



SOCIAL JUSTICE POETRY

April is National Poetry Month and many schools, especially in English Language Arts (ELA) classes, do a unit of study on poetry for the month of April. Throughout our nation’s history, poetry and song have been used to express thoughts and feelings about injustice and to envision a world where freedom, fairness and justice are universal for all. As middle school students consider issues of fairness, bias, discrimination and justice, poetry is a chance for them to articulate their feelings and share them with others.

This lesson provides an opportunity for middle school students to explore poetry and song about injustice, reflect on what social justice issues are important to them and write their own poems about social justice, using a variety of formats and finding creative ways to share their poetry with others.

See these additional ADL resources: [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#), [Imagine a World Without Hate™ Video Educator’s Guide](#) and [The Civil Rights Movement](#).

Grade Level: grades 6–8

Time: 45 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language

Learning Objectives:

- Students will define and reflect upon the meaning of justice, injustice and social justice movements.
- Students will analyze songs and poetry about social justice.
- Students will explore what justice issues are important to them and write poems about social justice.

Material:

- John Lennon “Imagine” song lyrics (www.metrolyrics.com/imagine-lyrics-john-lennon.html), one for each student, and the accompanying video (3 min.)
- “Glory” song lyrics (www.metrolyrics.com/glory-lyrics-john-legend.html), one for each student, and the accompanying video (5 min.)
- Blank paper (one for each student)
- Inspiring instrumental background music (see #5 in the “[Understanding Justice, Injustice and Social Justice Movements](#)” activity)
- “I Dream a World” poem by Langston Hughes (www.learningfromlyrics.org/Langstons.html)

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's "[Glossary of Education Terms](#).")

- alliteration
- justice
- peace
- Selma
- blights
- injustice
- possessions
- Simile
- elders
- juxtaposition
- power
- social justice
- greed
- metaphor
- text
- wisdom

SONGS ABOUT JUSTICE—THEN AND NOW

1. Explain to students that they will be listening to two songs about social justice, one from the 1970s ("Imagine" by John Lennon) and the other one from 2014 ("Glory" by John Legend and Common from the movie *Selma*).
2. Distribute to each student the lyrics to John Lennon's song "[Imagine](#)" and [play](#), audio only, the "Imagine" video. Or, use an audio version of the song if you have one. Students should follow along using the lyrics while listening.
3. After playing the song, engage students in brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - How did you feel while listening to the song?
 - What is the song about? What's the message?
 - What was your favorite part/lyric/stanza and why?
 - Why do you think John Lennon wrote the song?
4. Distribute to each student the lyrics to the song "[Glory](#)" by John Legend and Common (students may already know the song because it is from the film *Selma*). [Play](#), audio only, the accompanying video. Or, use an audio version of the song if you have one. Students should follow along using the lyrics while listening.
5. After playing the song, engage students in brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - How did you feel while listening to the song?
 - What is the song about? What's the message?
 - What was your favorite part/lyric/stanza and why?
 - Why do you think John Legend wrote the song?
6. After briefly discussing each of the songs, engage students in discussion by asking:
 - What do these songs have in common?
 - How are they different?
 - How are song lyrics both similar to and different from poetry?

UNDERSTANDING JUSTICE, INJUSTICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

1. Explain to students that similar to songs about social justice, there is a body of poetry about social justice and they will be writing their own poetry about a social justice issue that is important to them.
2. Ask students: *What is injustice?* Come to a definition of **injustice** as a situation in which the rights of a person or a group of people are ignored, disrespected or violated.
3. Have students turn and talk with the person sitting next to them and respond to this question: *What are some examples of injustice?* Explain that their examples can include events from the past or present and/or can include examples they have experienced personally, heard about or saw in the news.
4. Have students share aloud some of their responses and record them on the board/smartboard.
5. Distribute a piece of blank paper to each student and read the following questions aloud (at this point, do not solicit responses, just ask the questions):
 - What does justice look like?
 - If you were living in a world where justice was the norm, how would it feel?
 - How would people talk to each other and treat each other?
 - How would people live?
 - What would people have and not have?
 - What is your definition of justice?

After reading the questions aloud, put on some inspiring instrumental background music (e.g. jazz, classical), read the questions aloud again and have students write words, phrases, feelings and experiences and draw images that come to mind when they imagine a society with justice for all. Have students hold onto these sheets; they will be used later in the lesson.

6. Ask students: *What is a social justice movement? What is the purpose of a social justice movement? Do you know of any social justice movements past or present?* Explain that throughout our history and in other parts of the world, social justice movements have consisted of people working together on an area of injustice that they want to change. They use organizing, activism and other forms of protest to make their case and put forth their vision and demands. The change can include attitudes, opinions, laws, policies and legislation.
7. Ask students: *Can you think of any social justice movements that have taken place recently, in your lifetime or ones you heard about that took place in the past?* The list may include:
 - Black Lives Matter (police violence/racial profiling)
 - Climate Change
 - Women's Rights
 - Civil Rights Movement (voting rights, segregation, etc.)
 - Immigrant Rights
 - Marriage Equality
 - DREAM Act
 - Workers' Rights and Labor rights
 - Occupy Movement

- Women’s Suffrage (right to vote)
 - Disability Rights
 - Minimum Wage
8. If time permits, share the seven photos in [2014: The Year in Protests](#) as further inspiration for reflecting on social justice movements.

READING ACTIVITY

1. Distribute a copy of Langston Hughes’ poem “[I Dream a World](#)” to each student. Explain to students that Langston Hughes was an American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright and columnist.

NOTE: You may also choose to read aloud a different social justice poem. Use these links to find another poem: [Poem Hunter](#), [Poets.Org](#) and [Social Justice Poetry](#).

2. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
- What is the poem about?
 - What metaphors does Hughes use?
 - What aspects of social justice does he address?
 - What is his dream?

WRITING ACTIVITY: SOCIAL JUSTICE POEMS

3. Ask students: *What issues of injustice and justice are most important to you?* Give students five minutes to do free writing about these topics or issues. (Free writing is a prewriting technique which gives you a set period of time in which to write continuously without paying attention to spelling, grammar or topic. It produces raw and sometimes material not used, but often has nuggets to be used later for a larger piece of writing.)
4. Explain to students that now they are going to take their free writing and the drawing/writing of words and phrases they did previously to begin thinking about a poem about social justice. If you have previously taught a poetry unit, you may want to suggest those poetry forms for which students are already familiar. Remind students that poems can either rhyme, not rhyme or have a combination of rhyming and not rhyming. Go over some of the basic elements of poetry including the following (and provide examples if necessary):
- **Alliteration:** The repetition of initial sounds on the same line or stanza.
 - **Metaphor:** Figure of speech which makes an implicit, implied or hidden comparison between two things or objects that are very different but have some characteristics common between them.
 - **Simile:** Figure of speech that makes a comparison, showing similarities between two different things. Unlike a metaphor, a simile draws resemblance using words “like” or “as.”
5. Have the students consider the different poetry forms and choose what they think would work best for their poem. You may choose to have your all students write free verse poems but if not, below are additional poetry forms that may work well in writing poems about social justice.
- **Acrostic Poem:** Poetry where certain letters, usually the first in each line form a word or message when read in a sequence.

- **Free Verse:** A poem that has no rhyme, meter or other traditional poetry technique.
 - **Haiku:** A form of Japanese poetry that always has three lines in length. The lines always have 5, 7, and 5 syllables and often focus on highly evocative allusions and comparisons.
 - **I Wish Poems:** Each line of the poem begins with the words “I Wish” and the poem should be 8–10 lines long.
 - **It’s Not Fair Poems:** Similar to “I Wish” poems, each line of the poem begins with “It’s Not Fair” and the poem should be 8–10 lines long.
 - **List:** A poem that is made up of a list of items or events. It can be any length and rhymed or unrhymed.
6. Allow students about 15–20 minutes to write their poems. If they are unable to finish the poems during this period, have them complete their poems for homework. If time permits, have the students conference with each other to improve and expand upon their poems.

SHARING OUR POEMS

After the poems are complete, brainstorm with students how they would like to share their poetry with others. Ask students: *What are some ways we can share these poems with other students, family members and people beyond our circle of family and friends?* Ideas may include:

- Do a read aloud of the poems in our class, other classes, or a school wide assembly.
- Organize an evening poetry slam and invite family and community members.
- Create a video of everyone individually reading aloud their poems and share the video online.
- Create a poetry book (paper or online version) of all the poems.
- Use Pinterest to create a page of poems using the words and images.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [Materials for Teachers](#) (Poets.org)
- [Poetry Month: Everything You Need](#) (Scholastic)
- [Poetry Out Loud Teacher Resources](#) (Poetry Out Loud)
- [Tips for Teaching Poetry](#) (Poets.org)
- [When Thunder Comes: Poems for Civil Rights Leaders](#) by J. Patrick Lewis

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Standard 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative and figurative meanings and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
Writing
Standard 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
Standard 5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally.
Language
Standard 5: Demonstrate an understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings.