

**LESSON**

# What Is “Normal”?

## Overview

### About This Lesson

In this lesson, students will build on personal experiences and make new connections in order to define and redefine what it means to be “normal.” Students will read and annotate informational texts, analyze poetry, and engage in class discussions to deepen and complicate their understanding of what is considered “normal” and “beautiful” in society.

### Essential Questions

- How do we become who we want to be in the world?

### Guiding Questions

- What is “normal”?
- Where do we get our ideas about what is “normal” and “ideal” in our society?

### Facing History Learning Outcomes

- 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.

### What’s Included

This lesson uses the following texts and materials. Access materials and a lesson Plan-on-a-Page in this [Google Folder](#).

- Handout: What Is Normal?
- Handout: Image and Appearance: Anticipation Guide
- Reading: “Same Song” by Pat Mora

## Preparing to Teach

### A Note to Teachers

#### 1. Setting Up “Four Corners”

The first activity in the second part of this lesson includes the [Four Corners](#) teaching strategy. We recommend that you review the strategy and set up the room before class begins. Create four signs that read “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree,” and hang them in different corners of the room.

## 2. Pacing This Two-Day Lesson

The activities in this lesson are designed for two class periods. In the first class period, teach the first four activities to explore the question, “What is normal?” Then, in the second class period, help students apply their thinking to a poem about beauty and body image standards.

### Lesson Plan

#### Activities

##### 1. Define “Normal”

Post the word *normal* on the board and ask students to define it in their journals. To do this, ask students to generate a list of words, phrases, and ideas about normalcy. Most middle school students have heard the word *normal*, but they will likely struggle to articulate a definition. Assure them that you’re not looking for the “correct” definition, but simply what words, phrases, and ideas come to mind when they hear the word. Let them know that they will not be sharing what they write.

##### 2. Reflect on Notions of “Normal”

Let students know that they will continue to explore the concept of *normal* by reflecting on a scenario. Give them the following prompt:

- It’s lunch time on the first day of school, and you’re about to approach a group of students you haven’t met yet. There’s an empty seat at their table where you can eat your lunch. Before you get to the table to introduce yourself, you say to yourself, “Just act normal.” What do you think it means to “act normal”?

Ask students to discuss the scenario and accompanying question using the [Think, Pair, Share](#) strategy. After pairs have had time to reflect, ask each group to share highlights with the class. Then discuss this question together:

- Where do we get our ideas about what is “normal” in our society?

##### 3. Read, Annotate, and Discuss “What Is Normal?”

- Distribute the **What Is Normal?** handout, which includes two excerpts from Jonathan Mooney’s book *Normal Sucks: How to Live, Learn, and Thrive Outside the Lines*, as well as a short introductory bio about Jonathan Mooney for context. Read Mooney’s bio and each quote aloud, and then give students time to reread and annotate each quote in pairs.
- To help focus annotations, we recommend that students apply Kyrene Beers and Robert E. Probst’s “Change, Challenge, or Confirm” strategy to the text.<sup>1</sup> To do this, have students draw a star next to ideas that *changed* their thinking, draw an exclamation point next to ideas that *challenged* their thinking, and draw a checkmark next to ideas that *confirmed* what they believe or already knew.

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<sup>1</sup> Kyrene Beers and Robert E. Probst, *Disruptive Thinking: Why How We Read Matters* (New York: Scholastic, 2017), 37.

- After students have read and annotated the reading, regroup the class and read and/or project the following questions for a discussion:
  - How did the quotations change, challenge, or confirm your own thinking about what it means to be normal?
  - How do we learn what is “normal” in our society?
  - Who do you think gets to decide what is “normal”?

#### 4. Day 1 Reflection on New Understanding

Using the Project Zero Thinking Routine “I Used to Think . . . Now I Think,”<sup>2</sup> write or project the sentence stems for a final journal reflection. If time allows, have students share one idea in a [Wraparound](#). You can prompt students with this lead-in explanation:

When we began this lesson with a journal entry, you all had some initial ideas about what “normal” means. Review your journal and write a few sentences explaining your initial thinking:

*I used to think . . . about the concept of “normal.”*

Now, after analyzing and discussing Jonathan Moody’s quotations, have your ideas about the concept of “normal” changed or evolved in some way? Review your journal writing and annotations and write a few sentences explaining any shifts in your thinking.

*Now I think . . .*

#### 5. Reflect on Body Image and Beauty Standards

- Remind students that in the previous class period, they explored the concept of “normal.” In this lesson, they will build on this by thinking more specifically about how beauty and body image standards tend to be normalized in society. Distribute the **Image and Appearance: Anticipation Guide** handout and ask students to respond to each statement. Then explain the [Four Corners](#) teaching strategy and choose a few of the prompts from the anticipation guide to discuss.
- You might begin by asking students which prompts they are passionate about discussing together. To provide opportunities for everyone to voice their opinions, have students share with others in their corners before facilitating the class discussion.
- Finally, give students space to process the anticipation guide and activity by responding to the following prompt in their journals: *How do we learn about “ideal beauty” and “ideal bodies” in our society?*

#### 6. Read and Discuss the Poem “Same Song”

- Distribute the reading “**Same Song**” by **Pat Mora**. Read the poem out loud two times. Then invite students to read the poem to themselves and engage with the key

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<sup>2</sup> Thinking routine from [Project Zero](#), Harvard Graduate School of Education.

ideas in pairs or small groups by having them respond to the following question: *In your opinion, what is the most valuable idea in this poem? What makes you say that?*

- Then divide the class into small groups to respond to the discussion questions that follow the poem. To build in accountability, have groups assign the following roles: a facilitator to guide the discussion, ensure that everyone contributes, and keep time; a note-taker to record notes in their notebook or in a Google Doc; and a summarizer to share key ideas during a class debrief that follows the small-group discussions.

## **7. Day 2 Text-to-Self Reflection**

Invite students to synthesize new ideas and make personal connections to the poem in a journal response that builds on one of the following statements:

- What I just read reminds me of the time when I . . .
- I agree with/understand what I just read because in my own life . . .
- I don't agree with what I just read because in my own life . . .