

# Writing Contemporary Protest Songs



**Subject and Grade** American History, English Language Arts and Reading, 8<sup>th</sup>.  
Can easily be adapted to other grade levels.

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**Time duration** Two 45-minute class periods or one 90-minute block

**Overview** Throughout American history, protest songs with value messages have been used to form and change public opinion on social and political issues. This lesson deals with the evolution of a 19th century song and describes the importance of music as social commentary.

**Objective** In this lesson, students will work in small groups to examine a folk song and a protest song that share the same melody but have different lyrics. Students will write their own protest song lyrics to the tune of these two songs, based on a current event they have researched. They will then perform and record their songs.

**TEKS** *Social Studies, Grade 8, American History* (1B), explain the significance of the following dates: 1861-1865

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- (24A), describe the historical development of the abolitionist movement
- (26A), identify examples of American art, music, and literature that reflect society in different eras
- (26B), analyze the relationship between the arts and continuity and change in the American way of life
- (29E), support a point of view on a social studies issue or event
- (30C), create written, oral, and visual presentations of social studies information

***English Language Arts and Reading, Grade 8***

- (1A), listen actively to interpret a message by summarizing, asking questions, and making comments
- (5E), make connections to personal experiences, ideas in other texts, and society
- (5H), synthesize information to create new understanding
- (9A), explain the author's purpose and message within a text
- (12D), identify and gather relevant information from a variety of sources

**Materials**

1. Internet access
2. 'Old Dan Tucker' lyrics (included)
3. 'Get Off the Track!' lyrics (included)
4. Writing Contemporary Protest Songs graphic organizer (included)
5. Newspapers, news magazines and/or the Internet as current event resources
6. Recording devices

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**Activities  
and  
procedures**

**Day 1**

**Step 1:** Explain to students that American music has always included protest songs, written in reaction to situations or events that some musicians disapproved of and wanted to change. These songs were written to influence public opinion, and in the 1960's a great many protest songs became very popular. Explain that in this lesson students will identify and research an issue they feel strongly about and want to protest, and then write song lyrics to accompany their research information.

**Step 2:** Explain to students that in this lesson they will examine a song that has two different sets of lyrics but the same melody and they will use this same melody for their protest songs. Explain that before copyright laws existed, song melodies were often recycled with new lyrics. This process, known as contrafactum, occurs when the lyrics of a song are re-written as a different song (or vice-versa).

**Step 3:** Distribute the Old Dan Tucker lyrics and read them aloud with students. Explain that this folk song was probably written around 1820, became very popular, and was first published anonymously in 1843. Since then, hundreds of different verses have been recorded and are still being sung and recorded today. Discuss the lyrics to Old Dan Tucker by asking the following: Does this song have a social or political message? If so, what is it?

**Step 4:** Play the following Old Dan Tucker video clip, reminding students that their protest song will use this same melody.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9M5SOqi1n0> (5 minutes, 17 seconds)

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**Step 5:** Distribute the lyrics to ‘Get Off the Track’! Explain that in the 1840s, a political movement called abolitionism called for an end to slavery. New words for the song ‘Old Dan Tucker’ were written by Jesse Hutchinson, who wanted to abolish slavery. This new song became known as ‘Get Off the Track!’, a protest song. Display the cover to the ‘Get Off the Track!’ sheet music.

**Step 6:** Have students view an illustrated, online performance of ‘Get Off the Track!’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfKsjeTvKLS> (2 minutes, 53 seconds long)

**Step 7:** Discuss the lyrics to ‘Get Off the Track’! by asking the following questions:

1. What does the song title mean, and how does it relate to the song lyrics?
2. Did this song’s author have a social or political message? If so, what is it?
3. Do you agree or disagree with what he’s saying? Why?
4. How did this song make you feel? Did you feel that it was expressing feelings that are similar to your own?
5. Do you think this song is more of a protest song than ‘Old Dan Tucker’? Why or why not?

**Step 8:** Have students get into groups. Distribute the Writing Contemporary Protest Songs Graphic Organizer and read it aloud with students. Remind students that the

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song 'Get Off the Track!' took a stand on the social and political issue of abolitionism. Instruct students that the new lyrics they write for this song must also take a stand on a current social or political issue, and their lyrics should try to persuade listeners to agree with their opinion.

**Step 9:** Ask each group to brainstorm current issues they might want to protest in their songs. What issues make them angry or dissatisfied? Some examples might be war, civil rights, environmentalism, economic injustice, hunger, and poverty, etc.

**Step 10:** Allow students time to research their current issue and to fill out items 1-3 on their graphic organizers.

## ***Day 2***

**Step 1:** Have students get back into their groups. Review lesson objectives.

**Step 2:** Have students work with their group members to write the lyrics to their protest songs. Suggest they make at least one draft before they record their lyrics on their graphic organizer.

**Step 3:** Have students perform and/or record their songs and play them for the class.

**Step 4:** Discuss the following with students:

1. Is music an effective medium for expressing social and/or political ideas? Why or why not?
2. What was difficult about writing song lyrics?

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3. What was easy about it?
  4. Which parts were harder to compose, the verses or the chorus? Why?

**Step 5:** Ask students to give examples of current protest songs that deal with important social or political issues. Ask students what would happen today if they tried to publish a song using their own lyrics but someone else's music.

### **Extension Activities**

1. Have students perform or play their recorded protest songs. Allow students in other groups to guess what their song is protesting.
2. Ask students what section of the U.S. Constitution allows us to write songs about whatever topic we choose. Answer: The Bill of Rights, Amendment 1 - "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."
3. Allow students to create a 'band' that focuses exclusively on their protest topic. Have them come up with a band name, a title for their album, titles to additional songs found on the album, and lyrics to additional songs from the album. They may also create an album cover and back.
4. This lesson could be paired with "Whose Buffalo?", a lesson about the slaughter of the bison on the Great Plains also found on TBH:  
<https://texasbeyondhistory.net/teach/images/re-driver.html>

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**Related  
Websites**

Digital History - A database of copyright free historical music for educational use:

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/music/music.cfm>

Songs for Teaching

<https://www.songsforteaching.com/socialstudiessongs.htm>

Popular Songs in American History

<https://www.contemplator.com/america/>

Hutchinson Family Singers

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hutchinson\\_Family\\_Singers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hutchinson_Family_Singers)

## Writing Contemporary Protest Songs

**Step 1:** Choose a song topic. What current event or issue do you want to protest?

**Step 2:** Why do you feel strongly about this topic? Write **3-4 complete sentences** explaining your reasoning.

**Step 3:** Research your topic. From your research, write down 5 facts related to your topic:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

**Step 4:** Title your song. Choose a “catchy” word or phrase that will attract your listener’s attention. \_\_\_\_\_

**Step 5:** Write your protest song- 4 lines for each verse and 4 lines of chorus, based on the melody of ‘Old Dan Tucker’ and ‘Get Off the Track’.

**Verse 1:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Chorus:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Verse 2:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Chorus:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Verse 3:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Chorus:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Old Dan Tucker (Traditional American Folk Song)

Verse:

Old Dan Tucker was a fine old man,  
Washed his face in a fryin' pan;  
Combed his hair with a wagon wheel,  
And died with a toothache in his heel.

Chorus:

Get out the way, Old Dan Tucker,  
You're too late to get your supper.  
Get out the way, Old Dan Tucker,  
You're too late to get your supper.

Verse:

Well, Old Dan Tucker come to town,  
Ridin' a billy goat, leadin' a hound.  
The hound dog barked and billy goat jumped,  
And landed old Tucker on a stump.

Chorus:

Get out the way, Old Dan Tucker,  
You're too late to get your supper.  
Get out the way, Old Dan Tucker,  
You're too late to get your supper.

# GET OFF THE TRACK

By Jesse Hutchinson, Jr.  
(Sung to the tune of Old Dan Tucker)

Verse:

Ho! the car, Emancipation,  
Rides majestic through our nation  
Bearing on its train, the story  
Liberty! a nation's glory.

Chorus:

Roll it along! Roll it along!  
Roll it along! thro' the nation  
Freedom's car, Emancipation  
Roll it along! Roll it along!

Verse:

First of all the train, and greater,  
Speeds the dauntless Liberator  
Onward cheered amid hosannas,  
And the waving of free banners.

Chorus:

Roll it along! Roll it along!  
Roll it along! spread your banners  
While the people shout hosannas.  
Roll it along! Roll it along!