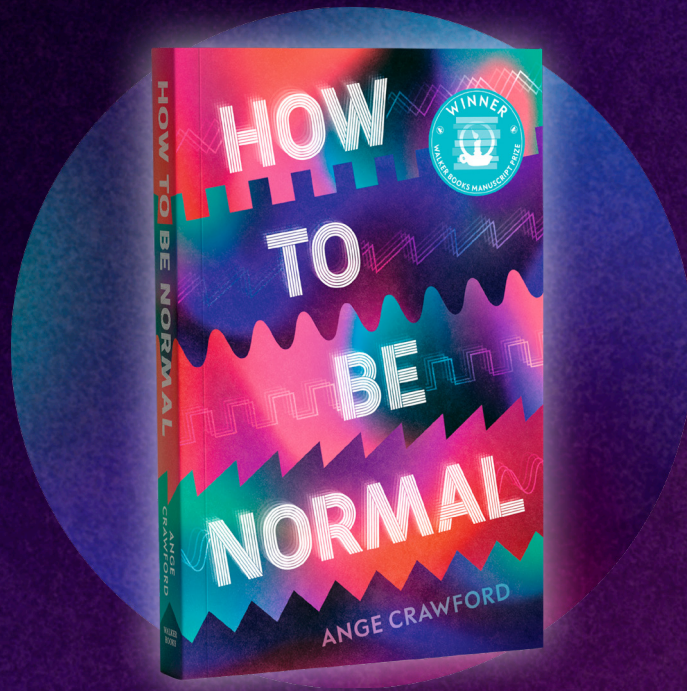


TEACHER NOTES

Teacher Notes by Christina Wheeler

WALKER BOOKS



HOW TO BE NORMAL
CREATOR: ANGE CRAWFORD
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ABOUT THE BOOK

For years, Astrid and her mother have been constricted by her father's stringent rules and savage outbursts. When he is forced to close his record store, Astrid's mum takes a job, resulting in an abrupt end to Astrid's home-schooling. Part way through Year 12, she must adjust to life as an ordinary teenager in an everyday high school, but Astrid's life is anything but normal. No matter how hard her family tries to present as the perfect household, nothing could be further from the truth.

In a gritty and evocative text about control, freedom and identity, *How to be Normal* is a powerful story that shares the importance of courage, hope and honesty.

Given the themes and sensitive nature of its subject-matter, it is recommended for readers aged 14+.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ange Crawford is a queer, neurodivergent writer based in Naarm/Melbourne. Currently a PhD candidate in the School of Media and Communications at RMIT, she holds a Bachelor of Social Science (Psychology, Honours 1) from Bond University and a Master of Arts (Writing) from Swinburne University of Technology. Her debut novel for young adults, *How to be Normal*, was the inaugural winner of the Walker Books Australia Manuscript Prize published in 2025. She has published shorter works across many genres, such as digital poetry, reviews, fiction and feature articles. She works as an editor and runs Seventh Gallery's emerging writers' program.

ABOUT THE TEACHER NOTES AUTHOR

Christina Wheeler is a qualified and experienced Teacher-Librarian and Curriculum Leader (Literacy) with over 30 years of experience in both primary and secondary settings. She is a writer, speaker and creator of Teachers' Notes, and has been a judge for the Queensland Literary Awards (Children's Award). Christina has shared her passion for literacy, communication and thinking skills internationally and loves helping readers to explore the richness of stories through the analysis of characters, settings and events.

THEMES

Identity • Courage • Friendship • Honesty • Hope • Love • Music
Coercive Control (shame, guilt, fear) • Bullying • Violence • Abuse

TEACHER NOTES

BEFORE READING

- Why do you think this story opens with a description of Astrid's family home? Why might she say, *'my house would rather you kept walking'* (p. 1)? How does this foreshadow what is to come? Make predictions about this story.
- Why does Astrid strive to be *'boring'* (p. 2)? How is this reflected in the title of the book? What is normal? Does such a thing exist? Discuss.
- As you read *How to be Normal*, use the chapter headings to track the main characters, settings and events of the story. How is the novel's story arc represented by the stages of a musical composition?

CHAPTER STUDY

Chapter 1

- After reading the first few chapters, go back and read pp. 1-5. What details are more apparent on the first few pages now that you know a little more about the story?
- Astrid says, *'I've been different my whole life, and it's not all it's cracked up to be'* (p. 20). Have you ever felt like this? Share in a reflection.
- In the role of Astrid, write a journal entry about your first day *'in a real high school'* (p. 2).
- What are your initial thoughts about Astrid's father? What clues do we get about his character?
- What do the different shapes between the paragraphs represent?
- Astrid often speaks about putting up her *'walls'* (p. 8). Why does she do this? Do you have walls that you sometimes put up? What prompts this defence mechanism? Share with a friend or in a reflection.
- Why does Astrid's household have to be so clean? How is this a form of control?

- Astrid is worried that her netball friend from when she was twelve might be at her new school and *'ruin everything'* (p. 10). What might Carla know? Make predictions.
- Why, on her first day, does Astrid say, *'each step is heavy'* (p. 11)? Why in the bathrooms do *'scrawled slurs on all sides scream out'* at her (p. 12)? How does the author use this setting to create a vivid sense of Astrid's headspace?
- Astrid's father says that *'social media is breaking everyone's brains and making them hate'* (p. 12). In what ways do you agree and/or disagree with this statement?
- On sticky notes, record Astrid's thoughts and observations about her first day of school. Use these to create and perform a short monologue about this day.
- According to her father, *'high school teaches people how to get kicked around by the capitalist ruling class'* (p. 15). What does he mean by this? What other strong opinions does he have? How would you respond to Cliff if you were Astrid?
- Describe Astrid's first impressions of Leila. Why does she say, *'she is so obviously normal, but so ... herself. This – this is who I want to be'* (p. 15)? Is Leila *'normal'*? Discuss.
- Why does Astrid describe herself as *'constrained'* (p. 19)?

Chapter 2

- Describe how *'the near-blank canvas of a basic waveform'* (p. 34) helps Astrid to navigate her way through this story. How does Astrid use Ableton to cope with her *'strange and lonely day'* (p. 35) as well as her home situation (see p. 36)?
- Explain the importance of Astrid's headphones that *'keep everything else out, all the things beyond this musical world, for which there is no process, no pathway, no sense of potential, and sometime no sense at all'* (p. 35).

- What role does Cathy play in *How to be Normal*? What must it mean to Astrid that ‘Cathy has seen me – heard me –’ (p. 38)? How does their friendship help both girls?
- Why do Astrid and her mum conform to what Cliff says? Why don’t they take a stand? What does this share about coercive control and fear?
- Why is Astrid so angry with her sibling Nick? How does this change as the novel progresses?
- What are your thoughts about the Whereabouts noticeboard?
- What does Astrid mean when she says: ‘*The distinction between what I really like and what I can appear to like is not always clear to me. Sometimes I worry that this is pretty clear evidence I am a broken person: I can arrange myself in far too many ways*’ (p. 44)?

Chapter 3

- In the role of Astrid, write a reflection about having to clear your laptop’s history and secretly switch off the family internet tracker for short periods of time. How does this make you feel about your own family’s boundaries?
- Describe what music provides for Astrid. See p. 47 for more details. What does this do for you? Share in a reflection.
- How does Astrid’s mum cover for her? What secrets and looks do they share? What are your thoughts about Ellen’s character?
- What putdowns and controlling measures do you find most confronting about Astrid’s dad? How do they make you feel? Share.
- Compare Astrid’s description of Cathy’s house on p. 57 with that of her own home on p. 1.
- Why does Astrid find Nick’s email so haunting (see p. 62)?
- Using a music-making app, compose a piece that reflects Astrid’s ‘*rushing thoughts*’ (p. 63). Share with your class.

Chapter 4

- Respond to Astrid’s thought that ‘*fitting in and standing out are kind of the same thing when you’re a teenager*’ (p. 64).

- Why does Astrid feel ‘*lost in the sting of Lily’s arched eyebrow*’ (p. 67)?
- Why does Astrid say, ‘*I can’t decide whether I am more afraid of success or failure, and the contradiction has completely overloaded my brain*’ (p. 68)? How much of this fear is caused by her father?
- Explain how the author has included specific details about her dad’s rules to portray Astrid’s constricted world.
- Astrid berates herself for ‘*officially [becoming] a liar*’ (p. 84). What would you like to say to her about this?

Chapter 5

- Why does Astrid say, ‘*I listen as though I’m silently comparing notes with my own wild stories – as though my past is not as immaculate and featureless as my house, as though my mind is not racing with the fear that this rain will wash away the pretence that’s keeping me safe*’ (p. 95)?
- Using the description of the symbols and waveforms on p. 96, explain why Astrid likes creating synth sounds so much.
- Astrid and her mum often have to invent their way ‘*out of trouble*’ (p. 100). Using details from Astrid’s story, write a feature article about coercive control and the impact on its survivors.
- How is Astrid’s stage persona (see p. 103) different from her usual persona?
- How does the author use language features on pp. 103-104 to build tension?
- Why, when Astrid does cry, does she find, ‘*the tears come slowly at first, then they’re huge gasps that I stifle in the water*’ (p. 105)? After she washes the coloured dye from her hair, what makes ‘*these...angry tears*’?
- With reference to pp. 105-107, explain the paradox between Astrid’s stage persona and her reality. How and why does the purple dress feature later in the text? Why do ‘*these little waves of colour, like the sound waves on my screen, strike a secret discordant note in my beige and white home*’?
- Why won’t Astrid leave without her mum? What would you do in Astrid’s position? Why does Ellen wait until Astrid turns eighteen to act?

- Discuss the recurring sentiment: ‘You cannot bust that which is already busted’ (p. 108).
- Why are Astrid and her mum wary of having Cathy over for dinner? In what ways are their apprehensions warranted?
- When Cliff is trying to be nice to Ellen, Astrid says, ‘the late afternoon sun is making my eyes water’ (p. 110). What is really happening with Astrid?
- Discuss the passage on p. 111 that describes a perfect family dinner scene: ‘the family...so connected, so close, much to the envy of those around them, who must wonder what it would take to achieve such domestic perfection’. What is really happening in this scene?

Chapter 6

- Dad gives approval for dinner at Cathy’s, which is placed on the Whereabouts board (p. 112). What might the conversation between Ellen and Cliff have been like for this to have eventuated? Perform in a short role play.
- What minute details does Astrid notice whilst at Cathy’s house (see pp. 112-115)? Why does she ‘want to be subsumed in this normality...to walk in the puddles, to wipe my hands on my shirt, to dip a fork into the dumpling sauce and taste it without permission’? Why does she say, ‘if I was here, really here, I would have such fun’ (p. 115)?
- What does Astrid mean when she says, ‘I never should have brought this here’ (p. 117)? What is ‘this’?
- What is the connection between Leila hating *Wuthering Heights* because ‘Heathcliff is so toxic’ (p. 121) and the storyline of *How to be Normal*?
- How does eating the donut with icing trigger Astrid’s realisation that she ‘might have been physically or emotionally abused’ (p. 125)?
- Astrid learns that the signs of emotional abuse may include, ‘isolation – shame – guilt – fear – control’ (p. 126). What evidence is there in the text of these signs?
- How did you feel when Astrid sneaks into the shed to ring Nick? How does this help instigate what later unfolds?

Chapter 7

- How does the friendship between Astrid and Cathy grow and change throughout the novel?
- Why, after explaining her dad’s philosophies, does Cathy ask, ‘And what does your mum think?’ (p. 136).
- Why does Cathy want to teach Astrid how to swear? How does this trigger Astrid’s father? Discuss the rising tension in the following extract: *That’s when I see Dad, so silent that I missed his footsteps. From the pristine lawn, he wanders over towards the window, his body oriented away from the scene inside the room, but I know better. I watch his eyes. I see them fall on the words, one at a time, and then on my giggling friend, and then on me. Shadows fall in those familiar places under his eyes. He keeps walking, but from this one look, I know he’s seen everything.* (p. 149)
- In what ways is Astrid’s mum strong?
- Astrid thinks her friendship with Cathy will soon be over, ‘all because I didn’t stay quiet’ (p. 152). What would you say to Astrid about this? What would you say to her dad?

Chapter 8

- Why does Astrid say, ‘In amongst all my lies...I almost forgot that I actually exist’ (p. 154)?
- When Astrid does a sound check for Ms Torres, she starts sharing what she doesn’t like for breakfast. In the role of Astrid, say all the other things that she would like to say but won’t (pp. 155-156).
- Why does Astrid say, ‘I am always performing’ (p. 159)?
- At their performance, Astrid describes herself as ‘screaming...at all the people I’ve stayed silent for – at Mum, at Dad, at Nick for all their expectations, at Cathy for making me expose this part of myself to the world... I do not have to be quiet for anyone’ (p. 159). How do her parents react to this performance?
- Why, after her dad describes what it means to be creative and eccentric, does Astrid resolve ‘to be the opposite of eccentric – to be boring, to be normal’ (p. 165)? How have her attitudes changed over time?

Chapter 9

- Why does Astrid ‘reach out one fingernail and scratch at the perfect paintwork until a tiny piece chips off’ (p. 171)?
- How is the moth ‘trying, desperately, to exit through the closed window’ (p. 173) a metaphor for Astrid?
- Discuss the connection with music that Astrid shares with her dad. How does this connection help their relationship? How does it help Astrid to express herself and gain independence later in the story? What hope does Astrid hold onto about her ‘shared musicality’ with her dad (see p. 166)?
- Why does Astrid sit in Cathy’s laundry crying, unable to move?
- What similarities and differences are there between Astrid and Leila? How and why has Leila reformed her rebellious behaviour? How might learning about this help Astrid?

Chapter 10

- What does Astrid mean when she says, ‘sometimes, here, love, fear and control are all the same thing’ (p. 188)?
- Discuss the passage on p. 190 in which Astrid is given sheets for her birthday. How has the author created such an intense scene?
- What helps Nick and Astrid become closer during *How to be Normal*?

Chapter 11

- How does the picnic with Nick’s friends on p. 212 give a sliver of hope to Astrid?
- Why does Nick tell Astrid to ‘always fit your own oxygen mask before helping someone else’ (p. 213)? How can you apply this to your own life?
- How do the words of Astrid’s dad get inside her head in the following excerpt:
I’ve always had Cathy around. Maybe a lot of my progress here was really just holding her hand, letting her drag me around, letting her use me. That’s not my voice. No, no, no. (p. 218)

- What is Astrid really doing when she washes ‘away the fake vanilla and the strawberry ice cream’ (p. 227)?

Chapter 12

- How did you feel when Astrid’s parents are late picking her up for the final? Why, when Astrid’s mum finally reaches her, does Astrid ‘hold her tight’ (p. 249)?
- In what ways has Ellen ‘been learning how to be normal, too’ (p. 251)?
- How does meeting Ellen’s work friend, Maria, give Astrid a ‘strange twinge of hope’ (p. 252)?
- How are some of Cathy’s experiences like those of Astrid’s (see p. 255)? What does this reveal about coercive control?
- Discuss the importance to the story of Lily’s social media post: ‘From now on, I’m standing up for myself like this,’ (p. 255)?
- Why, when her dad doesn’t know where the cereal is, does Astrid’s ‘heart [flicker] with sympathy for this man’ (p. 257)?
- Discuss the toxicity of Cliff’s putdowns. What have you learnt about yourself and your relationships by reading *How to be Normal*?
- Discuss Astrid’s decision to ‘[pull] my walls down, [letting] his disembodied voice in, even though it hurts so much to really hear him. I need to feel how wrong these words are’ (p. 258).
- Why does Astrid find comfort in hearing ‘a disembodied voice...[echoing] out between the hedges, or soft and restless footfalls...[disrupting] the disciplined post-dinner silence’ (p. 260)?
- In what ways is *How to be Normal* a story about courage?

Chapter 13

- In the role of Astrid, write a reflection about loving someone who hurts you (see p. 269).
- Why does Cathy say, ‘I feel so used’ (p. 281)? How does Astrid feel after hearing this? Discuss the symbolism of Astrid’s tears ‘mixing with the sawdust, revealing hidden layers of dirt below’ (p. 282).

- When her dad explains why he called her Astrid, she thinks to herself: *'I wish he could be like this every single day. We could have been so happy'* (p. 285). With reference to this, discuss what might have prevented Ellen and Astrid from leaving earlier.
- Discuss the significance of Astrid keeping the true meaning of her name to herself (see p. 286).
- Discuss the symbolism of Astrid's painting that has *'curved in on itself...the only thing visible... now...the big, yellow sun, and I remember that, on the day I painted this picture, it was storming'* (p. 295).
- With reference to pp. 320-321, explain how the waves on the beach are like the sound waves in Astrid's compositions.
- Why, although they are *'off the grid... with a private number, working from home, no more school'* does it no longer feel like *'isolation'* (p. 321)?
- Although Astrid wants to be *'ordinary'*, how does Cathy help her to realise that *'everyone's weird in their own way once you get to know them'* (p. 322)?
- What is the significance of Astrid dragging her *'hands through the sand'* and *'letting go'* (p. 323)? How will this sand *'stick with'* Astrid into the future?

Chapter 14

- Compose and or write the lyrics to Astrid's new track, that *'might say something like this: I exist. I will no longer be quiet. This is what I want. This is who I am.'* (p. 298)
- How is Astrid *'so close to normal, but so far away'* (p. 306)?
- How is Cathy a different friend from Carla?
- How does using her voice help Astrid? What have you learnt from her?
- Discuss the irony in the fact that Cliff's words, *'the words I've been running from – the words that he does not yet know hold no more power over me... [buy] time for my mother and sibling'* (pp. 317-318).
- When deciding not to share all her words with her father, what prompts Astrid to realise that *'there are some silences that I choose'* (p. 318)?
- With reference to the following quote, write a reflection that discusses the main themes of *How to be Normal*: *'I am so afraid and I am so okay and the old Astrid is gone'* (p. 319).
- How has the author managed to elicit empathy for both Astrid and her father in the following excerpt?
The flashes of the streetlights pass by like the flashbulbs of an old camera, and there in my mind is my dad, lifting me up so I can pick a lemon from a tree ... adjusting the telescope so I can see the moon ... placing the big headphones on me in the record store so I can learn about blues classics ... tending the community garden with all the gentle steadiness that was too difficult for him under our own roof. He gets smaller and smaller. (p. 320)

Language

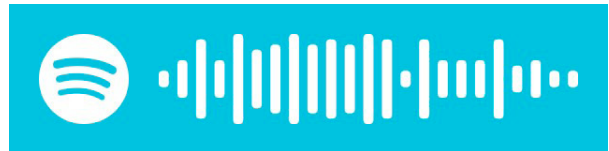
Discuss the following examples of figurative language in *How to be Normal*, and how they contribute to the text:

- *It's dead quiet in the courtyard beside the classrooms, with nearby trees casting uneven shadows, their scraggy tips scraping like claws against the roofs and windows.* (p. 17)
- *A thin sliver of light appears.* (p. 19)
- *A swarm of chatter swells behind us.* (p. 20)
- *The teacher lets the tide of babbling students go.* (p. 21)
- *The rows of chairs rumble with the stampede.* (p. 21)
- *I reach the almost abandoned food and nutrition classrooms, with their strange commercial-like kitchens glaring out at me like the set of a budget daytime cooking show.* (p. 26)
- *My new maths classroom is a rectangular room haunted by sweat, ink and that ubiquitous teenage boy deodorant.* (p. 28)
- *The teacher [peers] at me from over his clipboard with the round, dark owl eyes of someone who never sleeps well.* (p. 28)
- *Their gaze feels like a magnifying glass, and I am an unfortunate ant.* (p. 29)
- *I stand up and drag my bag away from her like some submissive animal in a nature documentary.* (p. 30)
- *My eyes are heavy with exhaustion.* (p. 40)

- *Dinner sits in my stomach like a rock.* (p. 43)
- *Mum's hurried footsteps echo like the gaunt woman on the stage.* (p. 43)
- *The silence stretches out.* (p. 48)
- *Mum sighs, beating the eggs like she's in the Olympics for it.* (p. 51)
- *Guilt ties a deep knot in my stomach.* (p. 53)
- *The truth nearly floods out of me again.* (p. 61)
- *Despite the contrasting genres and tempos, the bass notes agree with them, like acquaintances nodding at each other.* (p. 64)
- *Students pour out of the room and onto the footpath where I'm loitering – an orange sea of babbling about composition assignments and the most popular shows streaming online.* (p. 65)
- *Lily frowns at Cathy, her whole body animating into a question mark.* (p. 66)
- *The empty parental signature line stares up at me like an accusation.* (p. 70)
- *I follow Ms Torres down the hallway, breathing in the soggy ham sandwich smell of the classroom.* (p. 71)
- *I thrust it out in front of me, like I'm holding a radioactive weapon.* (p. 71)
- *The wind rattles the windows, and the library feels a second away from fracturing along its many spidery cracks.* (p. 76)
- *I'm left dazed in a thick cloud of her rose perfume and an unnameable feeling even more overwhelming.* (p. 83)
- *I force myself to stop looking outside, to lower my head like a convict on their way into the courtroom, on the off-chance that Mum is also in this same traffic.* (p. 95)
- *I snatch the bucket of thistles and storm away, trailing sharpness behind me.* (p. 109)
- *After days of freezing Mum out for our late arrival, Dad's waiting for us at home on Tuesday, standing in the front yard, his bare feet nestled in the newly clipped lawn.* (pp. 109-110)
- *I flush, veins coursing with irrational anger.* (p. 123)
- *I stay awake in a puddle of nerves.* (p. 144)
- *Dad traps Mum and me in the hallway and pours all those words back out at Mum, hitting her with all their sharp edges. I am pinned by them, back against the wall.* (p. 149)
- *Silence blankets us.* (p. 185)
- *The silver rings on her fingers reflecting the sun like sparks.* (p. 185)
- *It's the sort of embrace that makes a generation fold into a moment.* (p. 264)
- *Maybe it's a mirage, a trap, the kind of mood that will quickly turn back into those storms of hurtful words.* (p. 273)
- *A pang of hurt clutches my chest, and an insecurity I didn't want to name clings to me.* (p. 280)
- *I take an extra second to disentangle myself from those emotions, taking the ones that belong to me, and trying my hardest to leave the rest, like the painting curled up in my cupboard.* (p. 304)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Listen to the playlist inspired by *How to be Normal* on Spotify:



Read the Q&A with the author, Ange Crawford, [here](#).

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