

## PART 3

### LESSON 4: CREATE AND PERFORM A SPOKEN WORD POEM WITH OSTINATO PATTERNS



OSTINATO FROM RAVEL'S *BOLERO*

Creating an **ostinato** is another approach for adding additional sound layers to Spoken Word Poetry. An ostinato is a rhythmic or melodic phrase that repeats throughout the poem. Students can improvise simple rhythmic ostinatos to accompany a Spoken Word Poem using classroom percussion or found sound objects as instruments. Spoken Word Poems are sometimes performed with instrumental loops that repeat a pattern of notes and rhythms continuously throughout the poem. The constantly repeating pattern is called an ostinato.

#### YOU WILL NEED:

- Instruments and other items that make sound (Borrow simple percussion instruments from the music specialist, or find objects that make interesting sounds – ‘found sound’ instruments.)
- Short spoken word poems by Joe Davis and other authors (you can use any of the poems in Joe’s book *We Rise Higher*)
- Performance of “I Got Dreams” by *Young Audiences For Learning* poet and drummer: <https://youtu.be/GX-RlSPcpaw> [00:00 to 01:02].
- Performance of “Show Up” by Joe Davis: <https://youtu.be/A3fD9bMvBOI> [00:00 to 01:25].

#### WHAT TO DO:

**STEP 1:** Introduce students to the two types of ostinato:

**A. Rhythmic Ostinato:** Percussion instrument ostinatos have **no melody**; they don’t change pitch and feature only a rhythmic pattern.

- ▶ Listen to “I Got Dreams” by *Young Audiences For Learning* poet and drummer: <https://youtu.be/GX-RlSPcpaw> [00:00 to 01:02].
- ▶ Focus on the rhythm pattern played repeatedly by the Cajon drum. Notice how the speaker and drummer synchronize their rhythms together. Connecting **with** the rhythm pattern is one way an ostinato accompanies a speaker. At other times, the speaker and the ostinato follow separate rhythmic paths.

**B. Melodic Ostinato:** Instruments that repeat a pattern of changing pitches also play ostinatos with poetry.

- ▶ Listen to Joe Davis perform an early version of “Show Up” at <https://youtu.be/A3fD9bMvBOI> [00:00 to 01:25]. Notice the electric guitar plays a continuous four-note repeating melody, a melodic ostinato.
- ▶ Also notice that Joe does **NOT** speak in rhythm with the guitar. He speaks the poem in his own way.

One of the most famous ostinato patterns in western music is the repeating pattern in Maurice Ravel’s *Bolero*. Snare drums play the pattern **169 times** throughout the 15-minute piece.

Listen to an excerpt at:  
[https://youtu.be/s\\_pSJOkmYBA](https://youtu.be/s_pSJOkmYBA)

#### MINNESOTA STANDARDS CONNECTIONS...

Music: Artistic Processes  
(Respond or Critique)

**Standard 1:** Respond to or critique a variety of creations and performances using artistic foundations.

English Language Arts:  
Reading:

**Standard 1:** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and make logical inferences from it.

Writing:

Gather relevant information from multiple...sources and integrate the information...

**STEP 2:** Discuss similarities and differences you heard.

- Both examples included repeating patterns of sound, the ostinato.
- On the recording with the drummer, the poet often, but not entirely, spoke in rhythm with the drum.
- When Joe performed he did not speak in rhythm with the instrument. The melodic ostinato had its own repeating rhythm, and it was **different** from Joe's flow of words.

### STEP 3: Create a Rhythmic Ostinato

One device for creating an ostinato is to find an interesting pattern of words from the poem.

- Select a short poem, or an excerpt from a long one. The example is from “Breakfast Plums” by William Carlos Williams. (It may sound like an apology, but when spoken it is a statement about why the poet deserved the plums.)
- Display the text. Read the first section slowly in a calm, flowing voice. Have students repeat each section back.
- Continue with the second and third section in the same way. **Try not to read rhythmically.** Speak as though it were a calm conversation. Recite several times. Ask for volunteers to recite. Encourage confidence!
- Find a word combination or single word in the poem to use as a pattern for a rhythmic ostinato. Speak/chant it several times to find and feel the rhythm. For example:

(Ta ta tee) (Ta ta tee)      (Tum tee tee ta ta)      (Tum tee tee ta ta)  
pro-bab-ly | pro-bab-ly    OR    plums in the ice-box | plums in the ice-box

Clap and speak the words in rhythm: pat your lap and speak in rhythm; tap your desk with a pencil and speak in rhythm. THEN tap the pattern on your desk **without** the words.

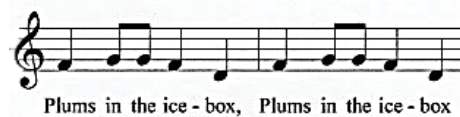
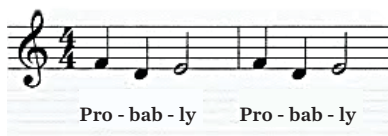
#### **It's an ostinato!**

**STEP 4:** Once you've “got it,” perform it.

- Group 1 begins the desk ostinato.
- As soon as it feels steady, group 2 confidently speaks the poem in a free rhythm, not in sync with the ostinato.

**STEP 5:** The second poem is an excerpt from “Gratitude,” by Joe Davis from his book *We Rise Higher*. Use the same process. Since the poem feels more rhythmic, students are likely to speak the text in a more rhythmic way. This is okay.

**STEP 6:** Follow a similar process outlined above in bullet point # 3 (Steps 1-4) to create a melody or melodic ostinato. You will need pitched instruments such as a xylophone, keyboard, or voices. Build the pattern in the same way; sing or play it, but eventually drop the words. **Without the words**, it is a melodic ostinato to accompany the poem. Here are a few examples of melodic ostinatos:



## BREAKFAST PLUMS

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold

— William Carlos Williams

## GRATITUDE (EXCERPT)

Holler hallelu!  
We call it gratitude!  
In all I say and all I do —  
the more I think of thanks  
the more I think of you.  
The more I think of thanks the more  
I think of you!

— Joe Davis