



MEET THE STORYTELLER

Brendan Kiely is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *All American Boys* (with Jason Reynolds), *Tradition*, *The Last True Love Story*, and *The Gospel of Winter*. His work has been translated into more than a dozen languages, received a Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award, the Walter Dean Myers Award, and was twice selected as one of the American Library Association’s Top Ten Best Fiction for Young Adults. His most recent book, *The Other Talk: Reckoning with Our White Privilege*, was a *School Library Journal*, *Bank Street*, and *Chicago Public Library* Best Book of the Year. Originally from the Boston area, he now lives with his wife and son in Greenwich Village.



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GENERAL TOPICS

Use these themes and guiding questions from the author’s story to structure your lessons or group discussions.

- Listening
- White privilege
- Safety
- Criminality
- Headwinds and tailwinds
- Naming your identity
- Personal agency and responsibility
- Accountability

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Use these themes and guiding questions from the author’s story to structure your lessons or group discussions. You may choose to share your responses to these questions aloud as a group or as a journal activity. If you decide to share aloud as a group, be sure to set some speaking and listening norms, such as speaking from the “I” perspective, not questioning or doubting someone’s experience, and treating everyone’s story with care and respect.

- What does accountability look like in your everyday life?
- How are you traditionally taught to find your role in society?
- What does skin-color privilege mean to you?
- What does skin-color privilege look like in Brendan Kiely’s life?
- Why is art a fuel for social change?

Questions for predominantly white groups:

- What does the presence or absence of skin-color privilege look like in your life?
- What makes talking about identity, racial identity in particular, so difficult?
- Why is it important to be able to articulate one’s identities?

Questions for predominantly POC groups:

- What does skin-color privilege look like in your community?
- How does the phenomenon of colorism resemble the broader culture?
- What is a quality appreciated in your community that is not reflected in the broader culture?

ACTIVITIES

Time Out: What’s an Identity?

A guide to starting the conversation about identities.

Writing Exercise: Naming Identities

Come closer to yourself by naming your various identities.

Conversation: The Talk

A guided conversation powered by art and the real world.

BONUS READING MATERIALS

Between the World and Me

by Ta-Nehisi Coates

The Person You Mean To Be

by Dolly Chugh

The Other Talk: Reckoning With Our White Privilege

by Brendan Kiely

TEACHER’S NOTE

This toolkit asks students to do the inherently difficult task of talking about their identities. Consider that this process will look and feel differently for your students depending on various factors, including personality and background. For that reason, to ensure that the following conversations are safe and productive, there are a few things to consider before you begin.

- **Start small.** Talking about identities and privilege is hard work and it may be brand new to your students. Start with encouraging students to name their visible identities: race, age, gender, and their non-visible identities: sexual orientation, socio-economic status, religion, ethnicity, nationality, ability. Notice that some identities (religion, gender) can exist in both categories—point this out to your students and allow them to discuss. You can even encourage students to come up with their own identifiers, things that they feel are important to them and their sense of self. Once your students have some practice with this, then you can move on to more complex topics like privilege and power. No matter where or how you start, the goal should always be to empower all of your students to come closer to themselves by examining their identities.
- **Consider your audience.** The racial and socioeconomic background of your students will likely influence their experience in these conversations. Thus your approach should be flexible. Depending on the makeup of your audience, use journals, partners, or small groups.

White students may not be used to thinking about their identities and while some may find it illuminating, others may find it difficult or uncomfortable and may push back. Draw them into conversation. Encourage them to lean into the discomfort. Explain that this discomfort is a commonly shared experience and that everyone must eventually move beyond that discomfort to discover what lies beyond: insights about ourselves, the world we live in, and why it is the way it is. Show the historicity of recent events by connecting them to their historical precedents. Allow opportunities for students to move their bodies. Some students of color may be experienced in thinking about their identities, and some may not. Some may feel comfortable sharing aloud, and others may not. It is essential that students of color are given opportunities to learn and tell positive stories about themselves and where they come from. Rather than asking questions that prompt students of color to relive or recite trauma, pose questions that allow them to think critically and productively about their communities, pose questions that ask them to consider their intersectional identities, and encourage students to imagine new worlds and spaces for themselves.
- **Know your essential takeaways.** What do you want your students to leave with? Perhaps you want students to leave being able to name their identities, or for them to consider which of their identities give them power and which ones do not, or for advanced groups, perhaps the goal is to start thinking about how that power gives them privilege, or how to be an advocate. Your takeaway should be appropriate for your audience.
- **Tell your story.** You can be an excellent model for your students in this work, so join in and name your own identities and share how they have influenced your life and your outcomes. Being honest about yourself will allow students to do the same.

Time Out! What's an Identity?

An identity is a quality, belief, characteristic, or repeated action that when combined gives an individual or a group a sense of who they are. While we tend to think of our identity as a single thing, close inspection will reveal that each individual actually has several identities that coalesce into a unified sense of self. One can identify as a woman, a gamer, a queer person, an athlete, afro-caribbean, latina, and so much more.

Count out your identities on your hand, can you get to 10?

While some identities can be important on the personal level, other identities gain political importance as they are litigated by society at large. A political identity is an identity that can be limited by society's laws. Understanding your political identities empowers you to see the way societal forces and laws affect you.

For our purposes in this toolkit, we will focus on political identities. Here's a list of political identities. Can you think of more?

- Race
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Physical type
- Ability
- Ethnicity
- Nationality
- Family structure
- Religion
- Age
- Mental Health
- Socio-economic status/Class

REFLECTIONS

While some identities are visible (someone's age for instance), many identities are non-visible and highly contextual. Remember to never assume anyone's identity. The best practice is to ask people to share how they identify with you.

1. Take a moment to reflect on each of these political identities. In what ways are they affected (positively and negatively) by society's law? Think through the whole list. You can either keep your answers in your head, write them down, or share them aloud.
2. Take a moment to check in with your body. How does thinking and talking about identity affect your body, if at all? Is your heart rate elevated, did you feel a pit in your stomach, did your mood change? Return to this mindful practice throughout this toolkit to see how topics are resonating with you on a physical level.

Naming Identities



In the book *The Person You Mean to Be*, author Dolly Chugh explains the concept of **headwinds** and **tailwinds**. They are inextricably linked to our various identities. Headwinds, just like tailwinds, are external forces, meaning they are created by society, and they play off of what is most natural to us, our identities.

Tailwinds are the formal and informal ways in which people are helped or pushed forward in society. Tailwinds can be as innocuous as the misguided belief that men are better at math and science than women, or as systematic as the way in which white soldiers returning from WWII were able to take advantage of the GI Bill, which allowed them to buy homes and get a free college education. If you were climbing a hill, tailwinds would be the identities that act as a wind at your back and make it easier to climb that hill.

Headwinds, on the other hand, are the various formal and informal ways that people are pushed back in society. Headwinds are external factors that make it harder for you to reach your destination or goal. Headwinds can be as pervasive as negative stereotypes like women are bad at math, and as systematic as the ways in which returning black soldiers were refused access to benefits from the very same GI Bill.

The stereotype that men are good at math is a **tailwind** that helps those who society recognizes as men.

The stereotype that women are bad at math is a **headwind** that hinders those who society recognizes as women

Notice that when it comes to math aptitude, the direction of the wind (help or hinder) depends on the identity (male or female).

GUIDING QUESTIONS

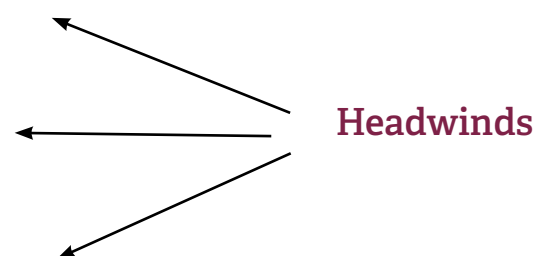
- What role does stereotyping play when it comes to the presumed ability of men and women in math?
- Imagine what it would be like for men and women to not have their aptitude for math judged by their gender.

Dolly Chugh very smartly recognizes that most of us have a combination of headwinds and tailwinds. Some people are helped by far more tailwinds and some are hindered by far more headwinds. Those with many tailwinds can be said to be privileged by society because the winds of society are pushing them forward based on their race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, religion, ethnicity, ability, age, etc.

So if a person only has a few tailwinds, it would be hard to call that person privileged. Yet, as Dolly Chugh smartly recognizes, many of us have moments of everyday privilege. Everyday privileges are the things about your identity which make your life just a little bit easier. For instance, being right-handed in a world built for right-handed people is an everyday privilege.

Take for instance, Person X is...

- Black
- Woman
- Immigrant
- Grew up poor
- Non-native English speaker
- Queer
- Raised by a single parent



While she has had some headwinds in her life, she also recognizes that she benefits from everyday privilege because she is...

- Cis-gender



According to Dolly Chugh, **everyday privilege** is one's ability to forget an aspect of their identity, where others may not have that privilege. For instance, Person X never has to worry about being misgendered because they are cisgender. The world is far kinder and safer for cisgender people than it is for transgender people. Similarly, a young girl may never have to think about her whiteness, but her classmate, a young boy, is constantly reminded of his blackness in the classroom, on the street, and in the news.

In recognizing her everyday privilege, Person X transforms it into a tool for advocacy. She is able to use her position of power and safety as a cisgender person and her voice to advocate for the rights, safety and well-being of trans people. Your everyday privilege can be found in the tailwinds in your life. The task of every person is to figure out how we can transform our everyday privilege into tools for change in the lives of those who lack safety and protection.

Exercise: Identifying Characters

You may choose to complete this exercise in small or large groups.

Instructions:

1. **List the Identities:** For each character listed below, list their political identities. Try to come up with a list of at least 5 identifiers per character

- Starr Carter** - *The Hate U Give*
- Katniss Everdeen** - *Hunger Games* books
- Hermione Granger** - *Harry Potter* books
- Rue Bennet** - *Euphoria*

Example: Harry Potter's Identities

- Pureblood (race)
- Cisgender male (gender)
- Orphan, raised by muggles (family structure)
- Straight (sexuality)
- Comes from a famous wizarding family (class)
- Able bodied (ability)
- Youth (age)
- Native speaker of the dominant language, English (language)

Exercise: The Headwinds and Tailwinds of It

You may choose to complete part A and B of this exercise in small or large groups.

Instructions:

- A. **Sort the Identities:** Now that you have a list of identities for the characters listed above, it's time to sort those identities into tailwinds and headwinds.

Example: Harry Potter Identities

Tailwinds

- Pureblood (race)
- Cisgender male (gender)
- Comes from a famous wizarding family (class)
- Able bodied (ability)
- Straight (sexuality)
- Native speaker of the dominant language, English (language)

Headwinds

- Youth (age)
- Orphan, raised by muggles (family structure)

B. Reflect and Discuss: Harry Potter is commonly thought of as the underdog who must overcome a conventionally more powerful wizard. However, this list shows us that even though Harry was the underdog, he had far more tailwinds pushing him forward than headwinds pushing him back. Examine your sorted list and compare them to Harry's list. What do you notice? What would happen if the sidekick became the hero? What questions arise for you? Engage each other in spirited conversation.

Activity One: Write On!

Now that you have a little practice identifying characters, apply this practice to the characters you create in your stories. Try to have a good sense of your character's identities because it will inform the world that they interact with. As you create the world of the story, who your character is will and should dictate how they interact with the world. But be careful! Be mindful of recreating negative or harmful stereotypes or tropes. In your stories, imagine new modes of interaction between your characters and the worlds you put them in. This is how a world gets built in a story: yes, with description and metaphor, but also by asking questions about the guiding principles of that world. What would it be like if Starr Carter could exist in the world any way she wanted?

The Talk



Typically, when we hear the phrase "the talk," we tend to think of the uncomfortable conversation that occurs typically after the child has asked, "Where do babies come from?" Hollywood depicts this version of "the talk" as an important milestone in every young person's life. Yet, we know that the birds and bees of the movies is rarely how that conversation happens in real life.

- Raise your hand if you have had some version of this talk with a trusted adult in your life.
- At what age did you have this talk? What was the experience like? Who did you talk to and what did you make of their answers? Share your answers aloud or journal.
- Can you think of other pivotal life moments that serve as a kind of initiation? Think of cultural and religious experiences.

Regardless of how you received this talk, it is culturally framed, especially in the media, as a very important moment in the life of a child. It is a kind of initiation into the world of human sexuality. However, there is another version of the talk that many children receive but is rarely depicted in the media.

Now, look at the following image...



"The Talk" by Michael D'Antuono

Bio: Michael D'Antuono is a New York City based American artist. He studied illustration at Parson School of Design. He is known for painting images that spark conversation, including the much discussed painting "The Truth" and "The Tale of Two Hoodies."

Critical Reading:

- Take a few minutes to examine this image.
- Then, do a critical reading of the image. In order to do this:
- First, describe only what you see, including colors, figures, and style (realistic or abstracted). Describe what the people are doing with their bodies but do not try to extrapolate what that movement means.
- Then, describe what you think it all means. What is the message or point of the painting? What messages does it communicate? What can we understand from their body language? What is communicated by the pictures on the wall?

GUIDING QUESTIONS

You may hold group discussions. Before you begin, be sure to set norms such as speaking for yourself only and not for whole groups or respecting each other's stories (define for yourself what it means to respect). Create your list of norms as a group.

1. What is the subject matter at the heart of D'Antuono's version of "the talk?" How do you know? Point to evidence from the painting.
2. Where do you find tensions present in the painting? To find the tensions, look for duality (e.g. light and dark), imbalances, and conflict of ideas.

3. Compare the birds and bees version of "the talk" with D'Antuono's version of "the talk." What is the effect of naming this painting "The Talk?" What does it suggest to you about the lived experiences of the people in the painting?
4. Are there other versions of "the talk" that happen in your communities that you can think of? Or do you receive other versions of "the talk" based on your race, gender, sexuality, etc.?
5. What role, if any, does your identity play in what version of "the talk" you receive?
6. Would you consider this artwork a form of activism? Why or why not?

Mindful Movement

Materials: pen and paper

Imagine a world where everyone (1) gets or (2) doesn't get D'Antuono's version of "the talk."

- Choose between 1 or 2.
- Imagine this world for a few minutes. Attune your senses to it.
- What does that world look like?
- What are the conditions that produced the outcome you imagined?
- Free write for 10 minutes and share aloud.

REFLECTIONS

You may complete these reflections as a journal activity.

- Have you had D'Antuono's version of "the talk" with an adult in your life? What was it like? Did it feel like news to you or did you already know? How was the conversation initiated? What did you make of what you were told? Are you glad you got that talk or resentful you had to have it in the first place? If you did not get that version of "the talk" what does this suggest about your relationship with the subject matter of the painting? How does it feel now to learn about this version of "the talk?"
- Think of the various versions of "the talk" that you get depending on your political identities, including race, gender, sexuality, and ability. Briefly list the types of "talks" you receive based on these identities. What do you need to know or hear in either version of the talk in order to feel informed and protected?
- If you have read *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, do a comparison between a version of "the talk" depicted in the beginning of that book with the painting by D'Antuono. What similarities and differences do you see? Describe the experience of seeing the scene on the page versus seeing the scene in a painting.

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We welcome your feedback on these toolkits and look forward to hearing how you have engaged with them via toolkits@houseofspeakeasy.org.

To find out more about House of SpeakEasy's other programming, visit www.houseofspeakeasy.org



Rachel Eliza Griffiths on "It's Now or Never"



Jason Reynolds on "Turn the Page"



Mahogany L. Browne on "The Road Not Taken"



Daniel Jose Older on "You Only Live Once"



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