

VIDEO

Write With . . . Life Stories: Singing Through Struggles with Gloria Estefan

by 826 National and Life
Stories

GRADES 9–12

TYPE

MEDIA

PRESENTED BY

LIFE STORIES

Songwriters are powerful storytellers. Their lyrics can connect us, uplift us, and even heal us. In this lesson, you'll identify a story of your own and turn it into original song lyrics.

WHAT YOUR STUDENTS WILL LEARN**About [Life Stories](#)**

Life Stories is a non-profit media organization that creates and distributes documentaries, interviews, and educational resources about people whose lives inspire meaningful change. These stories address issues of civics, history, politics, the arts and culture by shining the spotlight on relatable human stories of purpose and meaning in times of change. Life Stories provides open access to all their content for communities and classrooms through their curated website and YouTube channel.

About [The Thread](#)

The Thread is a new documentary interview series by Life Stories, exploring what it means to live a purpose-driven life through conversations with multi-faceted people who have helped shape our society. Each 30-minute episode takes viewers on a personal journey into the life of extraordinary people who candidly share their triumphs and failures. *The Thread* is available on the Life Stories website and YouTube channel, and as a podcast across all major platforms. Teaching

The Thread brings the series into the classroom with episode lessons designed to strengthen social emotional learning and media literacy skills and expand the scope of subject matter in Social Studies and English Language Arts. Future seasons of *The Thread* will include similar curricular support.

WHAT YOU WILL DO

Introduction:

In this video, Gloria Estefan reflects on being raised in a Cuban family that faced challenges upon immigrating to the United States and how her unexpected journey into music served as an emotional outlet from a young age. Estefan discusses how she met her husband, explores their personal and professional dynamics, and highlights the impact of their collaboration.

Please visit “[Gloria Estefan: Singing Through Struggles](#)” to see the full lesson created by Life Stories.

Content Notes

- While delivering this lesson, it is important to be mindful that every student has a different comfort level for thinking and writing about personal challenges they have experienced. If you have a moment from your own life that you feel comfortable talking about, this would be an wonderful time to tell the story. By modeling the vulnerability and honesty you hope your students will convey in their writing, you will not only help them understand the prompt more clearly but you will also remind them that the classroom is a safe space for them to share personal stories. That being said, be mindful to not force students to face something that they are uncomfortable sharing—instead, give students the freedom to choose a different topic to root their lyrics in. Every student should feel welcome to participate.
- We suggest you screen the video beforehand for topics that might need more historical or cultural context to help students access the full meaning of the speaker’s story. [The lesson](#) provided by Life Stories offers discussion questions to help your students dig deeper.

STEP 1

Watch Gloria Estefan’s video “Singing Through Struggles.” Then, freewrite your answers to these questions in your writing journal:

- **What role has music played for Gloria in overcoming her struggles and challenges?**
- **How do you overcome your own challenges?**

STEP 2

Next, choose at least three of Gloria Estefan’s songs to listen to—choose from the list below or pick different songs from her catalog if your favorites aren’t listed. Then, find page 1 of the [Singing Through Struggles—Handout](#) and answer the questions.

- [“Rhythm is Gonna Get You”](#)
- [“Reach”](#)
- [“Get on Your Feet”](#)
- [“Coming Out of the Dark”](#)
- [“Mi Tierra”](#)
- [“Oye Mi Canto”](#)
- [“Tradición”](#)

STEP 3

At their core, songs are simply stories that are told in a specific structure. Both songs and prose stories use imagery and organize the story in chunks of text; songs, however, are usually written with a specific structure in mind, including verses, a chorus, and sometimes a pre-chorus that comes before the chorus.

- **Verses** are where the majority of the storytelling occurs. Verses can contain imagery, dialogue, and sensory language, just like a short story or poem.
 - Each verse of the song is different, pushing the story forward.
- A **pre-chorus** leads into and complements the chorus.
 - The lyrics of a pre-chorus can be changed each time they're used, but the same message is usually repeated.
- The **chorus** is simple and presents a common thread that ties the verses together.
 - The lines of the chorus are repeated each time it's used.

Read the lyrics for Gloria Estefan's song "Reach" on page 2 of the handout and see if you can pick out the verses, the pre-chorus, and the chorus. As you look at the song structure, think about how the parts of the song work together to tell the story.

STEP 4

A key to songwriting is bringing a feeling to life. Songwriters do this in many ways, including writing from their own experiences and using different techniques in the lyrics, like metaphors and similes. On page 3 of the handout (Brainstorming), choose a feeling, write about the last time you felt that feeling, and then come up with three metaphors or similes that describe that feeling. (Reminder: Similes use "like" or "as" and metaphors don't.)

STEP 5

Now you get to start writing your song! On the Song Template on page 4 of the handout, you'll see a simplified song structure laid out: verse 1 – chorus – verse 2 – chorus. Begin mapping out your song, using your brainstorming notes from the previous step.

Note: It can take songwriters months, sometimes years, to perfect their lyrics. There's no pressure to complete your song in one sitting. If you get stuck, here are some strategies you can try:

- **Tell your story.** Remember the story you brainstormed on page 3? Break it up into chunks and write it as verses. (Whether or not you retell the story exactly how it went is up to you!)
- **Insert dialogue or important sounds.** In your story, is there an important line of dialogue or other sounds (cars honking, music playing, etc.)? Use your first verse to describe the sounds or share the dialogue.
- **Develop the details of one metaphor or simile.** Choose one of the metaphors or similes you created and then build your song around that. Example: "Excited is a street party, in the middle of summer." One of the verses could describe the sights and sounds of that celebration.

STEP 6

Finally, take a moment to reflect on the songwriting process. Answer these questions in your writing journal:

- **How did it feel to write a song about a challenging personal experience?**
- **Was it cathartic (a release of emotions), powerful, or something else entirely?**
- **Reflect on the experience and whether you think songwriting is a good tool for you to use in the future.**

MATERIALS

- Gloria Estefan: Singing Through Struggles – *The Thread* video
- [Singing Through Struggles—Handout](#)

- A selection of Gloria Estefan’s songs. Suggested:
 - [“Rhythm is Gonna Get You”](#)
 - [“Reach”](#)
 - [“Get on Your Feet”](#)
 - [“Coming Out of the Dark”](#)
 - [“Mi Tierra”](#)
 - [“Oye Mi Canto”](#)
 - [“Tradición”](#)
- Writing journal and writing utensil