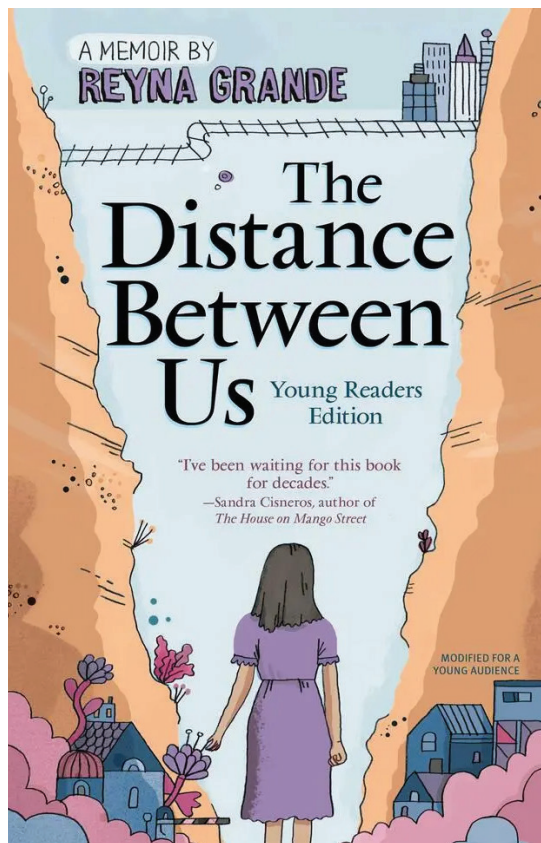


Teaching *The Distance Between Us*



In this vivid memoir, Reyna Grande documents her childhood in Iguala, Mexico, her crossing into the United States, her life as an undocumented child living in Los Angeles, and the role of books and writing in her life journey. The story illuminates the complex perspectives of a child waiting for her parents to return home from *El Otro Lado* (“the other side”) and examines the painful, and at times impossible, choices they were forced to make as their family transformed.

Through her own and her siblings’ experiences, Grande explores the ways in which a range of borders—geographic, emotional, cultural, linguistic—can divide us, even within our own families. This story encourages readers to empathize with the experiences of Reyna and her siblings while critically examining the reasons a person or family would seek to cross borders and the narrative of what it means to be undocumented in the United States.

The themes of this memoir 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 migration, choices, home, family dynamics, and the power of storytelling.

Note on edition: This guide is based on the 2016 edition of *The Distance Between Us: Young Readers Edition* by Reyna Grande, published by Aladdin, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children’s Publishing Division, New York, NY (ISBN: 978-1-4814-6370-6).

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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 *The Distance Between Us***

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 *The Distance Between Us*

About the Book

Publisher's Summary

Award-winning author Reyna Grande shares her compelling experience of crossing borders and cultures in this middle grade adaptation of her memoir, *The Distance Between Us*—"an important account of the many ways immigration impacts children" (*Booklist*, starred review).

When her parents make the dangerous and illegal trek across the Mexican border in pursuit of the American dream, Reyna and her siblings are forced to live with their stern grandmother, as they wait for their parents to build the foundation of a new life.

But when things don't go quite as planned, Reyna finds herself preparing for her own journey to "El Otro Lado" to live with the man who has haunted her imagination for years: her long-absent father. Both funny and heartbreaking, *The Distance Between Us* sheds light on the immigrant experience, beautifully capturing the struggle that Reyna and her siblings endured while trying to assimilate to a different culture, language, and family life in El Otro Lado (The Other Side).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 the events described in this memoir. 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:

- **Child abuse, neglect, and abandonment.** Throughout the book, Reyna and her siblings are abused and neglected by their paternal grandmother and then later by their father. Reyna's father is an alcoholic who physically abuses Reyna and her siblings on several occasions. The children are left by their mother to live with grandmothers for multi-year stretches of time.
- **Domestic violence.** Reyna's father physically abuses his wife, Mila, in front of Reyna.

² Simon & Schuster website, "About the Book" (*The Distance Between Us*).

- **Depictions of death.** In Part 1, Chapter 14, Reyna's young cousin dies in a flood while the children are still in Iguala. The book includes descriptions of the body after it is recovered. In Part 2, Chapter 12, after moving to the United States, the family witnesses a drive-by shooting in front of their house in LA and watches a man die.
- **Dehumanizing language.** The term "wetback" is used multiple times.
- **Border crossings and deportation.** In Part 1, Chapter 20, Reyna crosses the US-Mexico border along with her siblings and father, guided by a "coyote." On their first attempt, they are intercepted by Border Patrol; the children are separated from their father and held for several hours before being returned to Tijuana.

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 events and experiences featured in the memoir. 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:

- **What Is Migration?**

This explainer provides accessible information about why people migrate, current global migration statistics, and the meaning of key terms such as *migrant*, *refugee*, and *asylum*.

- **1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act**

This Library of Congress research guide explains the background and content of the 1986 act that granted legal resident status to an estimated 3 million individuals who originally entered the United States as undocumented immigrants. In her memoir, Grande discusses the personal implications of this act, which enabled Reyna and her siblings to obtain legal resident status in the US through pathways that immigrants today are unable to access.

- **Where Migrant Children Are Living, and Often Working, in the U.S.** from *The New York Times*, and **How Child Migrants Are Put to Work in Unsafe and Illegal Conditions** from PBS

In her letter to readers, Grande advocates for migrant children today and explains that the current experiences of migrant children are different, even from her own. She calls special attention to unaccompanied children seeking their parents or work when they cross the border. These two articles could help students understand the differences between Grande's experiences and those of many migrant children today.

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: Me Mamà Me Ama

Chapters 1-11

1. Our families are often the first group that we belong to; as children, we often define ourselves and are defined by others through our family roles and relationships.
 - a. How are Reyna and her siblings viewed or defined by Abuela Evila, Elida, and the people of Iguala?
 - b. How do they view and define themselves?
2. Reyna and her siblings each respond differently to the challenges of living without their parents.
 - a. How does each sibling respond?
 - b. What does each response suggest about the relationship between family, identity, and belonging?
3. On page 39, Reyna has a realization about her cousin Elida when she compares their experiences.
 - a. What distinction does she draw between their lives?
 - b. Why is this important?
4. Reyna and her siblings frequently find themselves on the outside of various groups in Iguala.
 - a. What are the consequences of being outsiders in their community?
 - b. How do Reyna and her siblings cope with their circumstances?

Chapters 12-21

5. When Reyna and her siblings are finally reunited with each of their parents, how do their dreams of their family contrast with the reality of their parents' choices? How do their parents' choices impact the children's understanding of where they belong?

6. Reyna and her siblings are forced to choose between their mother and their father, and also whether to stay in Iguala or leave for El Otro Lado (the United States).
 - a. How do the children evaluate their options?
 - b. What are the most important factors in their decision-making?
 - c. How does a desire for belonging play a role in each child's decision?
 - d. What might their lives be like if they chose to stay in Iguala?
 - e. What does this section suggest about the complex feelings that children can have toward their parents?
7. On pages 137–46, Grande describes her family's third attempt at crossing the Mexico–United States border. As they leave Mexico, Reyna is hit with conflicting feelings about leaving her home. What causes these feelings? How does she handle them?

Part 2: The Man Behind the Glass

Chapters 1–15

8. On page 160, Reyna has one of her first experiences in American school. They force her to shorten her last name.
 - a. Why do they do this?
 - b. What does it take from Reyna when she loses part of her name?
 - c. How are names important to our identity?
9. At the beginning of Part 2, Reyna recounts her experiences as a language learner in an American school. She begins to question where and with whom she belongs.
 - a. What are some of the ways that the school made Reyna feel different and separate from other students?
 - b. What could the teachers and students have done differently to help Reyna (and other students) feel a sense of belonging?
10. In Chapter 13, Reyna's father learns that his family in Iguala have taken over his dream house.
 - a. What did this house mean to Reyna and her family?
 - b. How does the loss of the house impact her father?

- 11.** In Chapter 14, Reyna describes her feelings about winning a short story contest.
- a.** What does the recognition mean for her?
 - b.** At the end of the chapter, she says, “I took out my notebook and found a clean page. Then I started to write another story.” What does this moment suggest about how Reyna is growing and changing?
 - c.** 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?
 - d.** What is brave about Jude’s actions throughout the book? How do Jude’s choices bring her a sense of peace?
 - e.** What are examples you have seen in your own life of people—including yourself—being brave and true to themselves?

Chapters 16–26

- 12.** In Chapter 18, Reyna returns to Iguala with Mago and their mother. While both Reyna and Mago are from Iguala, they respond differently to seeing their hometown again.
- a.** How have Mago’s feelings changed since leaving Iguala?
 - b.** How are Reyna’s feelings about Iguala different from Mago’s?
 - c.** What do their feelings suggest about the meaning of home?
- 13.** In Part 2, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos each take a different approach to escaping their father’s mistreatment. In Chapter 22, Reyna decides to make a big change.
- a.** What gives Reyna the courage to change her circumstances?
 - b.** How does Reyna think about belonging now, compared to earlier in her childhood?
- 14.** In Part 2, Chapters 22–26, Reyna describes her relationship with Dr. Savas. Even though they are very different, Dr. Savas becomes like Reyna’s family.
- a.** How do they overcome their differences?
 - b.** What makes their connection significant for Reyna?
 - c.** What does their relationship suggest about the meaning of family?
- 15.** In Part 2, Chapter 25, despite the abuse she suffered for years, Reyna returns to her father after Mila leaves him.
- a.** What new understanding does Reyna reach about herself, her father, and their relationship in this section?

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 *The Distance Between Us*. 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. On page 280, Grande writes, “The void inside me became bigger and bigger as I realized that the women I loved most were far from me.” How does distance affect our relationships? Consider physical distance, emotional distance, and generational distance.
3. Reyna, Mago, and Carlos each find different ways of belonging in the United States. How do they each find a sense of home for themselves? What do their stories suggest about the meaning of “home”?
4. Whose perspectives are missing from the story? Are there any characters who don't have a voice or who the reader only sees through the eyes of other characters? How might the story be different if their perspectives were included?
5. How does *The Distance Between Us* connect to, challenge, or extend your beliefs about the experiences of immigrants in the United States? What new thoughts do you have about what it means to cross the border and the experiences of people who do?
6. How can Reyna's story help us better understand ourselves, other people in our communities, and the world? How does her story challenge us to consider our choices and role in creating a more fair and just society?

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?