

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Exploring Identity in Literature and Life

Facing History Student Learning Outcomes

In order to deepen their understanding of the text, themselves, each other, and the world, students will . . .

- Value the complexity of identity in themselves and others.
- Examine how their identity is a combination of who they say they are, who others say they are, and who they hope to be in the future.
- Recognize the power that comes with telling their own story and engaging with the stories of others.

ELA Skills Development

- Draw evidence from the text to support analysis of what the text says and what can be inferred about characterization, setting, conflict, and/or theme.
- Produce a written reflection that develops a central idea and includes specific details and examples of personal experience.
- Use technology to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas clearly and creatively.

Overview

Adolescence is a pivotal moment in the process of *becoming* in a young person's development, and the students in your ELA classroom are deeply invested in exploring their own identities. The literature they read and the stories they write and tell in school are an important part of this process and can help them make sense of what they are feeling and experiencing.

The following learning experiences help students explore the complexity and fluidity of identity, both in the world of the text and in their own lives. To help students engage with this complexity in progressively deeper ways, we have provided four learning experiences, starting with individual identity and then moving outward to help students consider their relationship to place, other people, and society. Taken together over the course of a unit or year, these learning experiences can help students understand that identity development is a complicated, ongoing process, and while it can be difficult and requires courage, there is power and agency in understanding the factors that make them the unique individuals that they are, as well as value in making space to learn the stories and experiences of those around them.

Notes to Teacher

1. Understand the Purpose of Identity Charts

Identity charts are a graphic tool that can help students consider the many factors that shape the identities of both individuals and communities (see the [Identity Charts](#) teaching strategy). We recommend that you model the process of reflecting on identity by creating your own identity chart using the template that you are asking your students to use. Sharing your identity chart and speaking about some of the factors that make up your identity is an excellent community-building opportunity and a way for your students to learn more about you.

2. Definitions of Social Identity Terminology

Identity can be difficult to talk about. The more you can try to understand your students and give them the tools they need to express their ideas and experiences in the world, the more supported they will feel. The following definitions can help your students think and talk about their social identity, their sense of who they are based on their membership in certain groups:

- **Ethnicity:** A group of people who are connected by a common language, culture, spiritual tradition, and/or ancestral history.
- **Gender:** The socially prescribed and enforced roles, behaviors, and expectations that are assigned to individuals at birth based on their biological sex.¹ Gender is a social construct, and individuals can reject or create a gender identity that feels true to their sense of who they are.
- **Nationality:** Your membership in a country where you were born and/or where you have citizenship.
- **Race:** A socially constructed system of classifying humans based on their skin color and other physical characteristics. Race is not grounded in genetics or scientific fact.
- **Sex:** A label that individuals are assigned at birth that is based on chromosomes and the physical characteristics that distinguish male and female bodies.
- **Sexual orientation:** The inner feelings of who a person is attracted to emotionally and/or physically, in relation to their own gender identity. People may identify as “asexual,” “bisexual,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “pansexual,” “queer,” “straight,” or in other ways.²

¹ Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* (Teachers College Press: New York, 2017), 223.

² “[Key Concepts and Terms](#),” Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2014.

3. Honor Student Agency

Identity can be a hard topic for students to discuss with their peers, especially if it is a new concept or if the classroom community does not feel like a safe place for revealing personal aspects of identity. Students should always have a choice about what they share and what they keep private from you and their peers. This includes identity chart handouts and their written reflections. Reiterate these expectations with students when they are engaging with any of the following learning experiences and offer regular opportunities for them to provide feedback on how they are feeling with exit cards and check-ins.

4. Consider the Following Procedure for the Identity Chart Learning Experiences

We recommend the following procedure for each learning experience outlined below. There are opportunities for students to create four types of identity charts for a character in the text and for themselves, with each adding a new layer of complexity.

- Generate or review the factors that make up an individual's identity.
- Model the identity chart with a character from the text, starting with a “think-aloud” and then inviting students to help you.
- In pairs or groups, have students create an identity chart for a character in the text and then engage in small-group discussions.
- Model your own identity chart in a “think-aloud” with factors of your identity that you feel comfortable sharing.
- Have students work alone to create identity charts and then reflect in their journals using the questions provided or ones that you create.
- Debrief in pairs or small groups and as a class (see Notes to Teacher: Honor Student Agency).

Materials

- Handout: **Influences on Identity**
- Handout: **Starburst Identity Chart**
- Handout: **Social Identity Wheel**

Student Learning Experiences

Introduce

Introduce the Concept of Identity

1. Explain to students that they will be thinking about identity and what makes them the unique individuals that they are. Follow the steps on the [Identity Chart](#) teaching strategy, starting by listing the many factors that make up our identities. Have students

work in small groups to create an [identity chart](#) for a character in the text and discuss the following questions, citing evidence from the text to support their thinking:

- a. What parts of their identity does your character choose for themselves?
- b. What parts of their identity are determined for them by other people or by society?
- c. What aspects of your character's identity can they control, and which aspects are controlled by other people or circumstances?

2. Model the process of creating an identity chart by starting your own on the board. Use the [Think Aloud](#) strategy to help make visible your reflection process. Then have students create individual identity charts in their journals and respond to the three questions above. Consider adding the following question to their reflections: *What aspects of your identity have stayed the same and which ones have changed as you are growing up?*

Explore

Explore the Relationship between Identity, Belonging, and Place: Social Identity Charts

1. Explain to students that in literature and in life, our sense of who we are and where we belong is impacted by our setting, whether it be our home, community, school, or workplace, to name just a few, as well as the norms, values, and people who inhabit those spaces. These factors contribute to whether we feel like an insider or outsider—a heightened concern for the adolescents in your classroom. The **Influences on Identity** handout's framework helps students examine the cultural backdrop, beliefs, values, and sense of belonging for a character in your work of literature.
2. Follow the procedure outlined in the Notes to Teacher section (see note 4). Divide students into pairs or small groups and pass out the **Influences on Identity** handout. Use the following questions to help students explore how customs, culture, and place influence their character's sense of who they are, citing evidence from the text to support their thinking.
 - a. What traditions or cultural practices are most important for your character? How do these influence the character's sense of who they are?
 - b. Where does the character get their ideas from? Where do they get their values? How do their ideas and values shape who they are and the decisions you see them making in the text?
 - c. What does it mean to belong to a place? What is the relationship between how the character identifies themselves and where they live?

3. Then have students repeat the process, creating their own social identity maps and reflecting on the questions for themselves in their journals.

Explore the Relationship between Identity and Perception: Starburst Identity Charts

1. Explain to students that even as we struggle to define our unique identity, we are also being defined by others. Sometimes groups attach labels to us that differ from those we choose for ourselves. At no time in our life does this feel as important as when we are going through adolescence. This identity framework helps students explore the relationship between the individual (who they say they are) and society (how others perceive them) by looking at how their own identities are influenced by others.
2. Follow the procedure outlined in the Notes to Teacher section (see note 4), using the [Starburst Identity Chart](#) handout. Note that the arrows pointing out from the center are for factors that the character feels makes up their identity and the arrows pointing into the center are for labels that others place on them. You can also add arrows pointing in both directions for labels that the character uses to identify themselves that align with the labels society places on them. Have students work in pairs to create a starburst identity chart for their character and discuss the following questions, citing evidence from the text to support their thinking:
 - a. Whose opinions and beliefs have the greatest effect on how the character thinks about their own identity?
 - b. What dilemmas arise when others view the character differently than they view themselves?
 - c. What aspects of their identity does the character keep private in order to be accepted?
 - d. What aspects of their identity are they willing to change to fit in?
3. Then have students repeat the process, filling out their own [Starburst Identity Chart](#) handouts and reflecting on the activity in their journals.

Explore the Intersection of Individual Identity and Social Identity: Social Identity Wheel

(Note to Teacher: "Identity" refers to our sense of who we are as individuals and as members of social groups. It also refers to our sense of how others may perceive and label us. A "social identity wheel"³ helps students consider the multiple dimensions of their identities and how

³ Activity adapted from "[Social Identity Wheel](#)," LSA Inclusive Teaching Initiative, University of Michigan.

their sense of who they are may or may not align with how others perceive and label them. It also helps students consider how certain aspects of their identities can become more felt or visible in certain contexts. Because the relationship between personal identity and social identity is complex, we recommend taking the time to read [Exploring the Complexity of Identity](#) with your students before analyzing the intersection of individual and social identity in the text. For a deeper exploration of identity, consider teaching our [Identity and Storytelling text set](#).)

1. Explain to students that the purpose of the activity is to help them think about the ways we identify socially and reflect on the extent to which our social identities impact our sense of who we are and how we experience the world.
2. Divide students into groups of three and assign them a character. Use the [Social Identity Wheel](#) handout and clarify terms as needed (see the Notes to Teacher section). Have them discuss the reflection questions on the handout for their character, supporting their ideas with evidence from the text.
3. Then pass out copies of the [Social Identity Wheel](#) handout so students can create and reflect on their own social identities after you model the process for them.

Extend

Reflect in Writing on Personal Identity Charts

1. After creating one or more personal identity charts, provide time and space for students to reflect on the experience in their journals. The following questions can help get them started:
 - a. How did it feel to make an individual identity chart?
 - b. In what ways do you think the chart does a good job of representing your identity?
 - c. How do you think it falls short or fails to represent your identity?
2. Have students debrief in pairs or small groups, perhaps coming up with their own identity chart template if they feel like the ones provided were not able to capture the complexity of their identity.

Create a “Six Things You Should Know About . . .” for a Character in the Text

This learning experience uses the format of journalist Dan Reilly’s “6 Things You Should Know About . . .” ESPN column⁴ as a starting place for students to write about a character or themselves. For this column, Reilly interviews someone and then chooses short quotations about six to eight important things that the interviewee wants readers to know about them. The information is presented on one page in a visually interesting way.

1. Share one or more examples of Dan Reilly’s interview column with the class and discuss the format and editorial choices. Examples of column topics include the [Westminster Dog Show](#) and [being a baseball groundskeeper](#). Explain to students that they will be creating a “6 Things You Should Know About . . .” page for a character in the text, using one or more of their identity charts as a starting place.
2. Start by having students brainstorm a list of six to eight ideas for their page. They should include evidence from the text to support their ideas. Students can write in the voice of the character being interviewed or imagine that they have interviewed the character and are summarizing key ideas.
3. Lay out the page using a Google template or a graphic design program. For an image, students might use an actor who they could see playing their character or an object that is meaningful to the character. Share finished pages in a [gallery walk](#).

Related Resources

- Video: [The Bear That Wasn’t](#) (and [reading](#) version)
- Reading: [Authoring Identity](#)
- Reading: [Exploring the Complexity of Identity](#)
- Reading: [Still Me Inside](#)
- Reading: [Names and Identity](#)

This learning experience is part of the **Coming-of-Age Unit Planning Toolkit**, designed to support middle and high school ELA and humanities teachers as they develop and implement a coming-of-age literature unit. Visit the Toolkit at facinghistory.org/ela/coming-age/toolkit or explore our Coming of Age in a Complex World resource collection at facinghistory.org/ela/coming-age.

⁴ Adapted from description in Tricia Ebarvia, “[From the Classroom: What Does Real-World Writing Look Like?](#)” (blog post), *write.share.connect: Pennsylvania Writing & Literature Project Blog*, July 22, 2015.

