

## **Stray Kids**

National Standards: Pr4, Re 7-9, Cn11

The global explosion of K-pop can be credibly attributed to the meticulously curated public image of its stars, the ruthless precision of their performances, and algorithm-optimized songwriting and production. This highly engineered mass appeal has drawn its fair share of detractors, however. In response, many next-gen K-pop groups have begun to prioritize the more human elements of their members. Stray Kids are a perfect embodiment of this new ethos. Founded on teamwork, authenticity, and a commitment to creating their own music, Stray Kids are poised to take center stage in the next wave of the K-pop movement. Share their story with your class today!

### **Prepare**

By a show of hands, ask the class how many are fans of K-Pop. Ask them what makes K-pop unique? What are the genre's defining characteristics? Next, ask how many are familiar with Stray Kids. The band's rising international profile makes it likely that any K-pop fan will have at least cursory knowledge of their music and impact. Ask the class which Stray Kids songs they know, along with anything else they know about the band. Then ask, "How are Stray Kids different from other K-pop groups? How are they similar?"

Next, read the article as a class.

*Key points in the article:*

- Formed through their eponymous 2017 reality show, Stray Kids represent a new ethos in K-pop. Rather than executing the tightly-controlled vision of a corporation, Stray Kids are all about the individuality of their eight members. Through their in-house production team, 3RACHA, the band create their own music instead of just performing it.
- Stray Kids' sound is an ambitious blend of styles, including hip hop, EDM, rock, and art pop. Fans and critics alike often refer to their sound as "noise music." Their message-driven lyrical approach and sonic adventurousness have earned them a devoted fanbase known as STAY.
- With two No. 1 albums under their belt, the band's global influence is firmly on the rise. They have further cemented this status by expanding into other cultural avenues like fashion, branding, and various threads of pop culture. They maintain a close relationship with their fans through social media and continue to evolve their musical style with every release.

## **Begin**

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Dynamic:** continuously changing or developing
- **Authentic:** real, genuine, and true to oneself
- **Resilience:** the ability to adapt to difficulties or challenging life experiences
- **Adhere:** to stick firmly to something, like glue
- **Cohesive:** when the parts of the whole work or fit together well

## **Discuss**

After reading the article, play "Ceremony" from Stray Kids' latest album, *Karma*. How would they describe the sound? What lyrical themes do they notice? What is the overall vibe of the track?

Next, play excerpts of notable songs from their earlier records, like "I Am NOT" or "I Am WHO." How do they compare stylistically to the group's newer output? Is the production similar, or has there been a stylistic shift? Do the lyrical themes of "Ceremony" align with previous singles, or is there a new focus?

## **O&A**

1. What is the name of Stray Kids' in-house production unit?
2. How do fans and critics often refer to Stray Kids' experimental and genre-blending sound?
3. Which members of the band bring powerful rap skills and emotional depth to their lyrics?
4. Which early Stray Kids releases introduced themes of self-discovery and rebellion to their catalogue?
5. Unlike many K-pop groups formed solely by company decisions, Stray Kids' formation emphasized \_\_\_\_\_.

## **Answers**

1. 3RACHA
2. "Noise music"
3. Changbin and Han
4. "I Am NOT" and "I Am WHO"
5. Teamwork

## **Expand**

One of the driving forces behind Stray Kids' success is their in-house production and songwriting team, 3RACHA. By controlling their own musical output, the band goes against the

typical K-pop mold, which relies heavily on outside writers and producers selected by the record label. They are not the first pop group to defy the pop model and seize creative control, though. For a writing assignment, have students identify another pop group or artist that writes/produces their own music and research their career. In a short report, students should summarize the career of their selected artist and compare it to Stray Kids. Did they always write their own music, or did they start after they had already established themselves? Was their music popular and well-received by critics, or did they struggle for acceptance? How does their musical style compare to Stray Kids? Do they inhabit a pre-established genre, or have they created their own hybrid style?

## **How To Play "Zombie" by YUNGBLUD**

National Standards: 1-9

The most identifiable feature of a great rock song is often a loud, in-your-face guitar riff. The real power of a wall-of-guitars chorus, however, is drawn from contrast. Without the smaller, subtler elements of the arrangement, those guitars wouldn't sound so huge. An intricate tapestry of supporting instruments woven together with crushing guitars and drums is exactly what powers "Zombie" by YUNGBLUD, the Grammy-nominated single from his 2025 album *Idols*. Learn what makes this anthem tick and develop a cover with your own ensemble today!

### **Prepare**

To start, ask the class if they are familiar with YUNGBLUD or if they have heard "Zombie." What do they like about this song or his style in general? Next, play "Zombie" in its entirety and have the class take notes. How would they describe the style/genre of the song? What instruments do they hear? How would they describe the dynamics? What are some key moments in the song? Do they notice anything unique or unusual about the sound or structure?

After discussing, read the article as a class.

*Key points in the article:*

- Analyzing the arrangement of a dense, guitar-heavy rock record can be difficult. "Zombie" by YUNGBLUD is a great example. Behind the towering guitar riffs is a lush backdrop of strings, piano, and backing vocals. The way these elements blend together with the louder elements into a glorious whole is worthy of study.
- Another key to the song's impact is the relatively simple form and dynamic movement. The song sounds huge in the choruses, intimate in the verses, and bridges the gap in the pre-choruses, slowly adding more elements and filling in the arrangement as the song goes on.
- Nailing the intricacies of the arrangement is a great way to recreate the feeling of the record in a live setting, but it can be difficult with songs like "Zombie." Luckily, multiple live versions of the song are available and allow for some insight into the magic. Hearing the song in different settings with different instruments missing allows for easier analysis, along with ideas for how to adapt your own version.

## Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Hinder:** to limit the ability of someone to do something
- **Density:** the number of people or things in a place in relation to the size of the place
- **Subtlety:** the quality of being understated, delicate, or nuanced
- **Tapestry:** a complex, rich, and interconnected whole made of diverse, individual elements
- **Ratchet:** to cause to move by steps or degrees

## Discuss

After reading the article, conduct a classroom discussion comparing their notes about “Zombie” with the article’s analysis. Did their observations match the author’s assessments of the song? Did the author point out any important elements that students missed on their initial listen? If so, play the song once more and see if the class can catch it on second listen.

Next, conduct a class brainstorm about how to adapt “Zombie” to their lineup of instruments. If the ensemble includes drums, bass, electric guitar, acoustic guitar, keyboard, and at least one vocalist, they can adapt a nearly note-for-note recreation of the record. If the instrumental lineup looks a bit different (or includes more/less instruments than the record), not to worry! A single guitarist can create an amalgamation of multiple parts on the record in a way that works for a live show. If the ensemble has an actual string section, fantastic – if not, most keyboards have a string patch. Woodwind or brass instruments could be an effective substitution for (or addition to!) the strings. Analyze each missing instrument’s place in the mix and get creative in finding ways to recreate it.

## Q&A

1. YUNGBLUD’s album *Idols* was nominated for which category at the 2026 Grammys?
2. Which note do the strings hold for the full first verse of “Zombie?”
3. What causes the mood to be dark and tense in the intro of “Zombie?”
4. The verses of “Zombie” are in C# minor. To which key does the chorus modulate?
5. How many times does the chorus of “Zombie” repeat to end the song?

## Answers

1. Best Rock Album
2. B
3. A deliberate clash in the strings against the chords
4. E Major
5. 3

## **Expand**

Before the next meeting of the ensemble, have students learn their individual parts as decided in the earlier brainstorm session. At the beginning of the first rehearsal, listen to “Zombie” as a class one more time before attempting to play it. Discuss the form and arrangement of the song and any changes agreed upon in the brainstorm session.

Next, set up instruments and play the song. Stop after each playthrough of the song to discuss any changes that need to be made and clear up any questions the class may have. Once the ensemble is comfortable with the song and has successfully played it multiple times, record one final play-through (a phone video will do just fine).

After rehearsal, make the video accessible to students and have them watch it before the next meeting. Start the next rehearsal by watching the video together and having a class discussion. How does the song feel overall? Is the arrangement effective? Does the band nail the tempo and dynamics of the song? Does it feel like anything is missing? If so, discuss how to adapt. Repeat this process for as many rehearsals as it takes to nail the tune!

## **Musical Subtraction**

National Standards: 1-9

It sounds counterintuitive, but the most productive musical approaches often involve strategic restrictions; taking things away instead of adding things on. It's easy for young musicians to fall into misguided maximalism in their compositions or improvisations. Adding more notes, more instruments, or more ideas is a natural response if they aren't happy with the way something sounds. Removing options, however – whether it's notes from a scale, beats from a measure, or any other musical subtraction – can lead to more focused ideas and fun surprises. Share these strategies for musical subtraction with your students today!

### **Prepare**

To prepare for the article, review a few fundamental concepts according to the needs of your class:

- Notes of the major and minor scale (and the numbering system that accompanies them)
- Identifying time signatures

Conduct a brief classroom discussion, starting by asking how many in class either compose music, produce music, perform covers/solo arrangements of songs, or improvise with an ensemble. For those that do, ask how they generate their musical ideas. Is it a process of adding new elements until something works? Have they ever attempted to create with a set of restrictions in mind? Do they ever limit their choice of notes or selection of instruments? Do they ever try to create space rather than filling it in?

After discussing, read the article as a class.

*Key points in the article:*

- The old adage “Music is Math” rings true on multiple levels. Beyond the sheer physics of sound production, music can be conceptualized in terms of adding or subtracting different elements until the desired sound and emotional effect is achieved.
- From a creative standpoint, subtracting elements of a song can be a great way of subverting expectations, creating surprising moments, or developing new ideas that the artist would not have explored otherwise. It can accelerate melodic resolutions, create novel rhythms, and support the lyrics and overall vibe of a song in surprising ways.
- The three examples of subtractive strategies in the article are great starting points for this practice. Musicians can choose to subtract notes from a scale to create new melodic patterns, subtract notes from a riff or existing musical idea to leave tantalizing pauses or subvert melodic expectations or subtract beats from a measure of music to reshape or destabilize the rhythmic motion of the song.

## **Begin**

*Review Vocabulary words from the article below:*

- **Adage:** a traditional saying expressing a common experience or observation
- **Abstract:** existing as an idea, feeling, or quality, not as a material object
- **Subvert:** to go against established ideas or expectations
- **Visceral:** felt in, or as if in, the internal organs of the body; an intuitive feeling
- **Mundane:** very ordinary and therefore not interesting

## **Discuss**

While reading the article together, stop at each example and allow students to work through it individually or in small groups. Allow volunteers to demonstrate the example for the class. After each demonstration, ask the class for their reactions. Do they like the sound of the example? How does the overall character of the example change when removing a scale degree, note from a riff, or beat from a measure?

After working through the full article, conduct a summary discussion. Which example did the class find the most inspiring? Did they struggle to understand any of the examples? After working through the article, do they feel inspired to use any of these approaches in their own compositions, arrangements, or improvisations?

## **Q&A**

1. Great music is about what you \_\_\_\_\_ as much as what you \_\_\_\_.
2. Which scale degree does the bassline skip in “Ship To Wreck” by Florence and the Machine?
3. Which Outkast song features a very unusual phrase structure that subtracts 2 beats out of the measure in the middle?
4. Which type of scale subtracts specific notes out of full, seven-note major or minor scales to reach their five note forms?
5. Which element from Otis Redding’s reimagining of the folksong “Down in the Valley” features a subtractive approach?

## **Answers**

1. Leave out; put in
2. 2nd
3. "Hey-Ya"
4. Pentatonic scales
5. The horn line

## **Expand**

Create a Musical Subtraction composition assignment tailored to the level of your class.

For students with less composition experience: compose an 8-bar melody with simple chordal accompaniment for students to modify. Ask students to use one of the techniques in the article to alter the composition. For example: Students could choose to subtract one or more notes from the parent scale; any time that notes occurs in the composition, they could move it up or down to the next scale degree (or remove it entirely). They could also subtract one or more beats from strategic measures; any melody notes that land on the omitted beats could be removed entirely or shifted to before/after the removed beats (which might require alteration to other melody notes).

For compositionally proficient students: working alone or in small groups, students have the option to 1) create their own 8-bar composition, or 2) select an 8-bar section of an existing song to modify a la Otis Redding's "Down in the Valley" arrangement. They can use any of the 3 listed subtractive techniques to alter the song to their taste but must have a clear goal or reasoning for the adjustment. How does it change the feeling of the original? Does it elevate the music?

For a bonus activity, have students perform their compositions for the class on their due date. Ask students to play their example and then talk the class through their compositional strategy. Which techniques from the article did they use? Was it difficult to think in subtractive moves rather than additive? Do they feel inspired to use this strategy anywhere else in their musical life?

## **Your First Song**

National Standards: 1-9

Perfection is, indeed, the enemy of progress. For aspiring songwriters, fear of writing a “bad” song often prevents them from developing fledgling their ideas and finishing the song – or even writing at all. This mindset is rooted in several misguided ideas: 1) the idea that any song can be “perfect” 2) the idea that their ideas aren’t good enough to bring to completion, and 3) that their talent or artistic worth is determined by how “good” their first songs are. The truth is nobody writes great music right off the bat. Every song, however, presents a learning opportunity, and the act of finishing a song is the key to unlocking its lessons. Help your students get their songs over the finish line today!

### **Prepare**

By a show of hands, ask how many students in class are interested in writing songs. Next, ask how many have written and completed a full song. The number of raised hands will likely decrease significantly. Point out this disparity to the class and ask why they think that is. If so many are interested in writing songs, what is stopping them from giving it a try? Ask if anyone from the first group of raised hands had attempted to write a song but stopped before finishing. If so, what prevented them from completing the song?

After discussing, read the article as a class.

*Key points in the article:*

- As with many activities and art forms, the first song is often the hardest. Starting with nothing and arriving at a finished product can be difficult, especially if the artist is insecure about the result. The fear of writing a clumsy, awkward song stops many songwriting careers before they ever start.
- Rather than waiting for the perfect idea or inspiration, it is most important to get an idea over the finish line. Rather than worrying about the finished product is good, ask what you can learn from it. After all, your first song isn’t your masterpiece; it’s just your starting point.
- Picking simple lyrical subjects can help beginners get started. Borrowing chord progressions or melodic ideas from other songs can provide a solid foundation. Above all, the first song is proof that you can do it. Once number one is in the bag, the next few will come along much easier.

## Begin

*Review Vocabulary words from the article below:*

- **Inspiration:** the process of being mentally stimulated to feel, create, or act, often through a sudden, creative idea
- **Awkward:** clumsy, inept, not marked by ease of performance
- **Cringy:** something that makes you to feel awkward, uncomfortable, or embarrassed
- **Permission:** the act of allowing someone to do something, or of allowing something to happen
- **Profound:** felt or experienced very strongly or in an extreme way

## Discuss

After reading, conduct a classroom discussion. What were students' reactions to the piece? For aspiring songwriters, did they see their own fears and hangups represented in the article? Did the advice resonate with them? For those who have already gotten a song over the finish line, did they identify with the mindset presented by the authors? After they completed their first song, did they make a conscious effort to learn from the process?

Did the class have any questions about finishing songs that weren't addressed in the article? What else do they feel they might need to know? How might they go about finding those answers?

## Q&A

1. Your first song doesn't have to be good. It just has to \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The article encourages beginning songwriters to write about something small – which two examples does it give?
3. Your first song isn't your masterpiece; it's just your \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The difference between great songwriters and everyone else isn't that they were instantly amazing, it's that they \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_.
5. What do the authors say is most important when writing your first song?

## Answers

1. Exist
2. Your morning cereal or a silly conversation you had with someone
3. Starting point
4. Kept going
5. Don't delete it when you're done

## **Expand**

To really drive the lesson home, encourage students to write their first song. If they absorb the advice from the article, they should be able to get an idea across the finish line. Even if it uses a borrowed melody, a beat from someone else's song with the vocals removed, or a title/lyric from another song, it will be a highly beneficial exercise. Due to the vulnerable nature of first songs, presenting them in class might be too daunting. It could be beneficial, however, to have students write a brief reflection on the process of writing their first song to share with the class. This writing assignment could resemble something more like a journal entry. Students should reflect on how they started their song, how they developed their ideas, where they drew inspiration from, how long the process took, and what they learned from it. What do they like about their finished song? What could they do better next time?