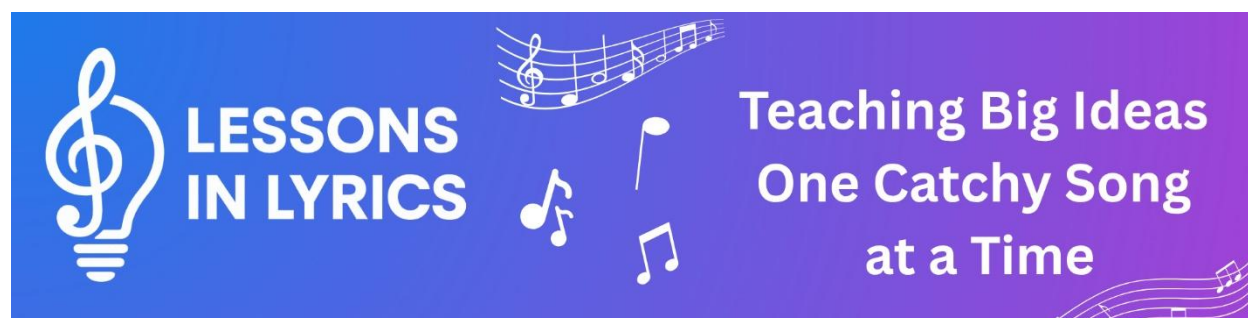


No Such Thing as a Free Lunch (Lessons in Lyrics)



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Concept Overview

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch” is one of the most famous sayings in economics—and one of the most misunderstood. It doesn’t mean people should never accept help or enjoy something “free.” It means that even when something feels free, someone else paid for it.

That “free” lunch? A friend picked up the tab. A government program? Taxpayers funded it. A ride, a check, a grant? Someone had to work, earn, or give something up so someone else could benefit.

This concept teaches students to look beyond the surface and ask important questions: *Where did the money come from? Who paid for this benefit? What did they give up to make it happen?* Whether it’s a public service or a personal favor, every good or service has a cost, even if that cost is hidden from view.

Through four musical versions—rap, pop, country, and rock—this lesson brings the concept to life in ways students will remember. Each version delivers the same core idea: “Free” isn’t really free. Somebody’s picking up the check.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- define the concept of “no free lunch” in economic terms
- identify who pays for goods or services that appear “free”
- analyze examples of public and private benefits to determine who is covering the cost
- evaluate policies, programs, or scenarios using the lens of “Who’s really paying for this?”

Vocabulary

Budget code: A system used to organize and track how government money is spent.

Covered: Paid for by someone else, often without you directly seeing the cost.

Gift: Something given voluntarily, without payment or expectation of return.

Grant: Money given by a government or organization to help pay for something, often with no requirement to repay.

Meter: A device that tracks usage or cost—like electricity, water, or time.

Policy: A rule or guideline set by a government or organization that influences decisions and actions.

Shifted: Moved from one person, place, or account to another—especially costs or responsibilities.

Stake: A personal investment or cost—something someone puts at risk or gives up.

Tab: A running total of money owed, like in a restaurant.

Taxpayer: A person who pays taxes to the government, helping fund public services.

Voluntarily: Done by choice, not forced.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the phrase “No Such Thing as a Free Lunch” mean in your own words?
2. Who might be paying for something that seems free?
3. In the videos, “somebody pays” is repeated across all the versions. Why do you think the creators chose to emphasize that phrase?
4. Think of a free school lunch. Who paid for it?
5. Think of a public park or a government grant. Where does the money come from to fund it?
6. What are some hidden or less obvious costs involved in things that seem free?
7. The country version uses the word “stake.” What does it mean to have a stake in something?
8. How might taxpayers feel about covering costs they didn’t choose?
9. What’s the difference between a gift and a tax-funded benefit?
10. How does choice factor into how people feel about giving or receiving something?
11. Can something be free to one person and costly to another?
12. How does this idea apply to government aid, scholarships, or public services?
13. The rock version says that even when it feels free, there’s a cost you don’t see. What are some examples of that?
14. What might someone be giving up—time, effort, opportunity—so that others can receive a “free” benefit?
15. If we understand that somebody always pays, how should that affect the way we make policy decisions?
16. Who should decide what’s worth paying for with tax money?
17. How can we weigh different needs fairly when deciding how to spend public funds?

18. Do you think people would act differently if they could see exactly how their taxes are spent? Why or why not?
19. Does knowing someone else paid make you feel more grateful or more concerned?
20. What's a responsible way to benefit from something that others helped pay for?

Lyrics – Pop Version

Somebody Pays – No Such Thing as a Free Lunch

[Verse 1]

That lunch tray didn't fill itself—
Those tater tots came off a shelf.
You didn't pay a single cent,
But somebody's dollars still got spent.

The field trip bus, the science fair,
The pencils waiting at your chair—
They don't just show up out of thin air,
Somebody paid to put them there

[Chorus]

There's no such thing as free,
Even when it feels like it to me.
If I'm not payin' cash or card,
Then someone else is workin' hard.

It might be taxes, might be a grant—
Not some magic from a wishful chant.
You might not pay in dollars and cents,
But that doesn't mean there's no expense.

[Verse 2]

Buy one, get one? Built-in trick—
They raised the price and made it stick.
"Free" phone with plan? That's just disguise,
You'll pay it back in monthly ties.

That giveaway shirt from a carnival booth?
You gave your info—and that's the truth.
Nothing's free when you zoom way out—
It's all just math, no room for doubt.

[Bridge – Light drop before final chorus]
The gov can't give what it didn't take—
Somebody's payin' for every "free" break.
So next time you cheer when you don't pay,
Just ask yourself—who did today?

[Final Chorus – Full Beat]
There's no such thing as free,
Even when it feels like it to me.
If I'm not payin' cash or card,
Then someone else is workin' hard.

It might be taxes, might be a grant—
Not some magic from a wishful chant.
You might not pay in dollars and cents,
But that doesn't mean there's no expense.

Lyrics – Country Version

Who's Pickin' Up the Check? – No Such Thing as a Free Lunch

[Verse 1]
That tray of tots and mac and cheese?
Somebody worked for those—believe me, please.
Could be your neighbor, could be your town,
But someone paid to pass it down.

That bus you ride? That trip to the zoo?
It wasn't free, just free to you.
Before you say, "What a lucky break,"
Remember—it came from someone's stake.

[Chorus]
There's no such thing as a free lunch,
No free dinner, no free brunch.
If it ain't your wallet payin' the bill,
Then someone else is footin' it still.

Might be taxes, might be a grant,
But somebody's coverin' what you can't.
So before you cheer, just stop and check—
Who's pickin' up the check?

[Verse 2]
That "buy one, get one" at the store?
They just raised the price a dollar more.

That “free” phone came with a two-year plan—
You’ll pay it back, oh yes you can.

Your friend bought lunch? That was kind—
But how many hours were clocked behind?
Even a gift, when it looks no-strings,
Comes from someone who gave up things.

[Bridge]

That check from the gov, that “free” support—
It didn’t show up from a magic court.
They take from folks who had to give,
To fund the perks we sometimes live.

It’s not a mystery, not a trick—
It’s money moved with a policy pick.
So before you clap for that giveaway—
Think twice ‘bout how it got that way.

[Final Chorus – Repeat]

There’s no such thing as a free lunch,
No free dinner, no free brunch.
If it ain’t your wallet payin’ the bill,
Then someone else is footin’ it still.

Might be taxes, might be a grant,
But somebody’s coverin’ what you can’t.
So before you cheer, just stop and check—
Who’s pickin’ up the check?

[Outro – Spoken, soft guitar strum]

It might be free to you...
But that don’t mean it was free.

Lyrics – Rap Version

No Such Thing (As a Free Lunch)

[Intro – Spoken, beat behind]

You ever hear “it’s free” and think,
“Score—I win”?
Mmm... not so fast.
Let’s talk about who’s pickin’ up the tab.

[Verse 1]

Buy one, get one? That ain’t free—
They just built the cost in secretly.
Free phone plan? Read that fine print,
You’re payin’ each month with a locked-in stint.

Sample at the store? That cube ain't kind—
It's bait to get inside your mind.
Free trial? That clock don't stop—
Forget to cancel? You just shopped.

[Chorus – Call & Response]

There's no such thing as a free lunch! (Nope!)
Somebody's payin' for that crunch. (Yup!)
If it ain't your card or your check—
Then someone else is writin' the spec.

There's no such thing as a free ride! (True!)
Behind every gift, there's a price tag too.
So when it says "free," don't be blind—
Ask who's payin' it, back behind.

[Verse 2]

Your friend bought lunch? That was nice,
But they gave up time to earn that price.
That "free" school gear? PTO baked—
Parents hustled, raffled, donated, and caked.

That shirt from the booth? Looks clean,
But now they've got your data stream.
That muffin shop Wi-Fi you like to use?
You paid 8 bucks for banana mousse.

[Bridge]

"Free" from the gov? That's the line—
They hand you yours after takin' mine.
That check or ride or service sweet?
It came from pockets down the street.

Not a gift, not passed-around hat—
Taxes take—don't forget that.
If you didn't pay but still got fed,
Someone else bled green instead.

[Final Chorus – Full Beat, Big Energy]

There's no such thing as a free lunch!
Somebody's buyin' every munch.
It might be taxes, might be a gift—
But somebody's payin'—givin' you a lift.

There's no such thing as a free ride!
Even good things still have a side.
So next time something's "free" to see...
Ask: who's payin' it?

Who's payin' it?

Who's payin' it?

[Outro – Spoken, beat fades]

If you didn't pay,

Someone else did.

And sometimes, they didn't even get to choose.

Lyrics – Rock Version

[Verse 1]

You heard the word—it said “no fee”

But free don't mean it came to be

Without a cost, without a fight

Somebody paid to make it right

That lunch tray's stacked, that bus is rollin'

But someone's checkbook took the tollin'

If you didn't pay, then don't forget—

The meter's runnin', the tab ain't set

[Chorus]

There's a cost you don't see,

Even when it feels like it's free.

If you're not payin' out of your hand,

It's comin' from taxin' somebody's band.

Might be taxed, might be owed,

Shifted through the budget code.

So next time you're smilin' at that “free”...

Ask yourself—who paid the fee?

[Verse 2]

“Buy one, get one”? Built-in spin—

You paid for both when you walked in.

That “free” phone deal with the 2-year tag?

Locked in tight—you're the moneybag.

Your friend buys lunch? That's real sweet—

But they gave up hours to earn that treat.

Even a gift that lands for free,

Came from someone's sacrifice, you see.

[Chorus]

There's a cost you don't see,

Even when it feels like it's free.

If you're not payin' out of your hand,

It's comin' from taxin' somebody's band.

Might be taxed, might be owed,
Shifted through the budget code.
So next time you're smilin' at that "free"...
Ask yourself—who paid the fee?

[Bridge – Breakdown, gritty groove]
That gov't check? That "helping hand"?
It started with someone else's stand.
They taxed the hours, taxed the sweat,
To write a check you won't forget.

Not from nowhere, not from grace—
It came from someone else's place.
So next time "free" comes knockin' loud...
Look around.

[Final Chorus – Full volume]
There's a cost you don't see,
Even when it feels like it's free.
If you're not payin' out of your hand,
It's comin' from taxin' somebody's band.

Might be taxed, might be owed,
Shifted through the budget code.
So next time you're smilin' at that "free"...
Ask yourself—who paid the fee?

[Outro – Spoken, over fading distortion]
If you didn't pay...
someone else did.

Activities

Quick Use: Bell Ringer or Filler Activity

Instructions:

Play one version of the *No Free Lunch* video (rap, country, pop, or rock) at the start of class. After viewing, ask students to respond to a single prompt in their notebooks or on a sticky note:

- What's something in your life that *felt* free but actually wasn't?
- What line or image from the video made you think about who really pays for "free" things?

- Do you agree with the idea that “somebody always pays”? Why or why not?

This short activity takes 5–10 minutes and can serve as a warm-up, informal assessment, or transition into deeper discussion. It also works well for previewing or reviewing a full lesson later in the week. You can choose a different music genre each time.

Who’s Picking Up the Check?

Objective tie-in: recognize that even if something is “free” to the recipient, someone else is paying

Instructions:

Divide students into small groups. Give each group a selection of “free” scenarios from the list below. For each scenario, students should discuss and record their answers to the following questions:

1. Who received the benefit?
2. Who paid for it (or contributed to it)?
3. What did the payer give up in order to cover the cost?
4. Who ultimately benefits and how?
5. Was it truly “free”? Why or why not?

After discussion, groups should share one example with the class. Encourage students to compare answers and reflect on how different people might evaluate the costs and benefits of each scenario differently.

Scenarios:

1. Free school lunch provided to all
2. A friend buys you a movie
3. You receive a free public library card
4. Free COVID-19 test at a government clinic
5. Your family gets a tax refund
6. Your family gets a tax refund that is more than the taxes you paid in
7. Free concert in the park sponsored by the city
8. College scholarship from a nonprofit foundation
9. Government provides free preschool
10. Free sample handed out at the grocery store
11. Your neighbor helps fix your bike for free
12. A celebrity donates money to fund new playground equipment
13. You get a free lunch because you won a trivia contest

14. The school gives out free pencils during testing week
15. You stream a free show on a platform with ads
16. Free breakfast during the summer from a local church
17. Government stimulus check sent to your parents
18. Free tutoring offered after school by volunteers
19. Your sports team gets free uniforms paid for by a local business
20. A local charity gives out free winter coats
21. You use a free public bus provided by the city

“Free Stuff” Ad Busting

Have students find real advertisements (including social media ads) or promotional materials that use the word **“free”** (e.g., “free trial,” “free lunch,” “buy one, get one free”). Then, in pairs or small groups, they:

- Break down the fine print or likely costs
- Ask: Who’s paying for this? What’s the real trade-off?
- Share with the class the “truth” behind their ad

Encourages real-world critical thinking and skepticism of messaging.

Free vs. Gift Debate

Objective tie-in: distinguish between gifts and tax-funded programs; recognize the role of consent and choice

Instructions:

Divide class into two groups. One argues that gifts/charity and government aid are essentially the same (“help is help”). The other argues they are different (one is voluntary, one is not).

Debrief with a discussion:

- Which method encourages cooperation?
- Which one allows for choice or mutual agreement?
- Are there pros and cons to each?

Alternative Debate Format: Assigning Roles Instead of Positions

In a typical debate, students are divided into *positions*—one group argues “yes,” the other “no.” But when you assign **roles** instead of sides, students are asked to argue from **a perspective**, not just a stance.

For example, instead of saying:

- *Team A argues that taxes are fair.*
- *Team B argues that taxes are unfair.*

You might assign students roles such as:

- A minimum-wage worker receiving government assistance
- A small business owner who pays high taxes
- A retired citizen on a fixed income
- A student receiving a scholarship
- A teacher whose salary comes from tax-funded schools

Each student must then consider:

- *What would this person think about "free" stuff?*
- *How might they define fairness?*
- *Who do they think should pay—and why?*

This encourages empathy, deeper thinking, and a more nuanced understanding of trade-offs and incentives. It also avoids students becoming overly entrenched in simplistic "pro" or "con" positions and opens space for discussion rather than just opposition.

"Thank You" Letters—From the Other Side

Format: Creative writing

Skills: Empathy, roleplay, understanding unseen effort

Objective focus: explain trade-offs; recognize that someone always pays

Students write a fictional thank-you note from/as a recipient of a "free" good or service to the person or group who paid for it.

Example:

- A student writes a letter from themselves to taxpayers thanking them for subsidizing their school lunch.
- Or from a public park visitor to a maintenance worker or tax-paying citizen.
- Student writes a letter to the PTO for something they have provided to the students/school.

This gives students a personal lens to reflect on unseen labor, money, or time that made their benefit possible.

Budget Breakdown Challenge

Format: Math + reasoning + real-world application

Skills: Budgeting, estimating, analyzing public costs

Objective focus: identify trade-offs; understand that resources are limited

Give students a simplified version of a city or school budget with a fixed dollar amount. Ask them to choose which services to fund and how much to allocate to each. Then introduce a new "free" program (e.g., free internet for students) and have them:

- Decide whether to include it
- Explain what other service(s) they would reduce or cut
- Present their reasoning to the class

This highlights the idea that "free" means less money for something else.

Here is a fictionalized city budget for your use or create your own. (Ask an AI to make one for you!)

Department	Budget Allocation (\$)
Environmental Protection	15495361.87
Public Safety (Police, Fire, EMS)	12995997.17
General Government (Admin, Legal, Elections)	12550758.01
Libraries & Cultural Services	10978325.53
Parks & Recreation	10964299.85
Public Works (Roads, Trash, Maintenance)	9853090.51
Health & Human Services	8889022.84
Education (K-12 Schools)	7235627.9
Economic Development	6964282.71
Housing & Urban Development	4073233.61

Here is another example, using easier numbers to work with:

City of Oakbend: Annual Budget Overview

Population: 150,000

Income (Revenue Sources)

- Property Taxes: \$45 million
- Sales Taxes: \$30 million

- Business Taxes & Fees: \$15 million
- State/Federal Grants: \$10 million
- Public Service Fees (utilities, licenses, etc.): \$8 million
- Tourism & Local Events: \$2 million

Total Annual Revenue: \$110 million

Expenses (Current Allocations)

Department/Service	Annual Funding
Public Safety (Police/Fire/EMS)	\$30 million
Public Schools	\$25 million
Roads, Bridges, and Transit	\$18 million
Public Health & Sanitation	\$10 million
Parks and Recreation	\$7 million
Housing Assistance & Homelessness	\$6 million
Arts & Cultural Programs	\$3 million
Environmental Initiatives	\$2 million
City Administration	\$5 million
Emergency Reserve Fund	\$4 million

Total Annual Spending: \$110 million

You can now prompt students with challenges like:

- What happens if the city loses a \$5 million federal grant?
- What if a new “Free After-School Meal Program” is proposed at a cost of \$2 million?
- Which department(s) should absorb the cut—or should the city raise new revenue?

Create Your Own Lesson in Lyrics

Instructions:

Challenge students to become the creators! Working individually or in small groups, have students choose an economic or civic concept (from class or from a provided topic list) and create their own *Lesson in Lyrics*. They should write a short, original song or rap that explains the concept in a clear, creative, and engaging way. Encourage them to include a chorus, define key vocabulary, and use real-world examples. For an added layer, students may storyboard or describe the kind of visuals they would use in a music video.

Students are welcome to use **AI tools**—such as ChatGPT, Suno, or music video generators—to help brainstorm, write, or even produce their project. Since this particular lesson is all about creative destruction, it's the perfect time to explore how new technologies can become tools for learning, creativity, and innovation.

This project can be submitted as lyrics only, or students may choose to perform or record their creation if time and resources allow. (Perhaps an extra credit opportunity?)