



Lesson Plan: Jack Kerouac

Ages: 17 and up

I. About the Author:

Jack Kerouac is an iconic literary figure, one of four founding members believed to have coined the phrase “Beat Generation.” Although he was born in Lowell, Massachusetts his family were French/Canadians from Quebec. He spoke English as a second language.

After a brief period at Columbia University Kerouac wandered about aimlessly, methodically working to become a writer.

Thomas Wolfe and Ernest Hemingway were two of Kerouac’s first influences. During an early visit to New York he visited Wolfe’s home in the hope that some of his creative inspiration would rub off on him, and in *On the Road* Kerouac referenced Hemingway, “Take the wine out of the water and let’s see if it got cold enough while we fished.”

His first published book, *The Town and the City* was an attempt to imitate the style of Wolfe. The book was panned and he travelled about North America with friends for the next seven years developing his stream of consciousness form that would become his signature writing style. This style would bring him heaps of accolades as well as negative criticisms.

His second book, *On the Road*, was his real break through, and to this day is his most read work. *On the Road* was typed in its majority between April 2nd and April 22nd 1951 at 454 W 20th Street, New York City on an 120 foot piece of telescoping paper.

For the next twelve years Kerouac continued his adventures throughout the U.S. and Mexico, spending most of his time in San Francisco and New York. He and his fellow Beats dabbled in Buddhist philosophy, actively abandoning many of the social and cultural norms in America, and really brought the subculture scene in America to the masses. The Beats would later be known as beatniks, which then evolved into the hippies of the 60’s. Throughout this time Kerouac struggled with drugs and alcohol and at the age of 47 he died from internal bleeding due to excessive alcohol consumption.

II. Pre-read:

Excerpt from Ginsberg's 1978 interview with Eric Baizer, Reywas Divad, and Richard Peabody

"I still would say that Kerouac was one of the most beautiful composers of vowels and consonants, one of the most mindfully conscious writers dealing with sounds. As Warren Tallman the essayist pointed out in his great essay in the late fifties, "Kerouac's Sound," Kerouac had a fantastic ear and a tremendous appreciation of modern black music and black tongue and Okie tongue and provincial speech, and his rhythms and sentences are organized after the models of excited conversation, probably rhapsody. . . exclamatory delight, you find that built into his prose. He was an athletic prose writer and he was tremendously honest. He gave himself to his art and I think he was one of the great prose writers in America. Perhaps in America, itself, the single greatest in the twentieth century. His breakthrough to a realization of spontaneous mind and the enormous inventive perceptive capacity of raw mind--"first thought is best thought-is something so noble that only a few great Buddhist poets have achieved that."

To read the entire interview click here: [Gargoyle Magazine](#)

III. It can be argued that Ginsberg knew Kerouac better than any other person. Read chapters 1-9 of *On the Road* and identify areas you feel best exemplify the above description.

a) Find a passage that you feel has a strong jazz influence and read it out loud. How does sound influence his writing.

b) Look for sections where the energy or the pace of the writing seems to suddenly speed up or slow down.

c) Find what you consider to be one or two of his most vivid descriptions of a person or a place or an idea in the book. Why does it seem so vivid to you?

IV. Study Terms:

Modigliani - Italian painter and sculptor, noted for his elongated forms

Lam – to beat, thrash

Obsequiously – servilely compliant or deferential, obedient

Benny Addict – *slang* for Benzedrine addict

Dichotomy – division into two contradictory parts, subdivision

Stultified – to make, or cause to appear, foolish or ridiculous

Verdant – green with vegetation; covered with growing plants or grass

Jalopy – an old, decrepit, or unpretentious automobile

Forlornly – unhappy or miserable, lonely and sad, expressive of hopelessness

Sardonic - bitter or scornful derision; mocking; cynical; sneering

Lugubriously – mournful, dismal, or gloomy

V. Assignment:

1. Kerouac uses the term “beat” six times in the first 50 pages of *On the Road*. What does the word mean in each of the different contexts?
 - (a) The term “beat” is a pun which refers to the beat of the jazz music which Kerouac loved so much, exhaustion, having nothing left to live, and being lost. The Beatles intentionally misspelled their name to reflect these multiple meanings. Beats were later referred to as beatniks, and then hippies.
2. What does Kerouac’s writing tell you about his life? Give specific examples.
 - (a) “Benzedrine and alcohol” “being drunk on the altitude”
 - (b) “...I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like the fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!”
 - (c) When describing Dean Moriarty Kerouac wrote, “He was simply a youth tremendously excited with life, and though he was a con-man, he was only conning because he wanted so much to live and to get involved with people who would otherwise pay no attention to him.”
3. On page 1, Kerouac mentions, “Always dreamed of going West, but never took off.” After actually heading off to Denver, do you think Sal’s experiences have been positive or negative so far? How might the reader of his time have interpreted the story differently? What images stand out to you from the travels?

VI. Ethics Discussion:

Your close friend, Lucien Carr, is being followed by a man named David Kammerer. Kammerer has followed Carr from Missouri, to Maine, to Illinois, and finally to New York. While at a bar, Kammerer meets Carr and threatens his life. After a few drinks, and an exchange of words, a

scuffle breaks out. Carr pulls out a Boy Scout knife, and stabs Kammerer to death. Shortly afterwards, he weighs the body down and dumps it in the Hudson River.

As his close friend you offer Carr advice, and take him out to see a movie and the Museum of Modern Art. Because of your interaction with Carr after the accident you could be implicated in the crime. Do you turn Carr over to the authorities, or be risk going to jail keep the crime a secret? What factors are most important to you in making this decision? Why?

VII. Spontaneous Prose:

Kerouac believed his style of writing would revolutionize literature. The technique, spontaneous prose, was characterized by ceaseless writing; the author wouldn't even stop to gather his own thoughts, or even lookup the definition or spelling of a word.

Now that you know a bit about Kerouac the man, what his friends thought of his work, and some of the work itself, try to write a story in spontaneous prose. First, try a short story from your childhood, which you've told many times.

Now that you've had some practice try making up a story. Don't think too much about what you are writing but try to embrace the spirit of the Beat Generation, and just go with the flow.

How did you do? What do you think about the technique?

Don't worry too much if it was difficult. It turned out to be too much for Kerouac too who edited his first draft many times before it was published.