

Cajun and Zydeco: Flavors of Southwest Louisiana

*A Smithsonian Folkways Music Pathway for
students in Grades 6–8.*



Teacher's Guide

Lesson Hub 4:

Cajun and Zydeco: Race, Class, and Music

Lesson Hub Overview

Like Louisiana itself, both Cajun and zydeco music are marked by a complex history of race and class relations. While Cajuns are direct descendants of the Acadians, who were exiled by the British in 1755 from present-day Nova Scotia (Canada), the origin of "Creole" is less strictly defined. At first, the term distinguished mainly between "native-born" people of European descent (white) and European-born (white) settlers. Over time, the term expanded. People of many races and ethnicities now identify as Creole.

Although the Cajuns and Creoles were once divided along racial lines, they have been neighbors for hundreds of years. It's out of this exchange that modern ***Cajun*** and ***zydeco music*** were born and continue to thrive. Many now regard them as cultural treasures.

In this lesson, students will learn about the complex roles played by both race and class in the development of Cajun and zydeco musics. Through a discussion of Cajun and Creole cultural identities, students will gain an understanding of their differences and similarities. They will engage with recordings from Smithsonian Folkways by artists whose music exemplifies the impact of race and class in Louisiana. Finally, students will have an opportunity to reflect on their own cultural identities through the lens of music.

In This Guide

<i>Lesson Hub Overview</i>	1
<i>Lesson Paths and Student Objectives*</i>	2
<i>Teaching Plan</i>	3
<i>2014 National Music Standards Connections</i>	12
<i>Additional Resources</i>	13
<i>Worksheets</i>	14

Lesson Paths and Student Objectives*



1. [Cajun and Creole](#) (30+ minutes)

- Students will explain similarities and differences between Cajun and Creole ancestry, culture, and music.



2. [A Cajun and Zydeco Partnership: Ardoin & McGee](#) (30+ minutes)







- Students will identify the ways in which Dennis McGee and Amédé Ardoin used music elements and expressive qualities in their collaborations.



3. [Music and Cultural Identity](#) (30+ minutes)

- Students will identify several important facets of their own cultural identity and will identify the ways in which cultural identity can be reflected through music.

*Note: The learning icons used above signify the type of learning used in each Path. Keep in mind that these Paths are not intended to be sequential; rather, teachers or students may choose which Paths they'd like to use from each Lesson. The time estimate given for each Path indicates "in class" time. The + indicates there are optional extension activities and/or a suggested homework assignment.

While all learning types ( History and Culture,  Music Listening,  Music Making and Creation, and  Creative Connections) fulfill 2014 National Music Standards, non-music teachers will be able to use  History and Culture and  Creative Connections Paths without specific musical knowledge.

Teaching Plan

1. Path One: Cajun and Creole



To Prepare:

- Read through this Path.
- Preview Path 1 of the **Lesson Hub 4 Slideshow** (slides 2–31).
 - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson Hub 4 landing page, if you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes.

1. Opening Discussion

- A. Provide a bit of contextual information about race and class in Southwest Louisiana (slides 5–6).
- B. Who are the Cajuns? (slide 7) – **Cajuns are descendants of people who once lived in Acadia** (parts of what are now New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia in Canada).
- C. Who are the Creoles? (slide 8) – The concept of ‘Creole’ identity is more complicated and varies in terms of ethnic background. See discussion points in slideshow.

2. Cajun Music and History (slides 9–16)

- A. Attentive Listening: Cajun example
 - Play a short excerpt from the embedded audio track, “La Valse de Denus McGee,” by Cyprien and Adam Landreneau (slide 9).
 - As students listen, ask them to consider this question: *How do you think the musicians might identify? (i.e., as Cajun or Creole).*
 - **Students are not expected to know at first listen**, but if you *have* done other lessons in this pathway, see if students can name some aspects that back up their guess.
 - **ANSWER: Cajun. See following slides for explanation.**
 - Cajun Music (slide 10) – Explanation of Cajun musical elements.
- B. Share information about Cajuns After leading a short discussion based on student responses, advance through the next slides for more contextual information about the following topics:
 - Cajun Ancestry (slide 11)
 - Displacement and Rejection (slide 12)
 - Settling in the Bayous (slide 13)
 - Cajun Poverty (slide 14)

- Cajun Stereotypes (slide 15)
- Cajun Oppression (slide 16)

3. Creole Music and History (slides 17–24)

A. Attentive Listening: Creole examples

- Play excerpts from two other embedded audio tracks: “Bernadette” by the Creole Belles and “Lake Charles Waltz” by Les Amis Creole (slide 17).
- As students listen, ask them to consider this question: *How do you think the musicians might identify? (i.e., as Cajun or Creole).*
 - **Students are not expected to know at first listen**, but if you *have* done other lessons in this pathway, see if students can name some aspects that back up their guess.
 - **ANSWER: Both Creole. See following slides for explanation.**
- Creole music (slide 18)
 - This contrast is meant to demonstrate the complexity of Creole identity - how people of diverse backgrounds and races can both identify as Creole, and how the music can have equally different characteristics.
 - Elements of Creole music – instrumentation (vocals, fiddle, accordion), driving rhythm, use of blue notes.

B. Share information about Creoles: After leading a short discussion based on student responses, advance to the next slide for more contextual information about the following topics:

- Creole Identity (slides 19, 20, 21, 22)
- Racism in the South (slide 23)
- Heading West (to the Bayous) (slide 24)
- Contemporary Creole identity (slide 25)

4. Cajun and Creole Cultural Exchange:

Share additional information about the following topics:

- Cajun and Creole musical and cultural exchange (slides 26, 27, 28, 29)
- Cajun and Creole Cultural Pride (slide 30)

3. Learning Checkpoint: (slide 31)

- *Who were (are) the Cajuns?*
Answer: Originally, the Cajuns were direct descendants of Acadians, who were exiled from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755.
- *Who were (are) the Creoles?*
Answer: The term Creole historically referred to people of mixed European or African descent who were born in Louisiana.

- *What aspects of cultural identity do Cajuns and Creoles share?*

Answer: They share a common interest in preserving the French language and many aspects of food and music.

2. Path Two: A Cajun and Zydeco Partnership: Ardoin & McGee



To Prepare:

- Read through the Path.
- Preview Path 2 of the **Lesson Hub 4 Slideshow** (slides 32–44).
 - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson Hub landing page, if you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes.
- Print [the compare and contrast worksheet](#) for each student (find below).
- Print (or display) the lyrics/translation for [“Madame Atchen”](#) and [“Blues de Basile”](#) (find below).

1. Listening for Similarities and Differences (slides 33–35)

A. Attentive Listening: Instruments (slide 34) Play short excerpts of the two audio tracks (“Madame Atchen” by Dennis McGee and Amédé Ardoin and “Blues de Basile” by Amédé Ardoin) embedded in the slideshow, while prompting students to think about this question:

- *What instruments do you hear?*
 - **“Madame Atchen” – accordion, fiddle, vocals**
 - **“Blues de Basile” - accordion, fiddle, vocals**
- Consider facilitating a short discussion based on student responses.

B. Attentive Listening: Comparing Style (slide 35) Play these excerpts again (perhaps several more times).

- Students should think about the following questions as they listen:
 - *What are your first impressions of each recording?*
 - *Are these tracks played by different musicians or the same ones?*
 - *Are the tracks from the same or different time periods?*
- After leading a short discussion about these topics, **advance to the next slides for answers** and more information.

2. The Founding Fathers of Cajun and Zydeco: (slides 36 through 43)

Share the embedded contextual information about the founding fathers of Cajun and zydeco (Dennis McGee and Amédé Ardoin) and their unique partnership.

3. Listening for Collaboration: Within this activity, students will analyze and compare “Madame Atchen” and “Blues de Basile” in more depth.

A. Compare and Contrast Listening Activity (slide 44) (*consider assigning as homework*)

- Pass out a compare and contrast worksheet to each student.

- Play each track again.
 - As students listen, have them write down their observations in the corresponding columns regarding **music elements** (e.g., instrumentation, texture, time/rhythm, pitch/melody, structure/form), **expressive qualities** (e.g., dynamics, tempo, style, tone quality, articulation), and **meaning/purpose/context** (e.g., language, role of audience members, performance context, lyrical meaning).
 - Next, students can fill out the third column on the worksheet (compare and contrast).

B. Comparing and Contrasting Tracks (slide 45)

- Prompt students to discuss similarities and differences between these recordings by using one (or more) of the conversation starters provided within the slideshow. *(Alternatively, students could discuss their ideas with a partner or in small groups).*
 - **Similarities:**
 - Musician: same singer / vocal style, in French, high pitched and wailing
 - Instruments: same instruments used - fiddle and accordions
 - **Differences:**
 - Time signature/form: “Madame Atchen” is a waltz – “Blues de Basile” is in 2/4--more of a "two step"
 - Instrumentation/arrangement: The fiddles drive “Madame Atchen” and the influence of old European classical music can almost be heard, whereas in “Blues de Basile,” the accordion drives the tune, and the fiddle plays in the background. Many elements of modern blues can be heard.
- **Bonus Discussion Question:** *Looking at the elements in your listening log, how, if at all, do these songs reflect any issues regarding race and class that we've discussed?*

Possible answers:

- “Madame Atchen” feels like a **precursor to what we now know as Cajun music** due to the influence of European music and the dominance of the fiddle. “Blues de Basile” seems to be a **precursor of what we now know as zydeco** since the accordion drives the tune and “blues” elements are heard.
- Even though we commonly associate “Cajun” music with white Cajuns and zydeco music with Creole (mixed race) - there is a lot of overlap between the two and **Cajun and Creole musicians have always collaborated and have drawn inspiration from each other.**

4. Learning Checkpoint: (slide 46)

- *What positive outcomes emerged from Amédé Ardoin and Dennis McGee's partnership?*

Answer: Their partnership laid the groundwork for modern Cajun music as we know it today and helped inspire an entirely new genre of music (zydeco).

3. Path Three: Music and Cultural Identity



To Prepare:

- Read through this Path.
- Preview Path 3 of the **Lesson Hub 4 Slideshow** (slides 47–58)
 - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson Hub landing page. If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes.
- Print the [“My Multicultural Self” Template](#) for each student (find below).
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- Print the [“Exploring Cultural Identity through Music”](#) worksheet for each student (find below).
- Print or display the lyrics to [“Paper in My Shoe.”](#)

1. Music and Meaning in “Paper in my Shoe” (slides 48–51)

A. Attentive Listening (slide 49)

- Ask students to follow along with the lyrics as they listen to the embedded recording of “Paper in My Shoe” (either pass them out or display them).
- As they listen, they should think about these questions:
 - *What do you think is the meaning of the expression “Paper in My Shoe”?*
 - *What do the lyrics mean to you?*
 - *What shared aspects of Cajun and Creole culture are represented here?*
Answer: poverty, struggle, happiness (heard in melody) through adversity
- Consider asking students to share their thoughts about these questions before moving to the next slides (**which provide explanation and additional contextual information**).

B. Share information about the meaning of the lyrics. (slide 50)

C. Optional Activity: (slide 51) Play the song again, asking students to sing along and/or tap along with the rhythm (note the use of English and a modern blues feel)!

2. Different Musical Interpretations of “Paper in my Shoe”

A. The King of Zydeco: Share Information (slide 52)

Share embedded contextual information about the song and the performer heard in the first example: Clifton Chenier.

B. Cajun and Creole Interpretations of “Paper in my Shoe” (slide 53)

- Attentive Listening Play excerpts from a Cajun (“Paper in my Shoes” by Nathan Abshire and the Balfa Brothers) and an early Creole* (“Du papier dans mon soulier” by Etienne Lewis) version of this song.

** It should be noted that "early Creole" music is meant to mean EARLY music from Louisiana, made by Creole musicians, that INFLUENCED the development of zydeco music. For a full discussion of this progression (and the invention of zydeco), please see Lesson 8.*

- As students listen, they should think about the similarities and differences between the songs.
 - **Similarities** - same lyrics, themes – both use the accordion, similar rhythm (2/4), laid back and dragging singing
 - **Differences** – instrumentation (early Creole version uses only accordion and voice; Cajun version uses accordion, and voice) - Cajun version is slightly more driving, likely a live stage performance, while Creole version sounds more like in-home music
- Consider leading a short class discussion based on student responses.

3. Music as a Reflection of Cultural Identity

- A. Share the embedded information regarding the ways in which Cajun and zydeco music reflect aspects of Cajun and Creole cultural identity. (slides 54-- 57)
- B. Creative Activity, Part A: My Multicultural Self (slide 58) (*this activity can be completed during class or assigned as homework*).
 - Pass out the “My Multicultural Self” worksheet.
 - Students will follow these instructions (also provided in the slideshow and on the worksheet):
 - Place your name in the center and use the outside “bubbles” to name aspects that help define who you are.
 - Focus on one of your “identity bubbles.”
 - *What is a song that reflects this part of your cultural identity?*
- C. Creative Activity, Part B: Music and Cultural Identity (slide 59) (*this activity can be completed during class or assigned as homework*).
 - Pass out the “Exploring Cultural Identity through Music” worksheet.
 - Students will follow these instructions (also provided in the slideshow and on the worksheet):
 - Write out the lyrics to the song you chose in Part A.
 - Underline one or more places in the lyrics that represent your identity.
 - Write 2–3 sentences that explain how this song represents your cultural identity.

4. Learning Checkpoint: (slide 60)

- *Can you name a facet of Cajun and Creole cultural identity that is sometimes reflected through music?*

Answer: Many songs in the Cajun and Creole (and zydeco) tradition have sad lyrics that reflect themes of hardship and suffering but are sung to upbeat melodies; this trend reflects a facet of their cultural identity: resilience or finding strength in adversity.

- *Can you express your cultural identity through music? In what ways?*

Answer: Answers will vary.

2014 National Music Standards Connections

MU:Re7.1.a Demonstrate and explain, citing evidence, how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, purposes, or contexts

- Can I describe the ways in which the songs we listened to reflect aspects of Cajun and Creole cultural identity?

MU:Re7.2.a Explain how the elements of music and expressive qualities relate to the structure of contrasting pieces.

- Can I identify and compare the ways in which the elements of music and expressive qualities relate to the structure of “Madame Atchen” and “Blues de Basille”?

MU:Re8.1.a Describe a personal interpretation of how creators’ and performers’ application of the elements of music and expressive qualities, within genres and cultural and historical context, convey expressive intent.

- Can I describe how the performers’ application of the elements of music and expressive qualities provide clues about important aspects of Cajun and Creole cultural identity?

MU:Cn10.0.a Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music

- Can I explain why Cajun and Creole collaborations ultimately led to the development of an entirely new genre of music (Zydeco)?

MU:Cn11.0.a Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

- Can I explain why the song I chose reflects one aspect of my cultural identity?
 - Can I explain similarities and differences between Cajun and Creole ancestry, culture, and music?
-

Additional Resources

Bernard, Shane K. n.d. "Cajuns." 64 Parishes. Accessed March 18, 2022.

<https://64parishes.org/entry/cajuns>.

Bernard, Shane K. n.d. "Creoles." 64 Parishes. Accessed March 18, 2022.

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DeWitt, Mark F. 2008. *Cajun and Zydeco Dance Music in Northern California: Modern Pleasures in a Postmodern World*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Dole, Gerard. 1978. "Louisiana Creole Music." Liner Notes for *Louisiana Creole Music*.

Folkways Records FW02622. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/FW02622.pdf>.

Doucet, Michael. 1995. "Amédé Ardoïn's Blues." Liner Notes for Ardoïn, Amédé. *I'm*

Never Comin' Back. Arhoolie Records ARH07007. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/ARH07007.pdf>.

Ledet, Jennifer. 2011, June 8. "Lache Pas la Patate! (Don't Drop the Potato!)" *People Problems...Solved* (blog). *Ledet Management*.

<https://www.ledetmanagement.com/lache-pas-la-patate-dont-drop-the-potato/>.

Louisiana Division of the Arts. n.d. "Folklife in Louisiana." Accessed March 18, 2022.

<http://www.louisianafolklife.org/>.

Spitzer, Nick. 1987. "Lache Pas la Patate: French in Louisiana." *Smithsonian Folklife*

Festival Program Book: 32–36. https://folklife-media.si.edu/docs/festival/program-book-articles/FESTBK1987_o8.pdf.

Worksheets

C&Z Lesson 4 Compare and Contrast Worksheet

	Example 1: “Madame Atchen”	Example 2: “Blues de Basille”	Comparing these recordings, how are they similar or different?
Music Elements (what instruments do you hear? Texture? Do you notice anything related to rhythm, melody, or harmony? Form/structure?)			
Expressive Qualities (what dynamics are used? Tone quality? Balance? Articulation? Tempo? Vocal timbre? Stylistic characteristics?)			
Meaning/Purpose/Context (What are the intentions of the performers? Why did they arrange/perform this? Where would this be performed? What language is used? What meaning do the lyrics convey? What is the role of audience members?)			

“Madame Atchen” (Lyrics and Translation)

As performed by Amédé Ardoin & Dennis McGee

French Lyrics:

Malheureuse, quoi t’as fait, mais avec moi,
Tu me fais du mal chaque fois je te regarde, ma
vilaine.

Quoi t’as dit, mais, toi, jolie, tu me fais du mal,

Quo’ faire t’as fait, mais, toutes sortes d’a
baisses,

Quitte-moi avec moi

Je va’s m’en aller, je va’s m’en aller mais dans
la maison

Je va’s m’en aller, mais dans la maison, toi,
jolie

Je va’s m’en aller à la chère ‘tite femme,
Mais, quoi t’as fait mais avec ton ‘tit cœur
J’ai pas pu, mais je connais pas la cause à toi.
La cause de toi, mais si tu me vantes sur tous
ces bonnes paroles
Toi, tu m’as dit, toi, jolie, ça m’a fait du mal.
Quand j’ai revenue t’étais partie, oui, t’étais
capable de m’en aller
J’ai resté, tu vas espérer aussi demain.

Oh, jolie, comment je va’s faire, tu me fais du
mal,
Je mérite pas ça, toi, jolie, chère mon cœur fait
mal,
T’aurais parti, mais tu me dis ça, mais ton idée,
C’est ton idée, c’est pas comme ça, toi,
malheureuse,
T’as pas me dit oui, je m’ai retourné, mais à la
maison,
Mon cœur fait mal, il m’a fait des menteries.

Translation:

Unhappy one, what have you done with me?
You hurt me every time I look at you, my ugly
one.

What you said, but you, pretty girl, you hurt
me,

Why did you do all kinds of degrading things to
me?

Leave me alone

I’m going to go, I’m going to go in the house,

I’m going to go in the house, you pretty one.

I’m going to go away, ah, the dear little woman,
But what did you do with your little heart?
I wasn’t able, but I don’t know your reason,
Your reason if you flatter me with all these
good words
You told me ... you, pretty one, that hurt me.
When I came back you were gone, yes, you
were capable of leaving me.
I stayed, you’re gonna wait more tomorrow.

Oh, pretty one, how will I do, you do me
wrong,
I don’t deserve that, you, pretty dear, my heart
hurts badly
You would have left, but you tell me your
mind,
That’s your idea, it’s not like that, unhappy
one.
You didn’t tell me “yes;” I went back to the
house,
My heart hurts; it lied to me.

“Blues de Basile”

As performed by Amédé Ardoin (with Dennis McGee)

French Lyrics :

O, comment je vas faire, catin
 Mais, ouais, ‘tite fille je m’en vas à
 la maison tout seul
 Comment tu veux, dis ouais, je
 peux faire, ‘tite fille
 Si tes parents veulent pas, je te
 demanderais pas
 Dis, ouais, c’est toi, éou c’est tu
 veux je peux aller
 Mais, ouais, mon nég, chaque fois
 que je vas pas c’ez toi.

O, mais, oui catin, comment
 Si vous-autres peuvent faire m’en
 aller de toi, ‘tite fille,
 Moi, je te vois pas, c’est beaucoup
 rarement
 Je serais contente te rejoindre, te
 rejoindre, ‘tite fille.

O, comment je vas faire, catin,
 Dis ouais, je vas tout seul éou c’est
 je vas aller,
 Que tes parents veulent pas,
 comment je vas faire, ‘tite fille

Translation :

Oh, what am I gonna do, doll?
 But, yes, little girl, I’m going back
 to the house all alone.
 How do you want, yeah, me to
 make it, little girl,
 If your parents don’t want, I won’t
 ask you.
 Say, yeah, you, where do you want
 me to be able to go?
 But, yeah, my man, each time I
 can’t go to your place.

Oh, but yes, doll, what can I do
 If you all can make me leave you,
 little girl ?
 Me, I see you so
 rarely
 I’d be happy just to go meet, to go
 meet you, little girl.

Oh, what can I do, doll ?
 Say, yeah, I’m going all alone,
 where I’m going
 Since your parents don’t want me,
 what can I do, little girl ?

“Paper in My Shoe”

As performed by Clifton Chenier

French Lyrics:

Ouais je fous pas mal
Quoi ta mom a' fait pas
Ouais je fous pas mal
Quoi ta mama n'aime pas
Je gain papier dans mes souliers x4

Translation:

Well I don't care
What your mama don't allow
Well I don't care
What your mama don't allow
I got a paper in my shoe x 4

My Multicultural Self

MIDDLE/UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY



Place your name in the center. Choose five different aspects of your identity and write each of them in the identity bubbles provided.

The form consists of five speech bubbles arranged around a central horizontal line. The bubbles are colored: light blue (top right), light orange (top left), light green (middle right), light yellow (bottom left), and a larger light orange (bottom center). Each bubble has a small tail pointing towards the center line.

Exploring Cultural Identity through Music Assignment Rubric

2014 National Music Standards Documentation for this Learning Experience (5th-8th Grade):

MU:Re7.1.a Select or choose music to listen to and explain the connections to specific interests or experiences for a specific purpose.

- Select an “anthem” that reflects one aspect of your cultural identity

MU:Cn10.0.a Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music

- Explain why this song reflects your cultural identity and serves as a symbol of cultural pride.

Suggested Rubric for Standards Documentation:

4 = Exceeds Standard	3 = Meets Standard	2 = Approaching Standard	1 = Does Not Meet Standard
<p>The song selected by the student <i>clearly</i> connected to the facet of identity they were trying to reflect.</p> <p>The student identified <i>several</i> places in the lyrics that “celebrated” this facet of their identity.</p> <p>The student identified <i>several</i> places in the lyrics that were “uplifting”, “inspiring”, or “motivating”</p> <p>The student’s response <i>artistically</i> and <i>imaginatively</i> included specific reference to interests, values, prior knowledge and/or experiences.</p>	<p>The song selected by the student connected to the facet of identity they were trying to reflect.</p> <p>The student identified one place in the lyrics that “celebrated” this facet of their identity.</p> <p>The student identified one place in the lyrics that was “uplifting”, “inspiring”, or “motivating”</p> <p>The student’s response included specific reference to interests, values, prior knowledge and/or experiences.</p>	<p><i>With assistance</i>, the student selected a song that connected to the facet of identity they were trying to reflect.</p> <p><i>With assistance</i>, the student identified a place in the lyrics that “celebrated” this facet of their identity.</p> <p><i>With assistance</i>, the student identified a place in the lyrics that was “uplifting”, “inspiring”, or “motivating”</p> <p>The student’s response included <i>general</i> but not specific reference to interests, values, prior knowledge and/or experiences.</p>	<p>The song selected by the student <i>did not</i> connect to the facet of identity they were trying to reflect.</p> <p>The student <i>did not</i> identify a place in the lyrics that “celebrated” this facet of their identity.</p> <p>The student <i>did not</i> identify a place in the lyrics that was “uplifting”, “inspiring”, or “motivating”</p> <p>The student’s response <i>did not</i> include references to interests, values, prior knowledge and/or experiences.</p>