

# Why Do We Know What We Know?



## Purpose

Why do we know what we know? How does culture become culture? How does common knowledge become “common”, anyway? In this lesson, we will consider the relevance of *pop culture* in our daily lives and consider why and how we know about certain things and not about other things. With this information, we can think about all the things we don't know about! From there, we'll consider the relevance of knowing other information if it's meaningful to study gaps in our knowledge.

## Introduction

We'll start off by considering what we know about, specifically pop culture. For the next section, choose one of the following to focus on. This should be something you enjoy and are familiar with:

Songs

Movies

Books

Video Games

What are popular \_\_\_\_\_ in your generation? As in, what are the popular songs or movies or books that people your age enjoy? List as many as possible!

Why do you think these are popular?

That being said, what *isn't* popular? Is there a specific concept, idea, or genre that your generation (mostly) does not like? Why do you think that is?

Now, let's think about previous generations. What \_\_\_\_\_ can you think of from more than 20 years ago? List as many as possible!

Why do you think you know about these older works of art? Were they important? What stood out about them?

## Consider This

In writing, the **canon** refers to the collection of works that are representative of the genre or time period. Representation is usually defined by which groups in society have cultural power in a given time period. For example, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway, and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck are considered to be pinnacle books in American literature canon. These works are all representative of the experiences and perspectives of a particular group of Americans in the 1920s and 30s, namely that of white men, who had the dominant political, social, economic, and cultural power at the time. It is telling that the experiences and perspectives of other groups of Americans at the time - women,

child laborers, non-European immigrants, Black Americans, etc. - generally are included in a separate canon. To be **canonical**, a series of works must be characteristic of the time period and style. So what defines the limits of what we know and include in our own understanding of the world? Whose experiences and perspectives are included? What determines our "canon"?

We will play the game **Categories** to demonstrate this idea. Within, we'll develop our own cultural canons on a variety of subjects. Here are your categories:

| Category #1   | Category #2   | Category #3   |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Books everyone reads in school</li><li>• Elements of the periodic table</li><li>• World leaders and politicians</li><li>• School subjects</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fortnite/Tik Tok dances</li><li>• Something people are afraid of</li><li>• Blockbuster movies</li><li>• Musical instruments</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parts of an automobile</li><li>• Capitals of African countries</li><li>• Computer programming languages</li><li>• Female scientists</li></ul> |

## How to Play

*The goal of Categories is to keep naming unique answers of the "canon" for each topic. What comes to mind first when you think about world leaders, African capitals, or musical instruments, and what defines the limits of your answers? The more correct answers you provide, the more points you receive. The game will occur in 6 rounds: 2 rounds per category. The person with the total number of unique answers over the course of 6 rounds will win!*

1. Choose and vote on a category and canon to start. You can choose a maximum of two canons per category.
2. Choose someone to start. That person will name something that falls within that canon. For example, if you're describing "School subjects", you may say "Biology."
  - a. If this person names something in 5 seconds, they earn a point.
  - b. If they cannot name something in 5 seconds, they're out of this category and cannot answer again.
  - c. Players can issue a *challenge* if they believe a response is incorrect. At this point, the group will discuss and look-up if the player is incorrect.
    - i. If the majority of the group determines that the player is **correct**, then the player remains and the challenger is out of the round.
    - ii. If the player is **incorrect**, then the player is out of the round and the challenger receives a point.
3. No repeats can occur. Once all players can no longer provide canonical responses, the round ends and a new category is chosen.

At the end of the game, calculate how many total points each player has.

# Brainstorming

After playing the Categories game, reflect on the following questions.

What was a category that was easy for you? Why?

Pick two of the above categories that you struggled with. Who would be able to ace each category?

Did you find the first section of categories easy? Why or why not?

That said, we anticipate that the third section of categories was much more difficult. Why do you think that this section was hard? Why would you potentially know less about this category?

Do you think it's important that people understand the ideas that were presented in the third category? Why or why not?

Is it equally, more, or less important that people understand the ideas that were presented in the first category versus the third category? As in, is certain knowledge more important than other knowledge?

## Narrow it Down

Let's learn more about a specific category we struggled in. Choose one of the above categories that you personally knew little to nothing about.

Our goal is to develop a basic familiarity with one or two key points about this topic. Using the Internet, navigate to at least one credible website to find information on the who, what, when, where, and why of one or more concepts within that category. Record a paragraph or two below:

Share this information with a peer!

After sharing, talk with your partner or small group about...

Would it be important for everyone to learn about this concept in school? If so, why? If not, why not?

Is there anything that almost everyone currently learns about that you feel we *don't* need to know? Why?

Why is it that we learn about certain things and not other things?

## Do we need a school curriculum?

Determining what we learn about and don't learn about is a complicated process. In [A Diploma Worth Having](#), Grant Wiggins, co-author of *Understanding by Design* writes,

"I have a proposal to make: It's time we abolished the high school diploma as we know it. In a modern, unpredictable, and pluralistic world, it makes no sense to demand that every 18-year-old pass the same collection of traditional courses to graduate.

Instead, we should do away with most course requirements, make *all* courses rigorous, and simply report what students have accomplished from year to year. Students should prepare for adult life by studying subjects that suit their talents, passions, and aspirations as well as needs. They should leave when they are judged to be ready for whatever next challenge they take on—whether it be college, trade school, the military, or playing in a band. Let's therefore abolish the diploma, if by *diploma* we mean that all students must graduate as though they were heading for the same 20th-century future.

This plan would enable us to finally deal with the key weakness of high school, summarized in that term virtually all students and adults use to describe it: *bor-ing*. High school is boring in part because diploma requirements crowd out personalized and engaged learning. It is also boring because our graduation requirements have been produced the way our worst laws are; they are crude compromises, based on inadequate debate. Because of arbitrary policies that define preparation in terms of content instead of useful abilities, schools focus on "coverage," not meaningful learning."

Why do you think it is that schools prioritize the subjects that they do?






Choose one of your school subjects. What is covered? Why do you think those specific concepts are covered? Could something else be covered instead?

Do you agree with the author that the way we currently organize school should be changed? Is there a case to be made that a school's canon is needed?





## Reflect

| How would you rate your understanding of this concept?<br><i>Place an "X" in the corresponding box below.</i> |   |   |  |   |
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How has your understanding of this concept changed as a result of this lesson?

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Which individual or community actions could this activity inspire?

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Why would it matter to understand gap's in one's knowledge? What is the goal of learning things you don't know about?

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