

Teaching *Other Words for Home*



Written in the voice of Jude, a 7th grader and Syrian refugee, this novel in verse follows Jude's journey with her pregnant mother from a small town in Syria to the United States. As Jude leaves everything she has known and acclimates to a new life in Ohio, the reader is compelled to ponder identity, belonging, and what defines "home." The novel explores how we can embrace and celebrate differences, open our minds to view life from other perspectives, and be proud of our own identities.

In the words of the author, "I wrote this book as a way to tell myself—both past and present versions—that as an Arab-American girl, my dreams, hopes, and fears are as valid as anyone else's. That the Jude's of the world deserve to have their stories told. I also hope that by introducing you to Jude, a magnanimous girl with a big heart and even bigger dreams, I will show you that you don't need to be afraid of these children who are fleeing from

a war zone. That they want the same things all of us do—love, understanding, safety, a chance at happiness."¹

The themes of this novel align with Facing History's **Borders & Belonging ELA Collection**. We've created this planning guide to support your school community in small-group, whole-class, or schoolwide reading and discussion. The discussion questions are designed to spark critical thinking and conversations around issues of identity, agency, migration, and belonging.

Note on edition: This guide is based on the 2019 edition of *Other Words for Home* by Jasmine Warga, published by Balzer + Bray, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers (ISBN: 978-0-06-274781-5).

1 "Author's Note," in Jasmine Warga, *Other Words for Home* (Balzer + Bray, 2019), 336.

Contents

Who We Are	1
Navigating Facing History's ELA Mini-Guides	2
Section 1: Introducing Borders & Belonging	3
Section 2: Designing Your Book Unit	4
Section 3: Teaching <i>Other Words for Home</i>	5
Discussion Questions While Reading	7
Discussion Questions After Reading	13

Who We Are

For nearly half a century, Facing History & Ourselves has championed an approach to humanities education that balances the mind, heart, and conscience. In the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom, our approach integrates literacy skills development with social-emotional learning and civic education. Our professional learning opportunities and curriculum resources—including thematic text sets, unit guides, and engaging teaching strategies—enable middle and high school ELA teachers to foster environments where students can explore the complexities of human behavior and decision-making. Through these resources, students develop their reading and writing identities, build their civic capacities, and broaden their global perspectives.

You can learn more about our [approach to English Language Arts](#) and explore our wide range of [curricular resources and professional learning](#) for ELA educators on our website.

Navigating Facing History's ELA Mini-Guides

Facing History ELA mini-guides can be used to support independent reading or whole-class book units. Use them as standalone resources to support group discussion during and after independent reading, or plan a whole-class book unit by pairing a mini-guide with our [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#). Taken together, these resources support the design and implementation of a whole-class read that centers students' identities and experiences as young adults in the world. Each mini-guide aligns with one of our thematic collections—such as [Coming of Age in a Complex World](#) or [Borders & Belonging](#).

This ELA mini-guide is organized into the following sections:

- **Section 1: Introducing Borders & Belonging**

This first section of the mini-guide provides framing for themes and big ideas that students will explore during their discussions of the book.

- **Section 2: Designing Your Book Unit**

The second section supports the unit design process. Use this section alongside **Sections 1–5** of Facing History's [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#) to prepare to cultivate a brave and reflective classroom community, determine your unit's essential questions and learning objectives, and design the summative assessment task.

- **Section 3: Teaching *Other Words for Home***

The third section offers content specific to the book, including a brief summary, relevant historical and contemporary context, content considerations, and text-specific discussion questions. Use this section alongside **Sections 6–7** of the [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#) to design lesson plans that incorporate Facing History journal prompts, discussion questions, teaching strategies, and learning experiences.

Introducing Borders & Belonging

This mini-guide is aligned to Facing History’s Borders & Belonging ELA Collection.

There is a fundamental human desire to belong—to be part of a group that values, respects, and cares for us. Social psychologist Solomon Asch described this desire to feel valued, respected, and cared for in a community as “among the most powerful forces to be found.”¹ Our sense of belonging can impact our self-esteem, agency, and the meaning we ascribe to our lives. Young adults, deeply attuned to their peers and surroundings, are no exception. They seek respect and belonging in groups where they can be supported, heard, and understood.

Exploring the intersection of borders and belonging is especially relevant for young people, who are navigating their rapidly developing identities and social roles. Everyday actions—like choosing what to wear, making friends, or even smiling at someone—can impact their and others’ sense of belonging for better and for worse. By engaging with books that depict characters who are navigating complex borders and who sometimes struggle to belong, we can normalize these feelings for students, helping them reframe their experiences with the understanding that the factors that shape belonging are both internal and external. This dual perspective has the potential to increase empathy and deepen students’ understanding of the complex dynamics that influence everyone’s sense of belonging.

Ultimately, belonging is not just about where we come from or what we look like; it’s about our shared experiences and values as humans. Engaging in a shared reading experience that explores the relationship between borders and belonging can help students recognize their capacity to foster belonging and consider how they can build bridges across the borders that might otherwise divide us, fostering more inclusive and empathic school environments.

¹ Geoffrey L. Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 5.

Designing Your Book Unit

Because teachers take many approaches to reading and discussing a work of literature with their students, Facing History does not assume that everyone will teach this book in the same way at the same pace. For this reason, our mini-guides are designed to supplement our [ELA Unit Planning Guide](#), which features planning resources, classroom-ready activities, and a [Unit Planning Template](#) so you can apply Facing History's approach to design a book unit suitable for your unique context.

In addition to the resources in the ELA Unit Planning Guide and mini-guide, we recommend that you give consideration to how you will foster belonging in your classroom so all students feel like their voices are heard and that they matter.

Cultivate a Brave and Reflective Community

At Facing History, we understand that before students can participate in courageous conversations, they need to know that they are part of a classroom community where they are known, valued, and supported. This process begins with teachers and students co-creating rules and norms for how everyone will treat one another. The following resources support the creation of brave and reflective discussion spaces where students can bring their full selves to conversations about literature and life.

- **Create a community contract:** Before introducing the unit, prepare students to engage, take risks, and support one another by creating a [classroom contract](#) with agreed-upon norms and behaviors. Such a contract increases the likelihood of each student feeling seen, heard, and valued. We recommend routinely revisiting the contract to reestablish group norms and commitments.
- **Incorporate a journaling routine:** In addition to creating and upholding the classroom contract, [journaling](#) is an instrumental tool for helping students develop their ability to process what they are learning, practice perspective-taking, and make informed judgments about what they see and hear. Providing students with time and space to reflect on complex issues and questions allows them to formulate their ideas before sharing their thoughts with their peers. Many of the discussion questions in the next section of this mini-guide can also be used as journaling prompts.

Teaching *Other Words for Home*

About the Book

Publisher's Summary

Jude never thought she'd be leaving her beloved older brother and father behind, all the way across the ocean in Syria. But when things in her hometown start becoming volatile, Jude and her mother are sent to live in Cincinnati with relatives.

At first, everything in America seems too fast and too loud. The American movies that Jude has always loved haven't quite prepared her for starting school in the US—and her new label of "Middle Eastern," an identity she's never known before.

But this life also brings unexpected surprises—there are new friends, a whole new family, and a school musical that Jude might just try out for. Maybe America, too, is a place where Jude can be seen as she really is.

This lyrical, life-affirming story is about losing and finding home and, most importantly, finding yourself.²

Content Considerations

When teaching memoirs and novels that address themes of borders and belonging, students will often be exposed to dehumanizing language and imagery as well as descriptions of tragic and unjust experiences. Students may have strong reactions to some events described in this novel. For this reason, it is important to use the strategies addressed in the **Prepare to Cultivate a Brave and Reflective Community** and **Anticipating and Supporting Emotional Responses** sections of the [All Community Read Guide](#).

In addition, the following notes can help you and your students be better prepared when you encounter dehumanizing or emotionally distressing content in the text:

- **Depictions of war and protests**, including a bombing and a police raid of a meeting of revolutionaries. These are described in a few words only and are not graphic.
- **Depictions of racism and discrimination.** Encounters with prejudice are a central element of Jude's story. Prominent examples:
 - In Part 4, Chapter III, a woman points to Mama's hijab and aggressively tells her she does not have to wear it anymore because "You're in America now. You're free."

² HarperCollins Publishers website, "About" (*Other Words for Home* page).

- In Part 5, Chapter X, a man follows Jude and says, “Go back to where you came from” and “We don’t want you here.”
- In Part 5, Chapter XIII, the word “Terrorists” is found graffitied in red paint on Layla’s family’s restaurant.

Get to Know the Context

It is not necessary to teach historical context before inviting students to engage with this book. The book is intended for young readers to read independently and therefore provides most of the context that is needed to make sense of the characters’ experiences. However, if you would like to support students in building additional background knowledge about the historical context and/or specific references in the book, we recommend engaging with the following resources:

- **Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 12 Years?** from BBC News

This article from BBC News describes the complicated conflict in Syria that led to the war that drives Jude and her mother to leave the country. This resource provides historical background as well as more recent (as of 2023) information about the state of war in Syria.

- **Syrian Crisis** from UNICEF

This informational page by UNICEF provides information related to the children of Syria. Additionally, UNICEF provides many more resources within this resource for anyone looking for more information.

- **Children of Syria** from PBS *Frontline*

This documentary episode focuses on a Syrian family that migrates to Europe to flee war, much like Jude and her mother.

- **Exodus** and **Exodus: The Journey Continues** from PBS *Frontline*

These two documentary films follow refugees from Syria on their journey to flee war. *Exodus* is part one, and *The Journey Continues* follows up with the same individuals two years later.

- **Verse Novels Are Everywhere—Here’s How to Teach Them** from Edutopia

This Edutopia article provides useful information about teaching novels in verse.

Discussion Questions While Reading

These questions encourage deep engagement with the book's central themes, focusing on borders and belonging in particular. Based on the Facing History pedagogical triangle, these questions spark intellectual, emotional, and ethical engagement with the text. Spanish translations of these discussion questions are available [in this folder](#).

Part 1: Changing

We are first introduced to Jude as a young girl living in a small oceanside town in Syria.

1. As protests and violence ramp up in Aleppo, Jude's brother Issa becomes involved with a group of revolutionaries who are against the Syrian government. This divides the family; their father believes the group is "treasonous."
 - a. How does Issa's involvement as a revolutionary affect how Jude's family views their identity and belonging in Syria?
 - b. How might differing views within your family impact your identity? How might those differences impact your sense of belonging?
2. Jude talks a lot about American movies and other aspects of American culture.
 - a. How does she seem to feel about America?
 - b. How does she seem to feel about where she lives in Syria?
3. This section ends with Mama—who is now pregnant—deciding that she and Jude will move to the United States, while Issa and Baba will stay in Syria.
 - a. Why does each family member choose to stay or go?
 - b. Why do you think Jude says, "I am learning to be / sad / and happy / at the same time"?
4. Why might this section have been called "Changing"? What are all the things that are changing throughout this section?

Part 2: Arriving

In this section, Jude and her mother arrive in Ohio to stay with Uncle Mazen, Aunt Michelle, and cousin Sarah.

5. Jude spends a large part of this section noticing and reacting to everything that is new and different in her environment.
 - a. What details does Jude focus on? What stands out to her as particularly unfamiliar?

- b. How does Mama seem to feel about their new living situation? How does Jude seem to feel about it? How are their feelings similar and different?
 - c. During a thunderstorm, which intrigues Jude, she notes: “We have storms back home, Mama says . . . Mama always does this. / If I say I like something, / in America, / she reminds me that we have the same thing back / in Syria” (pp. 94–95).
 - i. Why do you think Mama always reminds Jude of all they have back home in Syria?
 - ii. What conflicting feelings does Mama seem to have about being in America?
6. Jude reflects on the different ways that Americans think about food compared to her experience back home. She describes how the food she ate back home was “just food.” On pages 91–92, she says:

Here, / that food is / Middle Eastern food. / Baguettes are French food. / Spaghetti is Italian food. / Pizza is both American and Italian, / depending on which restaurant you go to.

Every food has a label. / It is sorted and assigned.

Just like I am no longer / a girl. / I am a Middle Eastern girl. / A Syrian girl. / A Muslim girl.

Americans love labels. / They help them know what to expect. / Sometimes, though, / I think labels stop them from / thinking.

What is significant about this comparison?

 - a. How is Jude’s understanding of her identity changing?
 - b. What does this comparison suggest about Jude’s sense of belonging?
7. Why might this section have been called “Arriving”? What is the significance of that title?

Part 3: Staying

In this section, Jude adjusts to attending school in Cincinnati and begins to experience social life outside of her uncle and aunt's house for the first time.

8. Jude meets a new friend, Layla, at a restaurant called Ali Baba. Jude feels a strong sense of comfort in the restaurant, which features many of her homeland's food and drinks.
- a. What are some dishes you grew up eating that make you feel comforted?
 - b. How does this moment relate to Jude's earlier observation that she is no longer just "a girl" but is now "a Middle Eastern girl / a Syrian girl / a Muslim girl"?

9. Consider Jude's new friend's identity: Layla is a first-generation American raised by two Lebanese parents. Jude notices, "even though her Arabic is good, / I can tell she is a native English speaker, / by the shape of her mouth, / and the way the words slide out, / unbent by the athletic tongue of someone / who was born speaking Arabic" (p. 137).
- How might Layla's cultural experience and relationship to her Middle Eastern identity differ from Jude's?
 - Think about your or your family's cultural background. How does it relate to your identity?
10. Jude begins to read more about what is happening in Syria. She states, "I am hungry to read every word I can about / Aleppo / about the families from my country, / who were not as lucky as me . . . Lucky. I am learning how to say it / over and over again in English . . . it tastes . . . sweet with promise / and bitter with responsibility" (p. 167–68).
- Discuss the connection between Jude's growing maturity and her realization that she is lucky to be in her new, safer environment.
 - Why does Jude have to "learn" to say she is lucky? Why does the word taste both "sweet" and "bitter"? In what ways does she feel conflicted?
11. Why might this section have been called "Staying"? What is the significance of that title?

Part 4: Hoping

12. In Part 4, Chapter II, Jude and her mother go to an ultrasound appointment and learn that Mama's new baby is a girl. In Chapter III, they encounter a very rude woman as they leave the hospital.
- What emotions do Jude and Mama experience in Chapter II?
 - What emotions do they experience in Chapter III?
 - What is significant about the contrast between these two chapters? How does it relate to the idea of belonging?
13. In Chapters IV and V, Jude goes sledding with Sarah and her friends. Sarah agrees to let Jude participate but says, "Just don't be weird." At first, Jude doesn't know what she means. Sarah clarifies that she means Jude shouldn't act like Layla, who wears a hijab. Sarah says, "She just acts like she isn't from here, you know?"
- How might visible signs of Layla's identity, like her hijab, influence Sarah's views of her?
 - Did anything surprise you about Sarah's views of Layla? Did anything surprise you about Jude's views of Layla?

- c. Why does Jude repeat, “Layla’s American” and “she was born here”?
 - d. How might Jude be feeling about her own belonging in America at this moment?
 - e. Consider your own environment and the people around you. What constitutes being “American” or “from here” for you? For the people around you? Why might people have different ideas about this?
14. Review Chapters VI, VII, and VIII, in which Jude decides to try out for the school play.
- a. How are these chapters a turning point for Jude?
 - b. What is motivating Jude to make the choices she makes in these chapters?
15. Why might this section have been called “Hoping”? What are the various characters hoping for throughout the section?

Part 5: Growing

At the end of Part 4, Jude experiences physical changes that mark the beginnings of adulthood, and Mama helps her put on a hijab for the first time.

16. The first few chapters of Part 5 show people in Jude’s life, including strangers on the street, having very different reactions to her wearing the hijab.
- a. What does each character’s reaction suggest about their perspective?
 - b. How does Jude navigate these different reactions?
 - c. How is the choice to wear the hijab significant to Jude? (Review pages 233–35.)
 - d. Several strangers make snap judgments about Jude when they see her wearing the hijab, including a man at the bus stop who follows Jude and says, “Go back to where you came from” and “We don’t want you here.” How might we think differently about people if we move beyond snap judgments and consider others’ complex identities?
17. Jude reflects on her pride in herself and the influence of “strong, respected women” she looks up to, like her Mama, Malala Yousafzai, and Kariman Abuljadayel.
- a. How do you think the stories of these other women have been important and influential for Jude?
 - b. How might Jude’s story of her own strength and pride be important and influential to people who read this book?
 - c. How can storytelling help us understand and appreciate other people?
 - d. What are some stories that have been important and influential to you?

- 18.** Chapters V–VIII focus on Jude rehearsing for the school play.
- What positive experiences does Jude have as she works with the rest of the cast?
 - What worries and fears does she experience?
 - Jude feels more of a sense of belonging with the cast of the play than she has in any other space in America so far. What about this experience helps her feel that she belongs? What can we learn from this section about how to create spaces where everyone feels that they belong?
- 19.** After the news of a bombing in another city, in Chapter XII, Jude asks Layla, “Why do they blame us? . . . Don’t they know we hate this too? / That we suffer too?” But then she reflects, “It’s only after I say it that I realize Layla / is no longer my ‘we.’”
- What does Jude realize about the differences between her point of view and Layla’s point of view?
 - What reflections does Jude then have about how some Americans view the Middle East and people from the Middle East?
 - What steps can you take in your school or community to challenge stereotypes and discrimination?
 - What kinds of experiences help you see the world from more than one perspective?
- 20.** In Chapter XV, after Layla’s parents’ restaurant is graffitied with the word “Terrorist,” she talks to Jude about how she doesn’t “belong anywhere.”
- What does Layla mean? How does she think about where she does—or doesn’t—belong?
 - How does this chapter change Jude’s understanding of Layla’s identity and experiences?
- 21.** Why might this section have been called “Growing”? What is the significance of that title?

Part 6: Living

In the final section of the story, Jude’s baby sister, Amal, is born and Jude is finally reunited with her brother, Issa, over video call. He is still a member of the resistance against the government, and Jude remarks that despite being skinnier, tired, and in a war zone, “He seems more at peace / than I have ever seen him. *You’re doing it*, I say, / and he says the same thing back to me” (p. 323).

- 22.** What is the “it” that both Jude and Issa are doing?
- What is brave about Issa’s actions throughout the book? How do Issa’s choices bring him a sense of peace?

- b.** What is brave about Jude’s actions throughout the book? How do Jude’s choices bring her a sense of peace?
 - c.** What are examples you have seen in your own life of people—including yourself—being brave and true to themselves?
- 23.** In Chapter XIX, Uncle Mazin smiles at Jude in a way that she interprets to mean, “It’s not a contest between here / and there. / You don’t have to choose.”
 - a.** What is significant about this idea?
 - b.** How does this compare to how Jude has thought about where she belongs in earlier sections of the book?
- 24.** What can we learn from Jude’s perseverance and positive reflection in this final section? Can you connect her experiences to anyone else’s? To your own?
- 25.** Why might this section have been called “Living”? What is the significance of that title?

Discussion Questions After Reading

These questions invite you to consider the book as a whole and draw lessons from the text that you can bring into your own life.

Directions: Choose from the following questions for a culminating discussion after you have finished reading *Other Words for Home*. You can also bring your own questions to the discussion. Spanish translations of these discussion questions are available [in this folder](#).

1. Consider your key takeaways from reading this book:
 - a. What scene from the book was most memorable to you and why?
 - b. What is one valuable idea you learned from this book? Why do you find it valuable?
 - c. What questions does this book raise for you? Where might you go to seek answers to your questions?
2. What aspects of Jude's experiences of adjusting to a new country, town, school, home, and environment can you relate to?
 - a. What events or actions in the book help people feel a sense of safety and belonging?
 - b. What events or actions in the book cause people to feel unsafe or excluded?
 - c. Do you feel that everyone in your school community can fully embrace and celebrate their identities?
 - d. How can your school community take steps to help everyone feel a sense of belonging?
3. Throughout the story, Jude's concept of "home" changes and shifts.
 - a. What does "home" mean to you? What makes a place "home"?
 - b. Have your ideas about home changed throughout your life? How, and why?
4. Consider the people in the story who made Jude feel welcome in her new environment. Also consider the people who made her feel unwelcome.
 - a. What beliefs or ideas seem to influence the behavior of people who are unwelcoming or unkind to Jude?
 - b. What beliefs or ideas seem to influence the behavior of people who are welcoming and kind to Jude?

5. Reflect on the upstanders in this story—the characters who stand up for their beliefs and take action. How can you be an upstander and encourage others to stand up in your own home? In your school? In your community?

6. The book ends with these lines:

The curtain lifts
and I step out onto the stage.
The theater lights are brighter than
I imagined.
I squint a little,
but then I adjust to the spotlight. (p. 332)

Jude is literally stepping onto a stage, but this moment can also be read symbolically. Throughout the novel, Jude has told us her story so that she might shine in her spotlight.

- a. What opportunities have you had to “step out into the spotlight” by sharing your story or something about who you are? Are you comfortable or uncomfortable being “in the spotlight”? Why?
- b. How can personal stories help us understand and support one another?
- c. Should people have to share personal stories to be deserving of empathy and belonging?

Connection Questions

These questions can be discussed in relation to any book with themes of borders and belonging and can be used to facilitate discussion across multiple books.

- What borders—literal and figurative—do the characters in your book navigate? How do those borders influence their sense of belonging?
- How does your understanding of where you belong shape who you are, your choices, and the decisions you make?
 - How would the main character or figure in your book respond to this question?
- What is one significant idea that is sticking with you after reading and discussing your book?