



A Guide to the 82nd National Folk Festival

Coming to Jackson, Mississippi
November 7-9, 2025





Local Learning Guide to the 2025 National Folk Festival

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About the Festival

Founded in 1934 in St. Louis, the National Folk Festival (NFF) is the nation's oldest celebration of traditional arts. Some artists who performed at the first festivals are now legendary, and the recordings and other documentation made possible by the NFF are priceless. Championed by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, it was the first event of national stature to present artistic traditions of all Americans on equal footing. It was also the first to present to the public musical forms such as the blues, Cajun music, polka, Tex-Mex conjunto, Peking Opera, and many others. Over the festival's long history, it has evolved to meet the needs of the times, but its commitment to presenting the nation's finest traditional artists in an exciting, joyful event remains constant. Today, the NFF is an exuberant traveling festival, produced by the National Council for the Traditional Arts (NCTA) with communities around the country to embrace the many cultural expressions defining us as a people in the 21st century.

Changing locations on a three-year cycle, the NFF is a broad-based community partnership, bringing together organizations and community representatives from across the host city. Participation of local and regional cultural communities encourages deeper public understanding of traditions practiced close to home as well as around the U.S. Each festival city has its own unique local culture, outlook, and issues, with different strengths and different resources, a new universe of personalities and politics, and a new physical site. Jackson, Mississippi, will host the NFF 2025-2027.

This large-scale, FREE, three-day event features hundreds of the nation's finest traditional performers and craftspeople, many stages of continuous music and dance, craft exhibits and demonstrations, a festival marketplace, family activities, parades, and delicious diverse and regional foods.



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What Is Folklife?

Folklife refers to the traditions, activities, skills, and artifacts of cultural communities. The NFF is an exciting, free opportunity to discover music, dance, stories, foods, and crafts from across Mississippi and the nation. Folklife encompasses the many things we practice and pass along informally in everyday life among our family, friends, and neighbors. We are all tradition bearers. Folklife is embedded in all our lives! Counter to stereotypes of folklife as quaint and in the past, living traditions are dynamic, contemporary, and future facing.

Since every community has folk traditions, they are an accessible subject in which students can be the experts. When studying folklife, students acquire new perspectives about themselves, their culture, and the culture of others. Seeing the continuation of folklife in their communities, students can connect the past with the present and be cultural stewards of traditions important to them. Students are also using and creating primary resources. They practice and instill critical-thinking and inquiry skills as they encounter and reflect on traditional art forms of their own communities and the wider world. Have students use the **Finding Folklife in Daily Life Worksheet on page 5** to uncover their living traditions and expand their ideas about folklife.

This guide will help prepare students for the NFF as they experience vibrant, contemporary traditional art forms. It offers scaffolding with suggested frameworks, activities, and worksheets. Because folklife is interdisciplinary, it fits into any subject area and grade level. And, because all of us have folklife, we can enjoy seeing how others share their traditions through performances and demonstrations. Something may appear exotic, but ask, where is something like this in my life? Also, something may be familiar, but what more can we learn?



Finding Folklife in Daily Life

You might not call your answers folklife, but these examples all point to how arts and culture show up in our lives in unique and special ways!

What is your favorite holiday?

How do you cure hiccups?

Who taught you to ride a bike?

What is your favorite food?

What is something you know how to make or do?

How do you choose who's "it" when playing a game?

What do you collect?

How do you celebrate your birthday?

What is a saying in your family or among friends?

What is a favorite song?

What do you say when someone sneezes?

What dances do you know?

What beliefs or sayings do you have about the weather?

What sports do you enjoy playing or watching?

What do you wear when you dress up?

Festivals as Classrooms

Each community is culturally unique and worth celebrating. Festivals are a way of honoring and showcasing local traditions, from farm goods to the arts. Mississippi has many festivals: the Delta Blues and Heritage Festival, Cruisin' the Coast, the Mississippi Book Festival, the Catfish Festival, and many more. The NFF will add to these and enrich students in every subject area.

English Language Arts

Students can respond to performances, demonstrations, and artists by close observation, note taking, sketching, and photography to record their reflections. They can use their responses to inspire short essays, poetry, song lyrics, and media clips.

Math

All artists need math to count, measure, plan, and create. Festival organizers must compute how to use space and build performance areas. Students can interview craftspeople to learn how they use math. They can create word problems related to music, dance, and foodways. Students can also consider the economics of the festival. In what ways does it bring money to the region? How do artists support themselves? How much did students spend at the festival?

Social Studies

Students will encounter artists and traditions from across Mississippi and the U.S. They can write or report on where something like this occurs in their lives. They may not dance like a performer, for example, but they have dance traditions. Looking for similarities as well as differences builds connections among people.

Science

Studying foodways includes scientific, artistic, and historic points of view. Students can choose a food to research how it is grown, produced, packaged, cooked, and served. Craftspeople will demonstrate skills that involve understanding the environment, physics, and chemistry. Students can interview and document these artisans.



Physical Education

Ask students to share skills and games they have learned outside class: hopscotch, skateboarding, tag, jump rope, biking, water games. These are examples of folklife and represent important informal learning from family, friends, neighbors, and cultural groups.

Dance

Students can pay close attention to specific dances and replicate some of the moves they observe. Stages will feature spaces so the audience can dance. Students can learn these dances and share their skills back in the classroom.

Media Arts

Folklorists identify traditional artists through fieldwork—interviewing, sketching, photographing, and recording people. They also provide opportunities for those who want to perform publicly. Students can use fieldwork tools to document parts of the festival and develop podcasts, short videos, webpages, and other media to tell a story about their festival experience.

Music

Incredibly diverse music genres present opportunities for students to experience new music and to pay closer attention to familiar genres. Students can focus on one genre to document, learn a song, or interview a musician. They can also write a musical response to a performance or the festival.

Visual Art

The festival is a visual as well as aural spectacle. Students will find many features to sketch, paint, and photograph for a class exhibition.

Ask students to interview a craftsperson at a demonstration booth to research how the artist learned their art form and why it matters to them. They can present findings in a variety of media.

Theatre

While at the festival, students can closely observe the actions and movements of storytellers and craftspeople to document their skills. They can re-enact or create a tableau of a demonstration or performance, write a script for a scene inspired by the festival, and storyboard a short video telling the story of some aspect of the festival.

What We Can Learn from Festivals

Does your community have a festival? Is there something special about your region that you believe should be celebrated with a festival? Even if there is already a festival, there might be room for more celebrations. Consider these topics, then add your ideas of what festivals teach us:

- Traditions that communities find important
- New and different as well as familiar art forms and cultural expressions
- How organizers set up and manage spaces and events
- How audiences behave and interact
- How to “read” or decode a festival through inquiry and reflection
- How traditional culture is embedded in daily life
- Inspiration for stewardship of local arts, traditions, and ways of living
- Connection to things we know and love
- Connection to other people and cultural groups
- Engagement of all five senses—sight, sound, touch, smell, taste

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Learning at the Festival

The NFF features traditional genres learned from family, neighbors, and elders in cultural communities. Preparing students for what they may see and hear makes the festival a more accessible learning opportunity. Explain to students that they will see many vibrant forms of music, dance, crafts, and foodways. Some will be brand-new and others will be familiar, but students will learn even more about them during the festival.

For students attending the festival, context and scaffolding will help them learn more from the experience. Ask them to inventory their assumptions about what the festival will be like. They can call on their five senses as they envision the festival: sight, sound, touch, smell, taste. Revisit their assumptions after the festival to gauge learning. Also use the **After the Festival Worksheet on page 15** to assess students' learning and collect their reflections.



Music and Dance

In a class discussion, brainstorm types of music and dance that students know. Share genres from the **Music and Dance Research Worksheet on page 11**. Ask students what they know about any of them. Have them choose three genres to investigate and share their findings using the **My Music and Dance Notes Worksheet on page 12**.



Seeing the Festival

Share the **Be on the Lookout Worksheet on page 13** to give students an idea of some of the art forms and crafts they will see. Discuss which ones they already know about and which are new to them. They can take a printout of this worksheet to the festival and see how many they can find.



Decoding the Festival

Middle and high school students can use the **Decoding the Festival Worksheet on page 14** to document the festival. Using the categories listed, they can capture information on notepads, sketchbooks, and cellphone cameras. Ask them to document at least one performance or demonstration and share results in class.

Remember, you can use the **After the Festival Worksheet on page 15** to assess students' learning and collect their reflections.

Music and Dance Research

Choose three music and dance genres to investigate. Use the [National Folk Festival](http://www.nationalfolkfestival.com/artists) website (www.nationalfolkfestival.com/artists) and other sources. Record findings on the **My Music and Dance Notes Worksheet on page 12**. Share findings with classmates. Which performances do you most want to see?

Selected Festival Music and Dance Genres

Delta Blues

Chicago Blues

Bluegrass

Hip-hop

Go-go

Gospel

Old-time

Marching Bands

Irish

Punk

Klezmer

Sacred Steel

Zydeco

Protest Songs

Flamenco

Bomba and Plena

Fife and Drum

Western Swing

Korean Percussion & Dance

Mexican Trio Romántico

West African Balafon

Choctaw Social Dance

My Music and Dance Notes

Genre	_____	_____	_____
	(i.e., Zydeco)		
What do I see?			
What do I think?			
What do I wonder?			
Where is something like this in my life?			

Be on the Lookout

Genre	New to Me	Familiar to Me	My Reaction
Quilting			
Stilt walking			
Cowboy Songs			
Go-Go			
Basketmaking			
Klezmer			
Traditional Foods			

Decoding the Festival

Events hold cultural clues, and decoding can deepen the understanding of their relationship to communities and to learning about folklife. Use this worksheet to research the NFF or community, state, national, and international celebrations, holidays, and special occasions. Not every category applies to every event.

Name of Event	Artifacts and publications (pins, posters, etc.)
Season of the year and date	
Location, relationship to the environment	Types of music and dance
Organizers, sponsors	Types of arts and crafts
Staff and volunteer roles	Special terms or language
Audience	Special clothing or regalia
Beginning/Opening	Overall festival arrangement and decoration
Activities	Individual stage or booth arrangement and decoration
Special food and drink	Festival stories (funny, hard, good, or dangerous experiences)
Sounds	
	Ending/Finale
	Cleanup

After the Festival

Use this page to collect students' reflections and reactions to the Jackson Folk Festival. Use the prompts below for writing, drawing, and reporting about the festival.

I noticed . . . _____

I loved how . . . _____

I really can't understand . . . _____

I can't believe . . . _____

I wonder why . . . _____

I was surprised . . . _____

I thought . . . _____

If I had been . . . _____

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Festival Information

The 82nd National Folk Festival will take place in downtown Jackson, Mississippi, from State Street to Farish Street and from Pascagoula Street to Mississippi Street.

For festival news and updates, and to support the festival, visit <https://www.nationalfolkfestival.com>.

Festival Guide by Local Learning
<https://locallearningnetwork.org>