

COMPLETELY,
ABSOLUTELY NORMAL:
VIGNETTES ABOUT
LGBTQ+ TEENS

A VIGNETTE PLAY IN ONE ACT BY
Bradley Walton



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Completely, Absolutely Normal: Vignettes about LGBTQ+ Teens includes ten vignettes which interconnect through related characters and LGBTQ themes unified by the emotion and humanity found in anyone who is completely, absolutely normal.

Background

The play premiered at Harrisonburg High School in Harrisonburg, Virginia in April, 2019.

Playwright Bio

After working for seven years as a comic book writer and artist without ever quite making a living at it, Bradley Walton switched careers and became a high school library secretary. This led to assisting with the school's drama program and directing an annual play, which was a pretty sweet turn of events because Bradley had been a major theatre nerd as a teenager. Eventually, Bradley decided to take a shot at writing an original script, didn't suck at it, and just sort of kept going.

His writing has been published by Theatrefolk, Brooklyn Publishers, Eldridge Plays and Musicals, Heuer Publishing, Playscripts, YouthPLAYS, Big Dog Plays, Image Comics, Desperado Publishing, Caliber Comics, and Basement Comics.

Bradley is nonbinary and uses both he/him and they/them pronouns.

Synopsis

Each vignette looks at a different aspect of identity.

- ★ **Confession:** Visiting their father's grave, a gay teen wrestles with the decision of coming out to their mother.
- ★ **An Awkward Conversation with Mom:** When a teenager comes out to their mom, the conversation takes an unexpected turn.

- ★ **Proof:** A closeted gay teen agonizes over cutting ties with a trans friend in order to please their parents.
- ★ **You Like Boys, Too:** A mom attempts to convince her bisexual daughter to try dating a boy.
- ★ **Conference Day:** A teacher apologizes for outing a gay student on Parent Conference Day.
- ★ **Brave:** Holding hands in public for the first time, a same-sex teen couple experiences the hatred of a stranger.
- ★ **The Door:** A questioning brother is caught off-guard by his own reaction when a sibling comes out as non-binary.
- ★ **Just After Midnight:** A transgender student struggles to cope with an unaccepting best friend.
- ★ **Not Interested:** A teenage girl in a happy relationship comes to the realization that she is asexual.
- ★ **New Teacher Orientation:** A new teacher who is considering the position of Gay-Straight Alliance sponsor has an eye-opening conversation with the club's president

Characters

Some of the characters have a choice when it comes to gender, and some have a specific identified gender.

JERI/JERRY: (F/M) A gay college freshman whose father is deceased.

CALLIE: (F) A nonbinary teenager (assigned female at birth) coming out to their mom, dating Zack.

MOM: (F) Callie's mother.

BRIAN/BRITTANY: (M/F) A closeted and scared gay teen, friends with Zack.

RITA: (F) Julie's mom, 40s, really wants her daughter to date a boy.

JULIE: (F) Rita's bisexual teenage daughter, dating Tiffany.

PETER/PATTY: (M/F) A gay student accidentally outed to their mom by a teacher. Dating Austin/Ashley (both must be same birth sex).

MR/MS. WAKEFIELD: (M/F) The teacher who outed Peter/Patty.

SHELLEY/SEAN: (F/M) A teen nervous about holding hands in public.

DANA/DARRELL: (F/M) Shelley/Sean's slightly bolder significant other. Must be same birth sex.

ERIC: (M) Callie's questioning older brother, a high school senior.

ZACK: (TRANS M) Dating Callie, and a close friend of Brian/Brittany

TIFFANY: (F) Julie's girlfriend, has recently realized that she is asexual.

AUSTIN/ASHLEY: (M/F) President of the school's Gay-Straight Alliance, dating Peter/Patty (both must be same birth sex).

MR./MS. SHAW: (M/F) A new teacher thinking about becoming GSA advisor.

Themes

Identity, Change, Personal Growth, Acceptance, LGBTQ+

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What makes up a person's identity?
- ★ Can you change your identity? Do you believe people can change?
- ★ How do you identify yourself? Do you have more than one identity?
- ★ Have you ever been discriminated against because of your identity?

- ★ Have you ever judged others based on their identity?
- ★ Does anyone see you as different than how you identify yourself? How do you deal with that?
- ★ Do you ever have to change your identity in the presence of others?
- ★ How does your identity influence your decisions?
- ★ How does your identity affect your day to day life?
- ★ What is your experience with the LGBTQ+ community?
- ★ How do you define “normal?” What makes a “normal” person?

Pre-Read Activities

Identity Chart

- ★ Have students make an identity chart for themselves. An identity chart visualizes different aspects of the question, “Who am I?”
 - » Students will need paper and something to write with.
 - » You may want to complete an identity chart for yourself as a model.
- ★ An identity chart starts with students putting their name in a circle or square in the middle of the page.
- ★ Then students draw lines from the centre. At the end of each line, students write one word that describes them (tall, sister, Canadian, drama club, piano).
- ★ Ask students to reflect on the final product. What shapes their identity?
- ★ Ask students to choose what they think is the most important part of their identity and write a paragraph describing why.

Identity Scene

- ★ In small groups, students will create a one-minute scene on the theme of identity. How do you visualize “Who am I?” How do you interact with those who don’t accept who you are?
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present.

Research Project

- ★ In small groups students will research an aspect of LGBTQ+ that they are unfamiliar with.
- ★ It could be in reference to gender, sexual orientation, history, terminology, opposition and discrimination, LGBTQ+ activists, writers, speakers, etc.
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

Normal Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute scene in which they theatricalize the concept of “normal.”
- ★ One character in the scene must be nonbinary. What is their perspective on the word?
- ★ Alternative: One character in the scene must be LGBTQ+.

Normal Reflection

- ★ Have students reflect and write a response on what it means to be normal. When do they feel normal? When do they feel the opposite? How do the people in their lives interpret the word and what is it like to interact with their interpretation?

Completely Normal Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss the word “normal.” What does it mean? How are we conditioned in society to view someone as “normal?” What happens when someone is viewed as “not normal?”
- ★ Groups will then create three tableau images:
 - » The first image will show the stereotype of normal. How is this visualized?
 - » The second image will show individual interpretations of normal. How does each person in the image visually define “normal” for themselves?
 - » In the third image, students will choose. Do they choose the stereotype, or the individual interpretation?
- ★ Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Discuss the choices students make for the third image and why they made them.

Draw Yourself: Shapes, Lines, Symbols

- ★ Provide paper and coloured pencils for students.
- ★ Tell students that their first task is to draw themselves. They don’t have to be artists or draw themselves true to life. They will use shapes, lines, and symbols (e.g., hashtag, stop sign, peace sign, hourglass, smiley face).
- ★ Take students through each of the items and have them think about their identity. If they could draw a shape that represents their identity what would

it be? Give students suggestions of shapes (circle, square, rectangle, pyramid, crescent) and encourage them to think of multiple shapes — we are all not just one thing.

- ★ Next, ask students to think of their identity in terms of lines. Again give examples (curvy, zigzag, straight, slanting, dashed).
- ★ Lastly, ask students to think of their identity in terms of symbols.
 - » It would be helpful to play music during this activity, so that students don't feel self-conscious.
- ★ When everyone is finished, make a gallery of the sheets (stick them to the wall or a large piece of paper) and have students examine them. Tell them to identify and share one shape, one line, and one symbol that stood out to them.
 - » Gauge your students. If they want to share the reasoning behind their choices publically, give them the opportunity. If not, have them write a journal entry or an Exit Slip in which they describe their reasoning for each element.

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Completely, Absolutely Normal: Vignettes about LGBTQ+ Teens*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions.

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. Is Jeri's mother supportive of her?
3. Where does Callie see themselves on the gender spectrum?
4. What proof does Brian think he has to give?
5. Who is Julie dating?
6. What did Mr. Wakefield do?
7. What is Shelley dreading?
8. Who says, "Why should I have to be sorry for being a boy"?
9. What do Brian's parents do when he comes out?
10. What is demisexual?
11. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. In the staging notes, the playwright indicates that most scenes are performed on a bare stage. In your opinion, why did the playwright make this choice? How would it impact the staging?
2. In your opinion, why does the playwright choose to share the subject matter episodically through scenes, rather than following one story from beginning to end?
3. Analyze Brian's use of language. What kind of words does he use? What can you infer about his character based on his vocabulary and word choice?
4. In the play, we hear about Brian coming out but don't see it. Why do you think the playwright made this choice?

5. Based on the way that Zack speaks, how would you visualize him? What is his physicality?
6. What is the significance of the line, "I'm gonna have to learn to forgive people or I'm gonna be carrying around so much resentment that I'll never be happy"?
7. What is the significance of the line, "Not being able to be who you are... it would have to eat away at your soul after a while"?
8. What is the significance of the line, "I'm in charge of my own attitude"?
9. How would you costume Callie? Use the text to support your answer.
10. Why does the playwright include the scene "New Teacher Orientation"? Why is it significant? How much do you know about the terminology used?
11. What is the main conflict?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why does the play's title emphasize the words "*Completely, Absolutely Normal*"?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about gender identity? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about happiness? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is going to happen next for Brian?
5. What is going to happen next for Zack?
6. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with gender identity with what happens in the play. Is it something you can connect with? If not, why not?
7. How does the author want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you see yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ Should anyone else be able to define your identity? Why or why not?
- ★ Now that you've read the play, would your definition of normal change? Why or why not?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?

- » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

“Who am I” Monologue

- ★ The characters in the play come face to face with answering the question, “Who am I?”
- ★ After reading the play, have students turn their own thoughts and opinions about the question into a monologue.
- ★ Students can use their own experiences as the base for the monologue character, or if they don’t feel comfortable doing that, they can create a character.
- ★ The criteria for the monologue are as follows:
 - » The monologue is a half page to one page in length.
 - » The character in the monologue is talking to someone. Students must identify the listener.
 - » The character wants something specific from the listener. Students must identify what the speaker wants from the listener.

Set Design

- ★ There is no specific set design for this play. Have students write a description of their set vision, or draw a colour rendering. How would you visualize the themes of the play?

Acceptance Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss what acceptance means to them in the context of identity. They will then create a three-series tableau in which groups will show:
 - » Students struggling with identity, either internally or through discrimination.
 - » Students making choices. Do they accept themselves? Do others accept them?

- » The result of this choice.
- ★ Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Discuss the importance of acceptance.

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Playwright Process

Playwright Bradley Walton talks about his process writing Completely, Absolutely Normal: Vignettes about LGBTQ+ Teens. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

What was the originating idea for the play? Where did you start?

When I started writing this play, I didn't know it was going to turn into "this play." I didn't have a master plan, and although the first draft only took a few weeks, the script developed and evolved over a very long period of time (about two years).

The spark of inspiration came from a panel discussion that my school's Gay-Straight Alliance hosted for interested members of the faculty and staff. It featured LGBTQ+ students talking about their experiences and what life was like for them at our school.

Besides plays, I also write 10-minute scripts for the high school forensics market, and the panel prompted me to write a monologue about a gay student coming out at their father's grave and wrestling with the choice of coming out to their mom, who they know isn't going to take it well. Then I wrote a companion monologue which was the mom's reaction to the teenager having come out. Both monologues mentioned the teen and mom encountering a same-sex couple holding hands in a shopping mall, and

the mom pulling her teen away from them. So I wrote a two-person scene about that couple's perspective of the encounter. Now I had a theme going, and the ideas kept coming.

One of the kids in the panel at school had mentioned that she was bisexual and her mother kept trying to get her to date boys. That led to "You Like Boys, Too."

My wife, who works at the same school as me, taught a student who was out at school but not at home. On the day before Parent Conference Day, that student said to my wife, "My mom doesn't know, please don't tell her." That was the impetus for "Conference Day."

While I was working on the script, a student dropped the word "demisexual" on me. I had no clue what the word meant and the student happily explained it. That moment served as the inspiration for "New Teacher Orientation."

I don't know where I got the idea for "Not Interested" but I do know that asexuality was something I'd had a difficult time wrapping my head around for a while. I decided to approach it by basing it on my feelings about something that lots of people are really passionate about, but in which I have no interest whatsoever: Football. (No offense intended to those of you who are football fans. I don't have anything against football, it just doesn't appeal to me personally. Which is exactly how the character in this scene feels about sex.) I wasn't sure if I'd gotten the portrayal of asexuality right until I got together with a group of my drama students for a read-aloud of the play's first draft. The student who read "Not Interested" told me when they were finished, "Mr. Walton, I didn't know what that scene was going to be about when I volunteered to read it, but I'm asexual, and you nailed it."

"An Awkward Conversation with Mom" and "The Door" (which was originally about a father instead of a brother) were both inspired by my wife and I being parents of a pansexual, nonbinary teenager.

The first draft of what became *Completely, Absolutely Normal* flowed into my word processor beautifully. It was one of the best writing experiences I've ever had. I found ways to tie some of the scenes together and eventually ended up with a collection of twelve 8-10 minute vignettes (about two hours total) that could be performed individually or together. I was super proud, thought it was as perfect as it could get, and that it was pretty much done. Silly me.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

Although the first draft was written in the space of maybe three weeks, the process of getting from first draft to the published version stretched out over a couple of years. Two things I love about the final version of this play are its efficiency and its structure. Each scene is incredibly streamlined, and every scene in the first half has a follow-up in the second half. The script's first draft, which had twelve scenes and was two hours long, was neither efficient nor so cleanly structured. But I was so enamored with it that I had a difficult time seeing the clunkiness. Then something completely unexpected happened.

I had written the script thinking I would never be able to direct a production myself, but incredibly, the opportunity arose. I had about six months to prepare, but the actual rehearsal window would only allow for a long one-act. So I spent six months whittling the play down from two hours to about 45 minutes. The process involved going over it again and again and again... cutting out a little bit more each time. It was slow and tedious, but it also felt good seeing each scene become more clean and compact. I felt really good about the script when the production finally kicked off. Then, in the middle of rehearsals, I had to cut a scene and replace it with a new one... but more about that in the next question.

After the production was over, some soul-searching began. The version of the play that we'd performed had a slightly different title: *Completely, Absolutely Normal: Vignettes About LGBTQ Teens and Their Grown-Ups*. It contained two monologues delivered by adult characters. One was my early version of "The Door" in which the character was a dad, and the other, "Lighter Than a Feather," was the mom's monologue that I mentioned in question 1. "Lighter Than a Feather" was also the scene that concluded the play. Two other playwrights I respect had both told me that if I was aiming for a youth-centric piece, the script would be better without those scenes. I'd disagreed. "The Door" contained some things about acceptance that I thought were really important. "Lighter than a Feather" brought almost everyone to tears during the cast's first read-through (it also bookended the show by connecting with the opening scene). I LOVED both of those monologues, and my students knocked them out of the park. But after the production, I couldn't shake the feeling that the audience had expected for the play to be over at the end of "New Teacher Orientation" and were thrown when it turned out there was one more scene.

I started toying with the idea of making “Lighter Than a Feather” optional and having it be something that future directors could cut if they needed to shorten the play for competition purposes. But if there were productions in which the scene was removed, I was concerned that “The Door” would stick out for being the only adult monologue in the play. It wasn’t until about a YEAR after the production and TWO YEARS after writing the first draft that I hit on the idea of rewriting “The Door” as a brother reacting to his sister coming out as nonbinary instead of a father reacting to his daughter. (In retrospect, it seems so obvious that I want to kick myself for not coming up with it right off the bat.) But I still had a problem... the play was supposed to be about LGBTQ+ teens. I had to make the brother queer in some form or another if this was going to work. And then it dawned on me... all of the LGBTQ+ characters in the play were very certain about their identities, but in real life that’s frequently not the case. I had alluded to this in “New Teacher Orientation,” but we never saw it fully explored. So I made the brother in “The Door” a young person questioning his own gender identity. It filled out something really important that I hadn’t consciously realized the play was missing.

But having successfully transitioned the character in that monologue from an adult to a teenager, the closing “optional” monologue with the mother character REALLY stuck out. So I looked at it yet again, and I finally saw that the really important things I wanted it to say — which were about parents learning to cope with subverted expectations — I had already expressed in the scene “You Like Boys, Too.” Having realized that, I was finally able to let “Lighter Than a Feather” go. It turned out that the script worked just fine without it, and concluding the play with the line, “You know what that makes us? Completely, absolutely normal” was exactly the right ending.

What changes, if any, were made during rehearsals?

Because I’d spent so much time refining the script as I whittled it down from its original two-hour run time, there wasn’t a whole lot of fine-tuning during the rehearsal process. But... I did have to cut an entire scene and write a totally different replacement when a cast member dropped out.

Originally, the play contained a scene called “Biology” that involved two transgender students talking about the pros and cons of using a former faculty one-seater restroom that has been repurposed as a gender-neutral bathroom. A couple of weeks into rehearsals, one of the students in the scene felt that it was hitting a little too close to home, and asked if he could drop out of the show. I didn’t want anyone to

be uncomfortable, and I was pretty sure I could find a work-around, so I told him that was fine. I couldn't put another cast member into that role, though, because I didn't have anyone else who was openly and authentically trans, nonbinary, or gender-questioning. This meant I had to write a whole new monologue for the remaining student, who was playing Zack — the significant other of Callie in "An Awkward Conversation with Mom" and sibling-in-spirit to Brian in "Proof." I had given Brian a bit of resolution in "New Teacher Orientation," but I saw an opportunity here to let that resolution play out through Zack's eyes. So that's what I wrote. And the result was really powerful. Even better, it improved the structure of the play. All of the scenes had counterparts that they connected to in some way... except for "Proof" and "Biology." By writing a new monologue for Zack that built on "Proof" I suddenly had this beautiful structure where everything in the first half of play had a follow-up in the second half.

I'm genuinely sorry to have lost the student who dropped out of the show, and it was a little bit stressful at the time, but in the end, the opportunity presented by the problem was the best thing that could've happened for the script. I wish I could take credit for meticulous planning, but in truth, I just got lucky.

As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play?

There are so many moments in this play that I love. The mom's shattered expectations speech in "You Like Boys, Too." The line "No, but I feel brave." The speech about the door in "The Door." "I couldn't do that to my brother."

But if I had to pick just one, I think I'd have to go with the description of the kiss at the end of "Not Interested." It's one of the most beautiful and honest paragraphs I've ever written. Our audiences loved it, and I think it's the high point of the show.

What was it like to see the play in performance?

Gratifying and overwhelming. We got full standing ovations at both performances and loads of wonderful comments in the lobby afterwards. And even though our principal backed the show 100%, I'd been nervous that the production might generate complaints from the community. But in the end, not a word was ever said.