



How to Be Happy

DAVID BURTON

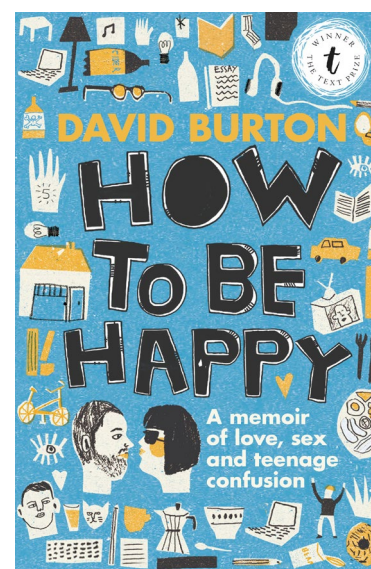
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TEXT'S TEACHING NOTES FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

- ▶ Text's teaching notes are designed for teachers to explore the novel in line with the *Australian Curriculum: English*.
- ▶ Questions are divided into stages: from pre-reading to post-reading and include suggested tasks for assessment.
- ▶ Refer to the legend below and the accompanying [Australian Curriculum: English Scope and Sequence reference chart](#) to decipher these codes.
- ▶ An ACARA coding system connects each task to the *Australian Curriculum: English*. It includes links to strands, modes, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities.

Strands	LA – Language LT – Literature LY – Literacy
Modes	W – Writing L – Listening R – Reading S – Speaking
General capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literacy Intercultural understanding Personal and social capability Information and communication technology Critical and creative thinking Numeracy Ethical behaviour
Cross-curriculum priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustainability Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia

SYNOPSIS

The only completely true, solid non-lame advice I can offer is my experience. There have been times I've been happy, and times where I've been dangerously unhappy. p.3

Dave Burton's memoir *How to Be Happy* looks back on his search to find his place in the 'games of thrones' of high school and beyond. We first meet Dave being strangled by the class bully as he goes to the defence of the cheese-loving Ray. It is not a good start to high school. Not knowing who he is and where he fits in, sees Dave create personas—such as Debating Dave, Crazy Drama Dave and Gay Dave—to create a sense of self and mask his insecurities. He makes friends and tries to find a girlfriend, and sometimes a boyfriend, with mixed success. To the outside world Dave appears a successful and popular student, but the real Dave struggles with anxiety and depression. In this very personal journey Dave comes to rethink the ideal of happiness.

How to Be Happy explores the themes of family, friendship, gender identity, love, depression and self-harm. Sad, funny, witty and at times brutally honest, Dave's rocky journey through adolescence and adulthood will resonant with teenagers and adults alike.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Burton is a twenty-seven-year-old writer from Brisbane, best known for his theatre work. His play *April's Fool* (Playlab Press) toured nationally in 2012. He has recently co-written *Hedonism's Second Album* for La Boite indie, and *The Landmine Is Me* for Queensland Theatre Company. A speaker and presenter in school across Queensland, David is passionate about sharing his remarkable story with young people. *How to Be Happy* won the Text Prize for Young Adult and Children's Writing in 2014.



Find out more about David Burton

Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCoCAAVVCJFs8B_djRLXHXA

Twitter: [@dave_burton](https://twitter.com/dave_burton)

Facebook: [daveburtonwriter](https://www.facebook.com/daveburtonwriter)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Where 'How to Be Happy' Came From

When I was nineteen, my former high school principal asked me to come and speak at a senior student retreat. He wanted me to share my story with graduating students. At the time, I didn't think much of it. I simply strung together a small handful of anecdotes. I wanted to talk about my struggles with depression and anxiety, as they had been such a big part of my life. But the thought of trying to put these words down on paper was nerve-wracking. Nevertheless, I pushed myself to do it, because I knew there would be students at the retreat who suffered similar issues, and may benefit from knowing that they were not alone.

I was overwhelmed by the emotional response of the students, and sat for many hours after the talk in one-on-one conversations with kids who wanted to share their own stories with me. I returned every year, and started giving my speech to other schools. Eventually, I started writing it all down, and that's how *How to Be Happy* was born.

Humour

It was incredibly important to me that *How to Be Happy* was full of humour, despite the fact it is a memoir about depression. Apart from laughter being the most natural remedy against melancholy, it's also a powerful form of protest against the Black Dog. The act of laughing disempowers its subject. Depression and anxiety are states of mind built upon the idea that whatever's happening is to be taken very seriously. Laughter fights against that idea. It's why farts in church will send you into a fit of hysterics. Everything about the architecture and ritual is telling you to be sombre and serious. But a whisper of flatulence makes it all seem so ridiculous.

So I often make myself the butt of the joke in *How to Be Happy*. It's been a great way for me to fight against the blues. I've found that being able to laugh at myself is actually a form of empowerment. If I can find humour in something, it stops anxiety or depression in its tracks.

Part of our cultural discomfort in discussing mental illness also comes from a fear of 'heavy' or 'deep' issues in friendly conversation. For me, the humour in *How to Be Happy* is an attempt to model a way of talking about depression and anxiety in young people that is approachable and comprehensible for as many people as possible.

Memoir

Unfortunately, writing a memoir isn't as simple as putting everything down from memory and presenting

it to your reader. There's a whole lot of my life that is just plain dull. Also, there are many anecdotes that didn't fit into the overall themes that I wanted to explore. Every anecdote went through a strong editorial process. During this process, I was asking two central questions.

First, does this anecdote contribute to the overall theme or arc of the book? Just like writing a fictional work, I had to treat myself as a character, and make sure that every scene somehow spoke to the protagonist's state of mind or journey. The most common stories that were cut because of this questions were ones that repeated a point I had made somewhere else. For example, one anecdote may demonstrate my confusion over sexual orientation—but in real life, there are any number of scenes I can remember that would have also represented my confusion to the reader. But a reader only needs one anecdote, told well, to get the idea.

Second, I questioned every anecdote's ability to engage the reader. Was it presented in as interesting a way as possible? My editor at Text helped me a lot on this point. It often meant introducing a lot more dialogue into a scene. I have only written plays in the past, so it's no wonder that I found it helpful to 'stage' every anecdote in my mind and let it play out. It also helped to imagine a bored fifteen year old sitting across from me—if I had to tell them this story, how would I get them interested?

These questions helped shape the book into a work that I hope is incredibly approachable.

BEFORE READING

1. *How to Be Happy* is a memoir, a literary non-fiction genre. The word memoir comes from the French words *memoire* and *memoria* meaning memory or reminiscence. In class discuss the difference between a memoir and a novel. What features might they share and how might they be different in structure and content? (ACELA1550) (ACELA1573) **LA RW**
2. Identify two ways an autobiography and memoir are different. (ACELA1550) **R W LA LY**
3. The title of the book is *How to Be Happy*. In small groups brainstorm what you believe are the challenges to being happy during the teenage and young adult years. (ACELT1636) **R W S L LA LT LY**

WHILE READING

1. A memoir is written in the first person. In the introduction the author, David Burton, engages with the reader. What impression of the narrator do we get in the first few pages of the introduction? What voice does he use to his audience (Hint: intimate, challenging, humorous, academic, serious)? (ACELA1553) (ACELT1643) **R W L S LA LT LY**
2. Dave describes high school as being, 'a place rich in stereotypes. It was like I was in a cartoon.' (p. 16). Explain the stereotypes he encounters and describe



how Dave responds to his new circumstances. How typical do you think his experience is at this stage of the memoir? (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W L S LT

3. In Chapter 2 'Smeghead' Dave joins the debating team and the 'Three Amigos' are formed. Dave describes the 'Three Amigos' as 'my new community' (p. 27). Describe the Three Amigos and explain how they were 'a community'. Why do you think he craved to belong to a community? (ACELA1552) 📖 👤 LT LY R W L S
4. Identify the events during Chapter 3 'The Swimming Carnival' that increased Dave's levels of anxiety? (ACELY1744) 📖 R W LT LY
5. At the end of Chapter 3 Dave writes, 'Crazy Drama Dave didn't do heartbroken'. What does this suggest about the part Crazy Drama Dave played in the life of the real Dave? (ACELT1635) (ACELA1564) 📖 👤 R W LT LY
6. Chapter 4 is called 'Self-Sabotage'. Write a definition of self-sabotage. How does this title reflect what happens in the chapter. Provide specific examples. (ACELA1561) 📖 ⚙️ R W L LT
7. Why do you think David Burton called Chapter 5 'Sweet Sixteen'? (ACELA1561) 📖 ⚙️ R W L LA LT LY
8. Describe the change in Dave and Tiff's relationship during this year. Do you agree with his assessment at the time that he was, 'an awful boyfriend'? (ACELT1636) 📖 ⚖️ ⚙️ R W LT LY
9. Dave writes of escaping the 'politics of school' (p. 87). What does he mean by this phrase, how is school political? What are these politics and do they exist in your school? (ACELA1561) 📖 ⚙️ R W LA LT LY
10. Describe some of the additional pressures at home and at school that Dave experienced in year 12 (Chapter 7 'Bruises')? (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT LY
11. In chapter 9 'Getting Out of Bed' Dave struggles with his sexual identity. What factors might have contributed to Dave's sexual confusion? (ACELT1635) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT
12. Explain why Crazy Drama Dave retired and Gay Dave emerged in Chapter 11. (ACELT1771) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT LY
13. In chapter 12 'Grown Up' Dave writes 'Something had to give' (p. 182). Use this sentence as a starting point to describe how the dynamics within his family changed after he left school and went to university. (ACELY1742) (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LA LT LY
14. Dave felt a sense of happiness living with Amber (pp. 185–86). Explain what made him happy while recognising the underlying tensions that still caused him anxiety. (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT LY
15. Why was it so important for Dave to produce the gay play in Chapter 15 'Turning Inside Out' (p. 188)? (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT LY
16. Describe the role 'Gutsy' played in Dani and Dave's relationship. (ACELT1638) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT LY

17. In Chapter 16 'Lost and Found' (p. 198) Dani says, 'You're thinking too much'. Discuss as a class what Dani meant by this statement. Do you agree with her assessment? (ACELT1635) 📖 ⚙️ R W S LT LY
18. What crisis made Dave consider suicide as an option? (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT LY
19. In Chapter 18 'Too Far Gone' Dave describes the physical and emotional symptoms of his depression and anxiety. Select images and words that capture Dave's experiences at this time. Which do you believe are the most powerful? (ACELT1637) 📖 ⚙️ R W LA LT LY
20. Has Dave learnt how to be happy at the end of his memoir? (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT

CHARACTER

1. Create a relationship chart plotting in the significant people in Dave's life. Place Dave in the centre of the chart and use an arrow to connect them to Dave. (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LA LT LY
2. Write one sentence explaining the significant part each person played in the memoir. Include Mary, Ravi, Amber, Nina, Mr Coates, Mrs Coates, Monica, Tiff, Simon, Andy, Chrissy, Rachel, James and Gary. (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT LY
3. Of all these characters, who do you most empathise with? Explain your response in a short paragraph identifying events in the memoir that bought you to this view. (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LA LT LY
4. The memoir is written in the first person and we see the characters through Dave's eyes. Chose a character from the memoir and write a monologue from their perspective. Include in the monologue their perception of Dave. For example Mary writing about Dave and Simon when she finds out they have reported her self-harm to the school counsellor. Tiff after Dave dumps her. Gary, following his first meeting with Dave. Simon when Dave 'comes out' to him. (ACELT1815) 📖 ⚙️ R W S LA LT
5. Did any of the characters surprise or disappoint you? Provide a specific example to support your view. (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LT LY
6. If you were to chose a friend from the people in the memoir who would you chose and why? (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LY
7. Choose two characters from the memoir and consider how they change from when we first meet them until they exit the memoir. Chose quotes or events that reflect change over time. How does the author signal change over time through the memoir's structure? (ACELY1744) 📖 ⚙️ R W LA LT LY

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. What is the purpose of this memoir? Select a sentence from the introduction you believe encapsulates David Burton's purpose in writing his memoir. (ACELT1812) 📖 ⚙️ R N W LA LT LY



2. What is the significance of the chapter headings? Select three and describe how they relate to the chapter content. (ACELT1641) R W L T
3. When describing his first university share house party Dave writes, 'Turns out paradise smells faintly of vomit and is very loud' (p. 153). Discuss the use of humour in the memoir. To what extent do you see it enhancing or distracting from Dave's story of his struggles? (ACELT1642) (ACELA1571) R W L T LY
4. In Chapter 8 'Doctors and Depression' Dave looks back on his history of anxiety and depression. This is approximately half way through the book. Describe what is revealed on this chapter. Why do you think Dave chose to look back on his childhood struggles with bullying and anxiety in this part of the memoir? (ACELT1641) (ACELY1744) R W L T LY
5. The plot of a fictional story or memoir is the sequence of events and can often be divided into five parts.
 - Introduction (character and setting revealed)
 - Rising Action (conflict or problem revealed)
 - Climax (the highest point or tension is revealed)
 - Falling Action (the conflict or problem begins to solve)
 - End (the conflict or problem is resolved)

Map out the plot of *How to Be Happy* on a timeline and see if this memoir plot follows this structure. (ACELT1641) R W L T LY
6. What is lost and gained if a story is told by an outsider rather than someone who experienced it first hand? (ACELT1636) R W L T
2. Write a brief paragraph explaining why you think the Harry Potter books are so important in the lives of the Three Amigos and other students Dave describes as the 'nerd soul mates' and 'socially awkward' (p. 29)? (ACELT1774) R W S L T
3. What role did the movies, in particular lavish musicals, play in Dave's life at sixteen? What did they give Dave that everyday life couldn't? (ACELT1774) L T R W S L
4. Throughout the memoir Dave identifies examples of popular culture that are important to him and his groups of friends. Some characters are given nicknames or are identified with figures from popular culture. For example Amber becomes Hermione Grainger, Nina the elf Legolas from *Lord of the Rings* and Ravi The Doctor from *Dr. Who*. Television series are referenced such as *Games of Thrones*, *Friends* and *Will & Grace*. Write a paragraph discussing to what extent you think teenagers identify and define themselves and are influenced by popular culture. Draw upon your own experience if you wish to. (ACELT1774) R W S L T
5. In Chapter 6 'Yoo-hoo!' Dave joins a new drama class. Write a character description for Eugene and explain in what circumstances was he created and what role he played in Dave's life. (pp. 88–90)? (ACELT1643) R W L T
6. How did Dave believe identifying as gay would help his relationship with girls? Identify the stereotypes that Dave associated with being gay. (ACELT1812) R W S L T
7. Describe how Dave redefined his identity though his relationship with Dani as Dani's Boyfriend Dave (Chapter 17 'Gutless Wonder')? Why did this relationship fail and how did the failure effect Dave's sense of identity. (ACELT1812) L T R W
8. Who else in the memoir struggles with their sense of identity? Were any characters in the memoir seemingly secure in their sense of self-worth and identity? What makes this evident? Provide two contrasting character studies. (ACELT1812) (ACELT1774) R W L T

THEMES

Identity

1. Literature exploring issues of identity in the teenage years often cover the following themes.
 - Freedom to define and redefine one's self
 - The need for love and for finding someone who cares for you and needs you
 - Dealing with obstacles (hate, pride, truth, greed)
 - Allowing others to define and influence you
 - Defining yourself by comparison to others
 - Finding a space to be yourself
 - Hiding from yourself and suppressing who you are.

(from Gloria Kaufmann and Kathy G. Short, 'Talking About Book: Critical Conversations About Identity', *Language Arts*, Vol. 78, No.3, January 2001.)

Which of any of these themes applies to Dave's journey in *How to Be Happy*? In small groups discuss and list them in order of importance and provide an incident from the book for each theme.

(ACELT1635) R W S L L A L T LY

Family

1. In Chapter 1 'Angel Faces' we are introduced to thirteen-year-old Dave's family. Describe the members of his family and the challenges they face in family life. (ACELT1812) (ACELT1774) R W L T
2. Describe the role popular culture played in the lives and identity of Dave's twin brothers Andy and Chrissy (Chapter 1). (ACELT1812) (ACELT1774) R W L T
3. How did Dave's mother try to support him during his teenage years and his struggles and how did he respond? (Provide specific examples.) Select examples from the text that communicate both his mother's love and Dave's embarrassment. (ACELT1641) R W L T



4. In his final year of high school Dave believed he was, 'a burden on my parents, a negative influence on my brothers, and therefore, a fundamentally unworthy human being.' (p. 112) To what extent do you believe Dave was 'a burden' on his family? Write a response to Dave's assessment of himself from the perspective of his mother (p. 133). (ACELT1815) **R W LT**

5. Dave writes in Chapter 14 'Grown Up' of his changing relationship with his family after he left school and went to university.

It's a feat of emotional quantum trickery: you simultaneously feel protective, loving and loyal to your family, as much as you do infuriated, resentful, and bitter about them. And that's not to mention the incessant guilt you feel for being infuriated, resentful, and bitter about them. (p. 180)

Respond to the following questions in a short paragraph. What circumstances made Dave bitter about his family and what made him feel guilty? What is your assessment of his family life? Do you think his description of relationships between children and parents is typical of most families or are his circumstances unusual? (ACELY1754) **R W LT**

Depression and Anxiety

1. Dave writes of Mary 'I realised I was beginning to pick at a darkness that I had known was there, but was unable to comprehend.' (p. 53) Respond to the following questions in a short paragraph.
- Explain the events that led up to Dave recognising Mary's problems.
 - What is 'the darkness' he refers to? (ACELT1771) **R W LT**
2. Do you think Simon and Dave did the right thing by reporting Mary's self-harm to the school? Explain your reasoning. (ACELT1771) **R W S LT LY**
3. Dave's mantra as a seven-year-old became, 'What do I care what other people think?' Why do you think his psychologist Lachlan questioned this coping strategy? What do you think of this as a strategy way of dealing with bullying and low self-esteem? (ACELT1771) **R W S LT**
4. What imagery does the author use to describe the physical symptoms of depression in Chapter 9 'Getting Out of Bed'? Write a list of quotes that encapsulate the physical and emotional experiences. (ACELT1637) **R W LT**
5. What does Dave see as the 'biggest mistake of the depressive mind'? (p. 133) Does this surprise you? (ACELT1771) **R W S LT**
6. What analogy does the author use to explain therapy on page 207 and why was it Dave saw it as scary? (ACELT1637) **R W LT**
7. The author writes that he was 'ashamed' of having to heal his emotions and feelings in a way that he wouldn't if he was having treatment for a physical injury such as a broken arm. What was he ashamed of? What stigma did Dave associate with mental illness? Do you think this attitude towards depression is widespread? (ACELT1771) (ACELT1812) **R W S LT**
8. Describe the 'meaningful steps' Dave's psychologist suggest he take to help his recovery (p. 238)? To what extent did they help? (ACELT1771) **R W LT**
9. Explain the title of the last chapter 'How to Be Unhappy' and how it relates to Dave's understanding of himself and his condition at the close of the memoir? (ACELT1771) (ACELT1812) **R W S LT**

AFTER READING

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the strategies Dave used to try to overcome his anxiety and fear through his adolescence. Were any of these successful? Use quotations and specific examples from the book to support your argument on why you think they did or didn't work. (ACELT1815) **R W S L LT**
2. 'Everyone thinks their family is about as cool as wearing socks with thongs.' Discuss the role of family in *How to Be Happy*. Use quotations and specific examples from the book to support your argument. (ACELT1815) **R W S L LT**
3. Towards the end of his memoir after a crisis Dave wrote, 'My biggest lesson during that time was learning how to be unhappy. You would think I had become an expert at this, but in fact I'd been doing it all wrong.' (p. 249)
- How was Dave doing unhappy 'all wrong' and what new lessons did he have to learn? Use quotations and specific examples from the book to support your argument. (ACELT1815) **R W S L LT**
4. Discuss the role of friendship (from both adults and people his own age) in Dave's search for happiness? Use quotations and specific examples from the book to support your argument. (ACELT1815) **R W S L LT**
5. Describe the different identities Dave adopted through adolescence and early adulthood and discuss to what extent they made him happy. Use quotations and specific examples from the book to support your argument. (ACELT1815) **R W S L LT**
6. How is imagery used in *How to Be Happy* to capture the author's experience of anxiety and depression? Do you find this depiction convincing. Use quotations and specific examples from the book to support your argument. (ACELT1815) **R W S L LT**









7. 'How to Be Happy is a useful self-help book for confused teenagers.'

Do you agree? Use quotations and specific examples from the book to support your argument.

(ACELT1815)   R W S L L T

CREATIVE RESPONSE

1. Write your own memoir piece based on an event or period of time in your life. Remember a memoir is written in the first person and is written from personal experience. (ACELT1815) (ACELT1644)  
R W S L L T
2. Describe a scene from the book you would use in a commercial to entice others to read it. What would people see or hear when they watched your advertisement? (ACELY1751)     R W S L L T