

## N.W.A.: A Hard Act To Follow

***Hip-hop and Hype from the Streets of Compton***

### Grades

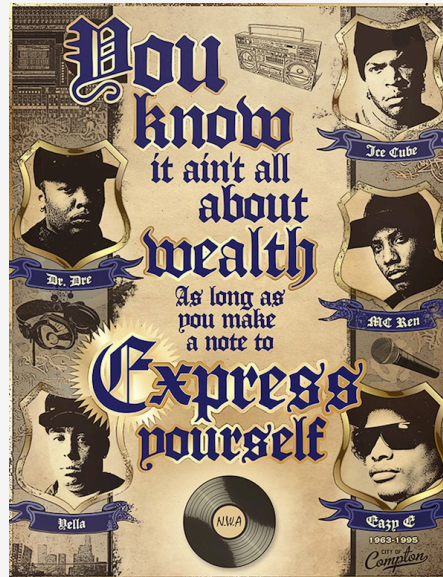
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### Author

Jonathan Gold

### Illustrator

Patrick Sean Farley



### Author Bio

Jonathan Gold started out at the *LA Weekly* in 1982 as a proofreader while he was studying art and music at UCLA, and by the mid-1980s became one of the paper’s most popular writers. He was music editor for the *Weekly* in the 1980s, and held a number of other positions with the paper. Jonathan Gold is currently a food critic who writes for the *Los Angeles Times* and used to write for *LA Weekly* and *Gourmet*. In 2007, he became the first food critic to win the Pulitzer Prize. He is also a regular on KCRW’s *Good Food* radio program.

### Illustrator Bio

Patrick Sean Farley is a graphic designer and illustrator based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is best known for his webcomics anthology *Electric Sheep Comix*.

### Summary

Gold’s piece from May 1989 is the first major article/cover story about the notorious Los Angeles gangster hip hop group N.W.A. Offering a behind-the-scenes account of the group’s rise to fame and their philosophy, Eazy E, Ice Cube, MC Ren and Dr. Dre are all heavily quoted in the piece. Their rise is put

in context with the late 1980s LAPD and gangs crisis as well as earlier precedents like the Blaxploitation era. Gold explicates the mythology behind the group, contextualizing the band’s image—both truth and possible fiction—while exploring the band’s music and talent. Gold characterized their appeal, “while the urban-gangster life had been romanticized since Capone, nobody had ever made it sound quite so much fun before.” The story is infused with irony— whether discussing the band’s image or their appeal to suburban audiences.

## Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed

### Writing Anchor Standards-Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

### Research for Building and Presenting Knowledge

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## READING Standards

### Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

### Craft and Structure

- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.
- Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

## Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

## Academic Vocabulary to Explore

*(See vocabulary approach in Appendix A of CCSS.)*

### Tier Two

Noncommittal  
Buckshot  
Vulgar  
Cackles  
Compilation  
Censored  
Instrumental  
Entrepreneur  
Machiavellian  
Stagnant  
Principle  
Aesthetic  
Proto  
Articulate  
Picturesque  
Avuncular  
Glamorous  
Vignettes  
Precedents  
Narrative  
Retribution  
Omnipotence

Snarling  
Palpitates  
Profane  
Tropes  
Implicit  
Underblown  
Indomitability  
Unauthorized  
Outwit  
Riffs  
Cagy  
Contemporary  
Streetwise  
Hype  
Ruthless  
Projected  
Liberia  
Infallible  
Blaxploitation  
Excruciatingly  
Swanky  
Canny  
Surly  
Verity  
Staccato  
Jitters  
Parroted  
Cocking  
Profane  
Iconography  
Uterior motive  
Tinny  
Paeon  
Sneering  
Rooted  
Cornerstone  
Hoodlum  
Ghetto  
Inevitably  
Exuberantly  
Drawling

Dispersed  
Pastiche  
Lapses  
Innovation  
Floundered  
Ode  
Spare  
Percussive

## Complementary Poem to Introduce BEFORE Reading the Text

### My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun (Sonnet 130)

*by William Shakespeare*

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

## Warm-up Questions

*(To introduce the story, should be used as a quick write or a journal/reflection piece.)*

1. Why do people find gangsters and the culture of organized crime fascinating?
2. What's your favorite song right now? Share some of the lyrics. What do these lyrics say that really resonates with you? Why?

3. Have you ever known someone who changed their life from having poor prospects to having great prospects? How did they do it?
4. Talk about a time someone tried to get your attention by saying or doing something shocking. What did they do? Did it work?

## Main Idea for Study

Music is a key instrument for transforming our culture—but its origins and purpose can be complex.

## Possible Themes for Study

- Blurring the lines between image and reality.
- The power of language.
- Wealth will change you.
- The power, expansion, use and allure of sensationalism in American culture.
- Music can be used as a tool of Social Justice.
- Previous struggles influence current racial politics.
- The economic impact on impoverished areas in the 1980s, particularly in Los Angeles after economic restructuring, played a role in social unrest.
- Artistic movements of resistance are influenced by one another.
- Music and art traditionally challenge authority.

## Focus Questions

1. What does Gold mean when he writes, “N.W.A. chooses not to live out the omnipotence that rap is all about?” What are some of the primary motivations of N.W.A. according to the article?
2. Considering this article was written in 1989, what happened in Los Angeles in 1992? What does N.W.A. symbolize in the context of their time period?
3. How did N.W.A. help change the demographics of people who listen to rap? According to the story, what was the response to N.W.A.’s music by some of LA’s gang members? Speculate on the reasons for these different responses.

*(The focus questions can be used for a Socratic Seminar and/or a writing assignment.)*

## Comprehension Questions

1. In two to three sentences, what seems to be Gold's central theme about N.W.A. in this essay?
2. What does M.C. Ren say in the story about gangbanging?
3. How does N.W.A. portray hardness as a rap aesthetic?
4. What does "hardness as a rap aesthetic mean?"
5. What makes N.W.A. frightening to some listeners according to Gold?
6. Are N.W.A. political?
7. Where is N.W.A. from?

## Text-dependent Questions

These questions may be used for Response to Literature writing pieces. They should not be used as comprehension questions.

1. Why do N.W.A. call themselves "street reporters"?
2. Who does Gold compare N.W.A. to?
3. How did N.W.A. build momentum with their first few songs?
4. How long of a period did the writer cover in his essay?
5. How does the writer differentiate N.W.A. with Ice T?
6. How does Gold describe the talents of the various N.W.A. members? How does he differentiate them from the talents of other singers?
7. What does Ren mean when he tells Gold, "the street's political enough?"
8. What image does N.W.A. try to create for itself? Cite examples from the text. Why is it effective in helping them to sell records? Is that all their image is about?
9. Identify and discuss the use of irony in this story.

## Types of Writing – Exercises & Activities

### Narrative

Write a short story from the perspective of a member of a band that's on its way to becoming famous. Choose a critical turning point for the band to center your story around. You choose the setting, characters, the type of music they play, etc.

### Descriptive

Describe the block you live on in detail. What kinds of building are on your block? What do they look like? What about the yards and the street? The cars you see? What are the people like? How do they act? How does it feel to live there? Describe your block in such a way that a person living in another part of the world can not only picture it, but they'll understand the character of the block and the people who live there.

### Expository/Analytic

1. Many people in Los Angeles have been exposed to gang violence. Does N.W.A. promote gang violence or discourage it?
2. Did N.W.A. speak for the people? Was their message a rising voice from the populace or was it something else? What's their connection to the 1992 Uprisings?\*
3. Ice Cube makes movies now? Is there a connection between his work then and now?
4. Was N.W.A. a force for good, or for bad—or neither?

Use any of these questions to write a one-page reflection.

#### \* Resources About the 1992 Uprisings

<http://www.southcentralhistory.com/la-riots.php>

<http://www.thenation.com/blog/167630/want-understand-1992-la-riots-start-1984-la-olympics#>

## Possible Instructional Approaches

### Activity

1. Rap your life!

Have students each write a poem that rhymes to describe a day in their life—it can be a special day or just the routines of a regular day. Read aloud, each poem should last no more than two to three minutes. Listen to one or two classroom appropriate rap songs in class and ask students to practice rapping their poems sans music.

Ask students to work on polishing the rap versions of their poems. Choose a day for the students to present their songs in front of the class. Students can ask other students to be back up singers and they can include musical accompaniment. Depending on how much fun you want to have with this, students can present their raps for the rest of the school.

**Note:** Ask students to keep the song content appropriate for a school setting in terms of language and material.



## 2. Explore media literacy.

Ask students to listen to two songs from each of their two favorite singers. Now research the singers—their biographies, how they currently live, the kinds of statements they make in interviews, etc. How do the singers' songs and these other items each correlate or not correlate to the singers' backgrounds? Is there anything that they may be exaggerating to boost their image for sales purposes? Is there any uncertainty in the media about what is and isn't true about them? Write an analysis of their music and share it with the class.

OR

Ask students to watch the television news with a critical eye—3 nights in a row. Have them create a chart with each night designated, and place each story into a category (or multiple categories) such as:

- Scandals
- Crime (except for murder)
- Murder
- Celebrity Stories
- Feel Good Stories (E.g., a dog rescues its owner)
- Stories About White People
- Stories About Non-White People
- World Events (that don't fall into other categories—except environment & human rights)
- World Issues (that don't fall into other categories—except environment & human rights)
- State and United States Events (that don't fall into other categories—except environment & human rights)
- State and United States Issues (that don't fall into other categories—except environment & human rights)
- Local Events (that don't fall into other categories—except environment & human rights)
- Local Issues (that don't fall into other categories—except environment & human rights)
- Human Rights Stories
- Environmental Conservation Related Stories

After placing the stories in categories for three nights, write a report discussing the most popular categories and the least popular categories, as well as the most frequent category blends. Ask them to include as many other observations about their data as possible. What do they notice about their data? Are some types of news covered **much** more than others? How does this skew what people watching the news learn and experience? How can it affect how they think?

If you'd like to integrate this with mathematics studies, have them work on a statistical analysis.

In class, discuss students' data and talk about bias regarding what's kept in and what's left out of news coverage and how it shapes awareness and thinking. Discuss the concept of sensationalism. Tie the discussion back to NWA and their savvy use of image and perception to drive how they were covered in the news. How did this link to record sales?

### Field Trip

Take a class trip to the **Center for the Study of Political Graphics**. Learn more about the power of words and art with an activity at the center and viewing their posters.

Alternatively, visit one of the Center's current exhibitions (listed on their website), or visit another museum with a similar exhibit.

<http://www.politicalgraphics.org>