

## MASTERING THE ART OF RAP

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[Assignment: Think about those areas of knowledge and experience in which you have some expertise. Write about the process through which you became deeply involved in your "thing," whatever it is, communicating to your readers what your involvement means to you.]

(1) Modern rap music began in the early 1980's. It started as a way for non-singers to get involved in music. Young men more gifted in creating beats than in singing were given the chance to highlight their talents at parties, clubs, or dances. Using a combination of highly synthesized beats, word mixing, and chanting, these raps featured the essential parts of music young blacks listened for with the beat being the nucleus. Some of the early pioneers of this form of music were Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the Sugarhill Gang, and Kurtis Blow, but rap music wasn't really taken seriously until 1986 when Run-Dmc released the triple platinum album Raising Hell. Since that time rap music has become a world-wide phenomenon. In 1989, rap was included in the American Music Awards, which means it is finally being appreciated in the same way as pop/rock, heavy metal, country, and rhythm and blues music.

(2) My affiliation with rap began in 1988, when my best friend, Alan Dickerson, approached me about starting a rap group. At first I was a little hesitant about the idea. I wasn't the coolest guy in school and only the coolest guys usually had a rap group. Secondly, I didn't know that much about rap music. But Alan told me it wasn't that hard to become a rapper; all you really needed was practice. So we began practicing. Our first raps were terrible. My friend Alan was responsible for making the beats and I was in charge of sampling music. I would sample old records from family and friends looking for appropriate melodies; he would create a beat that corresponded with them. The more we wrote the better we became. Our music came from a variety of sources: some early soul such as James Brown; a couple of melodies that Alan and I wrote; two written by another group member, Andre Turner; we even used the theme songs from the game show Jeopardy and from the old detective series Peter Gunn. Then we got hooked up with a producer and started winning rap contests. We are currently working on a rap album.

(3) Shortly after I started rapping, I saw L.L. Cool J on television giving advice to aspiring young rappers on what it takes to become a professional rapper. He simply said to always work hard, never give up, and gain as much knowledge as you can. At first I was angry because I thought he was going to give me a number to call to get a rap contract. But now that I think about it, his advice was very worthwhile. I can now see the point of his advice on working hard and gaining

knowledge. To become a successful rapper, you have to be smart and have a good vocabulary because you can't rap if you don't have anything to rap about.

(4) You also have to study other rappers so that you'll know what is hot and what is not. In the last few years the trend in rap has been educational, with such groups as Public Enemy, Boogie Down Production, and Stetsasonic setting new standards in rap music. Public Enemy teaches the value of black pride; Boogie Down Production encourages young black children to beware of trouble on the streets; Stetsasonic teaches about the problems of blacks living in South Africa.

(5) In the black community, a community that has few role models, rappers are looked on as gods. So to be taken as a serious rapper, you have to give knowledge in a way that is meaningful and appropriate for the black community. You have to speak out for peace, but make sure you're not too pacifistic or you will be considered weak. You see, in rap the worst thing is to be labeled weak. No one likes a weak rapper.

(6) The next thing you need to do to be a good rapper is to create your own style and then master it. No record company will sign a rap group that sounds too much like another. You will also need to have a certain type of personality that will differentiate you from other rappers because "character" is what separates great rappers from merely good rappers. Some of the rappers who have mastered their characters are: Flavor Flav of Public Enemy, Slick Rick, Big Daddy Kane, and Ice-T. Flavor Flav's character is wild and reckless. He leads us to believe he is illiterate and insane when he is actually a very brilliant young man. Then there's Slick Rick who uses a European accent when rapping, and who acts more like a cartoon character than a rapper. (He dresses like a clown and delivers his lyrics as if his nose is congested.) Big Daddy Kane is just the opposite and he is the hottest rapper in rap today. He is a very relaxed type who speaks in a calm voice laid smooth over mellow music. If I had to compare him to another character, I would compare him to "The Fonz" of the old Happy Days series. He has a style that has guys saying he's the smoothest and girls saying he's the cutest. Big Daddy Kane also wears dress clothes, separating him from the conventional rapper who wears jogging pants and tennis shoes. Finally there is Ice-T, one of my personal favorites. Ice-T is one of those rappers who come from a crooked background. He uses his knowledge of the streets and his troublesome past to give young people advice on what to avoid. Ice-T is one who tells it to you like it really is. He lets you know that if you're out gang-banging and committing major crimes, in the end you will die.

(7) After studying what's hot in rap, you start working on your demo tape. If you can't afford to pay for studio time you must find someone to help produce your tape. Record companies will not pay for your studio time or sign up a person whose tape doesn't sound professional. Once your demo tape is finished, you need to get your work copyrighted to make sure that no one steals your material. And then you are ready to send your work to various record companies, along with a picture package of you and your group members, and a resume if you have performed anywhere. Now the only thing left to do is to sit, wait, and hope that a record company contacts you.

(8) The name of my rap group is Project X. We have completed all the steps described above and are talking to record companies about a possible record deal so I speak from experience. To me, rap is more than just a hobby; it is a career goal. It is a dream that is very close to becoming reality and--it is the love of my life.