

# Form and Theme in the Traditional Mexican Corrido

Understanding corridos throughout history

## Overview

### Summary

Students will learn about the traditional Mexican musical form of *corridos*, which dates back to the 1800s and continues to be very popular. They will analyze the themes and literary devices used in *corridos* such as "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" and "El Moro de Cumpas". The lesson will culminate in students writing their own *corridos* based on the traditional form.

### Learning Objectives

Students will:

Analyze *corridos* to gain a sense of the traditional form.

Analyze theme and literary devices in *corridos*.

Write original *corridos* based on the traditional form.

### Teaching Approach

Thematic  
Project-Based Learning  
Arts Integration

### Teaching Methods

Discovery Learning  
Discussion  
Experiential Learning  
Reflection

### Assessment Type

Observation

next: [Preparation](#) >

## Preparation

### Lesson Setup

### Teacher Background

Teachers should familiarize themselves with the *corrido* genre and its place in history using the following sources:

### Key Staff

Primary Instructor

### Key Skills

#### Developing Arts

**Literacies:** Understanding Genres, Analyzing and Evaluating - Critique

**Making Art:** Composing and Planning, Producing, Executing and Performing

#### Global Connections:

Connecting to History and Culture

### What You'll Need

#### Materials

Pen

## Sources:

### Print:

Keen, Benjamin. *A History of Latin America*. 7th Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003.  
 Paredes, Américo. *A Texas-Mexican Cancionero*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976.  
 Paredes, Américo. *With his Pistol in his Hand*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958.

### Media:

Various artists. Heroes & Horses: Corridos from the Arizona-Sonora Borderlands. **Smithsonian Folkways Recordings**. CD 40475.  
 Various artists. The Mexican Revolution: Corridos. **Arhoolie Productions**. CD 7041-7044.

### Web:

**South Texas Border, 1900-1920: Photographs from the Robert Runyon Collection**  
 The Handbook of Texas Online: Cortez, Lira Gregorio

See the ArtsEdge How-to: **Turning Students into Songwriters: Tips on Writing Corrido Lyrics** for helpful guidelines on writing lyrics. Inspire students by sharing *corridos* written by fellow high school students. Winners of the annual Bilingual Corrido Contest in Arizona, a program conducted by the University of Arizona Poetry Center, have written some excellent *corridos*. See the 2003 winner, "El rancho de los pinos" by Julianna Echerivel Prieto, a *corrido* about a family that gathers on Sundays to spend time together, and "El corrido de caballo con hambre y sed" by Adriana Aguilar, a *corrido* about a child who is tasked with feeding a hungry, thirsty horse. Both student *corridos* and additional examples of *corridos* are available on the ARTSEDGE Look-Listen-Learn resource, **Corridos**.

## Prior Student Knowledge

Students should be familiar with the geography and general history of Mexico. Students should be familiar with current events.

## Physical Space

Classroom

## Grouping

Small Group Instruction

## Accessibility Notes

Students with visual impairments or disabilities may need modified handouts or texts.

< previous: [Overview](#)

next: [Instruction](#) >

# Instruction

### ENGAGE

**1. Begin with a free-writing exercise (or if using class journals, ask students to write in their journals).** Ask students to describe what their everyday life is like. Then ask them to write about a time when their everyday life was disrupted in some way—anything from a humorous anecdote to a significant event.

**2. Ask students how the language they used in their freewriting exercise may differ from essays**

Journal  
 Percussion instruments with octaves such as bells, xylophone and or piano keyboards  
 Timer  
 Mirrors, at least two (preferably two per every four students in the class)

## Teacher Materials

For the teacher:

[Assessment Rubric](#)

For the student:

[What is a Corrido?](#)  
["El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez"](#)  
["Story of Gregorio Cortez"](#)  
["El Moro de Cumpas"](#)

## Resources:

[Printable](#)  
[Info Sheet - What is a Corrido?](#)  
[Info Sheet - El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez](#)  
[Info Sheet - Story of Gregorio Cortez](#)  
[Lyrics - El Moro de Cumpas](#)  
[Info Sheet - What is a Corrido?](#)  
[Assessment Rubric](#)

## Resources in Reach

Here are the resources you'll need for each activity, in order of instruction.

**they turn in as homework assignments or from business letters.** Explain that many forms of literature are written in everyday, ordinary language (i.e., poems by Langston Hughes, contemporary slam poets, etc.); the Mexican *corrido* is one example of a literary tradition written in everyday language.

#### BUILD KNOWLEDGE

**1. Pass out the What is the Corrido? information sheet located above under 'Resources in Reach' and discuss the characteristics of *corridos*.** Explain that the *corrido* is a type of ballad or short narrative, a story usually based in real life. Ballads have been written in cultures all over the world, and the form dates back to the 14th and 15th centuries. The ballad has roots in the oral tradition, and thus the form is simple and direct, and uses ordinary, everyday speech and dialogue. The subjects in ballads tend to be about lost love and recent events. Some traditional *corridos*, in particular, tended to focus on events due to the clashing of cultures—that of the United States and Mexico. However, almost any subject can be the focus of a *corrido*.

**2. Explain that although most traditional *corridos* were written about historical events (wars and revolutions) and heroes (John F. Kennedy and Fernando Valenzuela), and major catastrophes (earthquakes and train wrecks), many *corridos* were written about the common aspects of everyday life, and the ways that everyday life is disrupted.** Subjects of such *corridos* have included the struggles and joys in relationships and employment, the characteristics of a hometown or region, and stories of individuals who defend themselves from outside forces.

*Corridos* sung along the U.S.-Mexico border in the 19th and early 20th centuries, for instance, often dealt with conflict between the U.S. and Mexico that affected their daily lives.

**3. Pass out the lyrics to the famous *corrido*, "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" and the "Story of Gregorio Cortez" information sheets located above under 'Resources in Reach'.** Provide students with some historical context surrounding Cortez's story. Cortez epitomized the border hero for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans because he represented a man who stood on principles and defended his rights against the *rinches*, the name given to Texas Rangers (a "law enforcement" group of that was founded in 1823 to fight Native Americans). The Texas Rangers had achieved worldwide fame as a fighting force during the Mexican-American War, but when the war ended, the Rangers no longer had an official function since it was up to the U.S. military to defend Texas. The Texas Rangers continued to participate in fights with Mexican nationals. In 1916, Pancho Villa raided Columbus, New Mexico and intensified tensions between Anglos and Hispanics. The Rangers, along with hundreds of special Rangers appointed by Texas governors, killed approximately 5,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans between 1914 and 1919. Stories of brutality and injustice among the Rangers were common.

**4. Discuss how Gregorio Cortez is depicted as a border hero in the *corrido*.** Ask students whether they think he would be such a hero if he were not a farm hand and vaquero, but an outlaw prior to his encounter with the sheriff. Albeit Cortez's story is a more extreme example of conflict between cultures, the Mexican and Mexican-American people could relate to Cortez's struggle, because it mirrored their own everyday struggles living in under poor employment and economic conditions and their own conflicts with the *rinches*. Discuss how the theme of "his pistol in his hand" is linked to the oppression of Mexicans by the United States.

**5. Examine how the lyricist glorifies Cortez through simile (comparison of two unlike objects with the word "like" or "as") and hyperbole (exaggeration for emphasis) in "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez."** Ask students for examples ("leaped out of the corral", "His voice was like a bell", "trying to catch Cortez/ Was like following a star.") Remind students that the characteristics of heroes in many literary traditions (i.e., tall tales) are often depicted in hyperboles (obvious exaggeration for effect).

#### APPLY

**1. Inform students that *corridos* were usually written in a timely fashion in response to current events.** Pass out the lyrics to the *corrido* "El Moro de Cumpas" by Leonardo Yañez, which tells the story of a very famous horse race that took place in 1957 in the town of Agua Prieta, Mexico, which borders Douglas, Arizona. Composer Leonardo Yañez (nicknamed "El Nano"), a member of the Mariachi Copacabana, wrote this *corrido* after watching the race from the finish line. The handout is located above under 'Resources in Reach'. "El Moro de Cumpas" is one of the best known *corridos*; almost every singer of this tradition knows it. This *corrido* also served as the inspiration for a feature-length commercial film about the horse race it documents.

## Build Knowledge

[Info Sheet - What is a Corrido?](#)

[Info Sheet - El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez](#)

[Info Sheet - Story of Gregorio Cortez](#)

## Apply

[Lyrics - El Moro de Cumpas](#)

[Info Sheet - What is a Corrido?](#)

## Assessment

[Assessment Rubric](#)

**2. Tell students that the horse is an important symbol in Mexican culture.** First of all, horses are essential to the cattle industry, a widespread source of employment in many parts of Mexico, including the northern border states. Secondly, without horses, the Spanish conquistadors would not have been able to defeat the native peoples and occupy their land. Point out that a horse is also important in "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" since without the horse, he would not have been able to outrun the *rinches*. Also, in rural Mexico, the horse used to be an important means of transportation. Horseracing became a popular form of entertainment for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and remains so today. In Mexican horse races, usually only two horses are raced against each other.

**3. In corridos about horse races, the horses are often given human characteristics that describe them as brave, respected men.** And although there is one winner in the competition, both participants are honored. Read the lyrics of "El Moro de Cumpas" aloud. You may also wish to play an excerpt of the *corrido* for your students (see the ArtsEdge Look-Listen-Learn resource [Corridos](#).) Ask students to point out instances in the lyrics in which the horses were given human characteristics (i.e., El Moro is described as handsome, both horses are "two seekers after triumph").

**4. Discuss the themes of the corrido. One theme involves the way people are prone to make judgments based on appearances.** Point out the lines "Everyone kept saying / that that horse came / especially to win." Ask students why everyone thought El Moro was going to win (they were charmed by his good looks). Note that Relámpago surprised many of the betters (note that "relámpago" translates to "lightning").

**5. Discuss the theme of gambling in the poem.** Note how many people from Agua Prieta and neighboring towns voted on the match. Discuss what the allure of gambling is, in general, including at American horse and dog tracks as well as the lottery and casinos. Ask students if they think economic conditions in the border town of Agua Prieta may have influenced more people to gamble. Tell students that many who bet on Moro lost not only money but also vehicles and ranches. Discuss how the descriptions of the horses and the horserace reveal a general respect for horses. Gambling is not criticized in the lyrics, for example. The horses are lauded for their beauty and speed. Ask students how the description of the horses reflects the important position of the horse in Mexican culture.

**6. Ask students how Yañez builds suspense in this corrido (by waiting until the last two stanzas to state the winner of the race).** Discuss how writers are able to create "page turners" through suspense.

**7. Challenge students to write their own corridos.** You may wish to encourage them to write on whatever they would like, or provide some options (see the What is a Corrido? handout, located above under 'Resources in Reach' for potential themes). The main criterion is that the *corrido* should be centered on an event, character, or story that is happening in the present time. Tell students that they must follow the form of traditional *corridos* and use colloquial language. You may also wish to ask students to make their corridos suspenseful.

#### REFLECT

**1. Organize a corrido concert, asking students to read the lyrics of their songs aloud—or better yet, to sing or perform them if a student in your class plays an appropriate instrument (i.e., guitar, accordion).** See the ArtsEdge How-to: [There's a Song in Everyone: Tips on Composing a Simple Corrido](#) for useful guidelines on helping students to compose music.

#### ASSESSMENT

Assess the students based on the following criteria:

Evidence of understanding through insightful and frequent participation in class discussions.

Evidence of understanding of the *corrido* form.

Wrote an original *corrido* in the traditional form that reflects the student's understanding of the *corrido* tradition.

You may also use the Assessment Rubric located above under 'Resources in Reach'.

< previous: [Preparation](#)

next: [Standards](#) >

## Standards

### The National Standards For Arts Education:

#### Music

**Grade 9-12 Music Standard 6:** Listening to, analyzing, and describing music

**Grade 9-12 Music Standard 8:** Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts

### Music

**Grade 9-12 Music Standard 9:** Understanding music in relation to history and culture

### Language Arts

#### Language Arts Standard 1:

Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

#### Language Arts Standard 2:

Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing

#### Language Arts Standard 5:

Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

#### Language Arts Standard 6:

Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts

### United States History

#### US History Standard 17:

Understands massive immigration after 1870 and how new social patterns, conflicts, and ideas...

< previous: [Instruction](#)

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### CREDITS

#### Writers

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*Original Writer*

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