personal narrative.
- Invite students to bring in other examples of music that tell about personal experiences and share these songs with the class.
- Use the song, "Five Feet High and Rising" to kick-off a study of flood control on the Mississippi River. Have students research the history, cause, and effects of floods, as well as what man has done to control them on the Mississippi. Useful resources for such a study include the online investigation, [Have Flood Controls on the Mississippi River Been Successful?](#), the [MSN Encarta entry for Flood Control](#) and this [YouTube video](#) on Mississippi River floods. Have students create a multimedia timeline with details of major floods, including what happened in the floods of 1927, 1993 and recent events. Discuss the pros and cons of living in a floodplain, and whether the song, "Five Feet High and Rising" remains relevant today.
- Have student pairs each read one of the perspectives of those [Remembering Johnny Cash](#) on the POV website. As they review the material, pairs

should identify what stimulated or hindered Cash's creativity as an artist. Discuss what students can learn from Cash to inspire their own imaginative works and then apply these ideas to an original project.

- Help students understand how New Deal programs from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) helped impoverished farm families like Johnny Cash's during the Great Depression. Have students read about the [Dyess Colony Resettlement Area](#) and outline how and why the town was set up. Then, show the Recommended Clips, "[Dyess, Arkansas](#)" and "[Johnny Cash's Childhood Home](#)."
- Illustrate how personal narratives can be used to study history. Instead of a childhood memory, have students write about an experience that they have all shared, perhaps an activity at school. Discuss the similarities and differences among the final narratives. What patterns emerge? How might personal narratives be prejudiced? How could a historian interpret the different points of view of these personal narratives and create a shared history of the event?

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## RESOURCES

[Student Model: Writing a Personal Narrative](#) (PDF)

Holt, Rinehart, and Winston provide this handout that breaks down a sample personal narrative into its composite parts.

[The Official Johnny Cash Web Site](#)

This site features a biographical timeline, audio and video clips, downloads and more.

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## STANDARDS

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by [McRel \(Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning\)](#).

### Geography

Standard 4: Understands the physical and human characteristics of place.

Standard 6: Understands that culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.

### Language Arts

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Standard 3: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Cari Ladd**, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in broadcast journalism, secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's Director of Education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now [PBS Teachers](#)), and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.

### Background Sources

Documentary: **Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music**. 1969;

Dyess, Arkansas - Historical Events: [Report on 1937 Flood](#);

Reyes, Paul. "[A Visit to the Man in Black's Childhood Home](#)," Slate, December 13, 2005.

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Learn more about: [Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music](#)

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