

## **Using Music to Teach Personal Narrative: “Snapshots” and “Crossing-the-Border” Song**

### **Rationale**

The personal narrative, apart from appearing as an option in the writing component of many state assessment tests, is a form of writing which allows students the chance to reflect seriously and honestly on important events in their own personal experience. For many of my students at Morton East High School, a significant life-changing event was the migration from Mexico to America of either the students themselves or their parents. The “crossing-the-border” experience is documented, legitimized, and given a narrative voice through the use of popular music, which creates a space for students to express their own immigrant experiences.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will generate a list of components for personal narrative.
2. Students will be introduced to the “snapshot” nature of narrative writing.
3. Students will work in large and small groups to write fictional narratives.
4. Students will generate set of “personal snapshots,” or an idea sheet, for future use in narrative writing.
5. Students will read and evaluate lyrics from Ben Folds Five, identifying the elements of personal narratives, and Bruce Springsteen, identifying these elements set within the immigration experience.
6. Students will generate personal narratives relating to their own immigration experiences.

### **Audience**

This lesson is designed for 9th grade English classes, and would also be appropriate for 11 grade American Studies/History classes, ESL classes, or oral history lessons. Although the lesson was designed for use in a school with an extremely high population of immigrants or children of immigrants, the experience of coming to and arriving in a new place is universal.

### **Time Frame**

This complete lesson should take no more than five 50-minute class periods, and can easily be shortened by eliminating selected activities, such as the read-around, the large group narrative writing activity, or the poster-making activity.

### **Materials**

Posterboard and markers; overhead projector (if available); lyrics to “Eddie Walker” and “The Line.”

### **Background**

This lesson is fairly self-contained, and does not require significant background information. English teachers may wish to use this lesson in a larger unit on writing, perhaps between lessons on persuasive and explanatory writing.

## **Procedures**

### **“What Makes a Story Good” & List-Making, 7-10 min.**

1. Begin lesson by asking students about their favorite movies, books and stories, and what makes these favorites good. Select a student to record the responses under a heading, such as “Things that Make a Good Story.” The list will likely include target writing components such as focus (sticking to the story), organization (story makes sense), support (good details), as well as humor, action, drama, etc. Introduce these terms if they do not arise, and include them alongside the terminology used by the class.
2. This list should be copied by students onto posterboard and hung in room, either as an extra-credit assignment or as part of the lesson.

### **Intro to Narrative, “Snapshots” & “Eddie Walker”, 10-15 min.**

1. Connect the terms “story” and “narrative,” define narrative through the terminology used in the list above, and introduce the idea that a narrative is like a snapshot. (If you are very comfortable with the class, bring in a crazy picture or two from childhood or early adulthood, and ask the students to generate the story, based on the photo.)
2. Distribute lyrics to “Eddie Walker” and have the class read the text aloud. Ask for connections between the idea of snapshots and the lyrics to the song, and discuss briefly the way that each stanza is a photograph, and that each photograph has its own story. Play the song in class and have students follow along.

### **Large and Small Group Writing Activity, 15-30 min.**

1. Choose one of the stanzas in “Eddie Walker” and read it again in class, asking “What do you think happened?” If there are several different ideas about the story behind the stanza/photo, pick one and focus on it, allowing the whole class to develop this idea into a paragraph-length narrative. Make sure you or a student is copying the narrative, preferably on an overhead projector. Once this paragraph has been written, recognize it as a narrative and apply the “good story” criteria to it, evaluating its focus, support, organization, etc., and making suggestions for improvement.
2. Break class into 3-4 person groups and have them develop another story out of the snapshots of “Eddie Walker,” writing one or two paragraphs of fictional narrative and using the “good story” criteria.
3. Share if time allows.

### **Idea Sheet Creation, 2 min.**

1. Students should generate a set of “personal snapshots,” or an idea sheet, for future use in narrative writing. (Teachers should also generate a list to use as a model.)
2. Assign a narrative based on one of the snapshots on the personal idea sheet for homework. This would be a very rough draft.

### **More Narrative & Peer Review, 10-15 min.**

1. Review elements of narrative, and go over the idea sheets, sharing your own and requesting that others do the same. Do not have students read the homework rough drafts yet, but instead have students do a very brief peer review of the narratives, seeking for the above-mentioned elements of a good story.
2. After a quick peer review, ask if any students feel like sharing a paper written by one of their classmates.

### **Immigration, Narrative & Bruce Springsteen, 25-30 min**

1. Question the students about what some of the most important stories they or their parents might have to tell about. Along with meeting a spouse, marriage, childbirth, death or near-death, ask about immigration to the United States. Share an immigration story from your family, if known, ask for family migration stories from the class, and/or discuss the current issues regarding immigration, including the illegal means of crossing the border and the role of the INS.
2. Make a list of terms, defining “coyote,” “la migra,” etc., if the class is unfamiliar with Mexican/Central/South American migration issues and terminology.
3. Requesting that the class keep this discussion and the aspects of narrative in mind, distribute lyrics from “The Line” by Bruce Springsteen and have students look for focus, support, and organization while students read the text aloud. Make sure there is comprehension of what Springsteen is writing about regarding working for the INS, illegal immigration and drug smuggling, as well as the song’s underlying story of love and loss.
4. Play the song for the class while they follow the printed lyrics.
5. Assign students the task of writing a personal narrative relating to their own immigration experiences (or the experiences of a family member). Require that the narrative contain the “good story” elements, and note to the class that these elements will compose the grading rubric for the assignment.

### **Evaluation**

Student performance will be based on adherence to the class-generated requirements for good narrative and completion of the assigned work. Extra credit options include bringing in examples of narrative from popular music, making a presentation to the class regarding an immigration experience, writing a narrative song, etc.

### **Selected Recordings**

“Eddie Walker” by Ben Folds Five (*Naked Baby Photos*, Caroline Records, 1998); written by Ben Folds; published by Sony/ATV Songs LLC (BMI).

“The Line” by Bruce Springsteen (*The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Columbia Records, 1995); written by Bruce Springsteen; published by Bruce Springsteen (ASCAP).

### **Enrichment/Additional Resources**

This lesson has many tie-ins to contemporary political science/modern history, in addition to its connection to immigration history in the United States. “The Line” could clearly prompt a debate regarding current immigration policy and the viability of the border.

### **Contributed by**

Joe Cislo, Cicero, IL

### **Suggested Playlist for Thematic World Studies Curriculum**

#### **I. Prehistory and Ancient River Civilizations** (What is history? What am I? Who are we?)

“Eddie Walker” by Ben Folds Five, *Naked Baby Photos* --recording history through photographs; thinking about what makes (personal) history

“Every Ghetto, Every City” by Lauryn Hill, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* --a record of her youth; recognizing and naming details and artifacts as important components of history  
“Had Me a Girl” by Tom Waits, *Early Music* --geography lesson (boy this guy gets around!)

#### **II. Classical Civilizations** (What is a hero?)

“Given to Fly” by Pearl Jam, *Yield*  
--a contemporary hero described, with Christlike earthly experiences; great lyrics

“Superman” by R.E.M., *Life's Rich Pageant*  
--raises questions about the requirements for a hero

“Cortez the Killer” by Neil Young, *Decades*  
--Cortez/Europeans seen as destroyers of Eden-like tranquillity; (necessary to skip 6 minute intro guitar solo)

“People of the Sun” by Rage Against the Machine, *Evil Empire*  
--violent song about subjugation of Aztec empire I call to action for native peoples of the Americas

#### **III. The Middle Ages** (What is Conformity?)

“Killing in the Name of” by Rage Against the Machine (self-titled) --has chorus “f\*ck you I won't do what you tell me”; anti-conformity

**IV. Renaissance and Reformation** □ (Am I more important than the community? Or is the community more important than me?)

“I Used to Love Him” by Lauryn Hill, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*  
--battle between heart and head, emotional vs. rational

“Father and Farther” by Jim Boyd, *Smoke Signals* soundtrack  
--questions importance of family as community

**Contributed by**

Joe Cislo, Cicero, IL

Source: The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (<http://www.rockhall.com/teacher/sti-lesson-50/>)