

No Sugar

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

Class activity: responding to Indigenous poetry of the 1980s. Before beginning a study of *No Sugar* teachers might introduce students to some of the poetry emerging from Aboriginal writers in the 1980s. It would be helpful for students to gain an understanding of some of the political and social issues being explored by these writers and to comprehend the cultural territory from which they were writing. Oodgeroo Noonuccal's 'Last of His Tribe', 'No More Boomerang' and 'The Unhappy Race' each introduce separate issues of Indigenous experience, as well as traditions of Aboriginal writing and style. After reading each poem aloud to the class, teachers should ask students to respond to a series of short questions:

- What is the main subject of the poem?
- What observations can you make about the language used in the poem?
- Can you connect the poem to any contextual information you might know?
- How are you positioned by this poem to view the subject?

Introducing Jack Davis' work through his poem 'The First Born' would help students to become familiar with ideas such as connections to land, family, heritage and subjugation, each an important theme in *No Sugar*. Follow the reading and questioning process as above but also pose the question 'Having read this poem, what might you predict about Davis' other writings?' It is also helpful to explain that *The First Born* became the title for the trilogy of plays of which *No Sugar* is part. As a class, complete a close reading of this poem, exploring:

- the persona and who it appears to be addressing
- the structure of the poem
- the tone of the poem and language use
- imagery and allusions.

Teachers might ask students to formally write down their reading of this poem as a homework task.

- **Jack Davis – contextual study.** Davis made no secret of his close connection to the subjects that he wrote about. As a class investigate the many elements of his life that inform his dramatic works. A broad search of his life should connect students to topics such as the Moore River Settlement, the Stolen Generation, Nyoongah Heritage, Aboriginal Lands Trust WA, the Oombulgarri Massacre, A. O. Neville, and the 1905 Aborigines Act. Divide the class into small groups to investigate such topics to gain a broader understanding of Davis' context.

PERSONAL RESPONSE ON READING THE TEXT INCLUDING SUCH ASPECTS AS:

- **Class wiki/blog – character names.** The names of characters contribute significant ideas to the play. Establish an online area for students to contribute ideas about the characters' names. As the study of the play continues you might add further notes about characters, or other narrative or dramatic devices.
- **Understanding the stage – class activity/homework task.** As a class, turn to page 8 of the text and consider the information about setting. Davis provides some very specific information about location and staging, all of which is critical to understanding the play. Students should experiment with a space that they might have access to throughout the study of the play, setting out the different locations and necessary staging, and try to conceive of the logistics of

this type of performance. Students should write a summary of their response to Davis' staging and its potential influence on audience members as a homework or journal task. (Some early performances of this play were also perambulatory in style; that could be an aspect to explore practically with students, and for them to include in their response.)

- **Investigation: Nyoongah country and language.** The glossary located on pages 107–10 is a vital tool to understanding the play. As a class, discuss the function of Nyoongah language within the play, remembering that audiences in the theatre would not have this, but they would have the actors' delivery and movement to help them understand Nyoongah words. If students are unfamiliar with the location and traditions of Nyoongah people, as a class investigate the geographic area of the south-west of Western Australia that are traditional Nyoongah areas. Also investigate traditional myths and totems.
- **Written response: Act 1 Scene 1.** Allocate the parts of all characters in this scene to members of the class and read through the scene, using the stage directions where possible. Areas for discussion in this scene might be: the 1929 Centenary Edition of *The Western Mail*, Don Bradman and cricket, Jimmy's blood on the ground, pies, rabbits, dowak, sixpence. After this reading and discussion, students should all write a page-long response to the scene addressing the following topics:
 - What issues are raised in the first moments of this play?
 - What elements of symbolism are relevant to understanding the drama?
 - Contextually, what appears to be critical to an audience's understanding?
 - What is your initial response to this scene?
- **Class discussion: Binary oppositions Act 1 Scene 2.** Explore the cultural studies concept of binary oppositions, drawing examples from popular culture or obvious historical constructions. Apply this theory to Act 1 Scene 2 and consider how the oppositions are made clear to the audience, as well as their effect on the audience.

OUTLINE OF KEY ELEMENTS OF THE TEXT

- **Two to Tango: remembering the narrative and dramatic elements of drama.** When studying a drama text it is critical to emphasise that both narrative and dramatic devices must work together for the text to exist. **Narrative** elements such as plot structure, characters, setting, themes and symbolism are essential to the story that is being told while **dramatic** elements such as staging, costumes, lighting, sound effects and directions enable the telling of the story. Allocating 'experts' (class members) for different elements of the text's construction can help to ensure no aspect of the text is forgotten while reading or discussing the text.
- **Group activity: plot study.** *No Sugar's* plot structure is quite traditional in that there is an obvious complication, series of events, climax and resolution (as well as an implied coda). This is worth mapping as a class activity but a more helpful exploration of plot would be the concept of journeys. Throughout this play the plot is influenced by enforced journeys that the Millimurra and Munday family members must undertake. In groups of three, students should try to track the many journeys of this play and create a mud map between Perth, Northam and Moore River detailing the different journeys and the main ideas associated with them. Students might choose to represent this with words or through images. Ask each group to explain their map to the rest of the class and display them for the duration of studying the text.
- **Class wiki/blog: characters and symbolism.** Return to the shared space created earlier to document comments about the characters' names. Again, ask students to add all they can to their understanding of characters, based now on narrative and dramatic conventions. Some of the categories for them to note are totems and ritual engagements, experiences, sound effects, costuming and props, stage directions.

SYNTHESISING TASK/ACTIVITY

- **Discussing dichotomy.** In small groups, or individually, students should select a character from each side of one of the specific oppositions or dichotomies constructed in Act 1. The task is to present an oral and/or visual presentation that explains the differences between the characters' backgrounds, ideologies, experiences and levels of power, and also how they are constructed through the play by staging, symbolism, dialogue and so on to represent certain ideas or attitudes.
- **Postcolonial historical perspectives – investigating A. O. Neville.** During the time that Davis was writing *No Sugar* Australian historians began re-examining events of Australia's colonial past, as well as the way these events were recorded. With the distance of hindsight most people began to agree that the ideology of colonialism had led to regretful events in Australia's past and had also created government policies and historical records that were racist – at best paternalistic. A. O. Neville is a figure whose record has been re-examined through the postcolonial lens and this has led to his critical characterisation in this play, as well as the novel *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* and the feature film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

Task description

1. Investigate A. O. Neville's views by reading his speech to the Western Australian Historical Society and then look at some of the historical accounts about Neville as a government official.
2. It might also be helpful to look up the terms segregation, assimilation and paternalism.
3. After this, consider the representation of Neville in *No Sugar* and selected scenes from *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.
4. Write a summary of which of Neville's views and actions of postcolonial thinkers would object to and why someone like Davis would choose to present the character as he does in *No Sugar*.

Next Page

THE WRITER'S CRAFT

- **Class investigation and written response: theatrical style.** Davis employs a unique theatrical style in his play, but there are clearly stylistic traditions that he is borrowing from. These are European Realism, Stylisation, Brechtian Theatre, protest play, corroboree performance. Teachers should divide the class into small groups, each researching and summarising one of the above terms and applying it to *No Sugar*. Each group should be able to identify moments in the play that are functioning within that tradition and present this information to the class. Some focus questions for research and presentation might be:
 - What are the main features of this tradition?
 - What are some examples of other writers or performers working with it?
 - Can you locate scenes where this tradition is evident in *No Sugar* and explain how it is employed?
 - What does this tradition lend to the performance or the audience's understanding?

Once all presentations are complete, consider Dennis Carroll's article and discuss his use of the term 'Aboriginality' as a theatrical style on page 101.

- Students should write a response to the question: Should Davis' theatrical style be described as 'Aboriginality'? Use specific examples from *No Sugar* to support your answer.

- **Humour and pathos.** In this play Davis combines the funny side of life with the tragic. This is a common literary construction to communicate the complexity of the human condition. In Davis' work the comic is often the result of Aboriginal characters' mimicry of bureaucratic figures or processes, or even parodies of white practices. Embedded within such scenes is the tragedy and absolute opposition that is part of the colonial predicament. As a class, locate

examples of such scenes and look closely at how language and stage devices create humour and pathos in Act 4 Scene 5.

- **Student activity: perambulatory performance.** The first performance of this play was perambulatory in style. With the students, map locations within the school grounds that could be used for the scenes. Considerations for a perambulatory performance would need to include distances walked, location of audience, natural features, obstacles and disturbances. After considering all of these factors discuss why this form of performance would be desirable. Things to consider would be the importance of journeys in the place (uncontrolled journeys or journeys made not through individual choice), as well as disruption of audience expectation and experience.
- **Living performance: oral histories and acting in Indigenous culture.** In an interview Jack Davis said, '[Y]ou see, we've always been acting. Aboriginal people are the greatest actors in the world . . . we've acted up before magistrates, we've acted up before the police, we've acted up before social workers; we've always done our own mime. It's not too long since we were introduced to television and all that type of thing, and when we lived in the Bush we had our own way of doing these things.' Look closely at Gran's role in Act 1 Scene 7, as well as Act 2 Scene 6, and consider the way that performance and oral traditions are naturalised for the Indigenous characters and discuss 'What is the value of this tradition to the white figures in the play?'

Plot structure

- **Class activity: Characters and Power (PDF, 121KB).**
- **Themes and scenes**

At the completion of the play, fill out the following table as a summary of the play's ideas.

Theme	Characters	Scenes	Quotes/References	What do you understand?
Outline the comment that the play promotes about each theme	Identify the characters who make this theme apparent to the audience	Identify where in the play there are examples of this idea	Record specific examples of lines, directions, etc.	Describe the connection between what appears in the play and what you understand.

- **Symbolism: No Sugar? Act 4 Scene 8.** This play is highly dependent on symbolism to communicate many of its ideas. While specific symbols and motifs operate continually throughout the play, one scene in particular (Act 4 Scene 8) brings together many examples of this device to communicate the climax of the narrative. Students should interpret the possible meanings of the following items, colours or words from this scene:
 - Whistle
 - Sugar bag
 - Yellow shirt, black pants
 - Magpie
 - Yellow and red ribbons
 - Tobacco
 - Red dress
 - Koodjie

Students may also locate other examples of symbolism from this scene or from other moments in the play.

Some teachers may wish to locate examples of these things to have in the classroom while the play is being studied as visual reminders to students of the importance of the non-verbal elements of drama.

- **Act 4 Scene 5: Language? Which language? Whose language?** In *No Sugar* language is a critical consideration. Language is not simply the method of communicating the narrative, it is a contested site within culture. Formal English, Colloquial Australian English, Creole English and Nyoongah are all used throughout the play to make important statements about character and indicate power struggles and conflict. Students should look at the language used by different characters in Act 4 Scene 5 and write a response to the question 'What can language help us to understand about characters?' A question to extend students further might be 'How would you feel if a language other than your native tongue was enforced upon you?'

Text and meaning including such elements as:

- **Themes Handout** (PDF, 213KB)
- **Individual task: language and power.** This play demonstrates how important language can be to demonstrating social power. In many scenes in this play language is used to dismiss, intimidate and dehumanise people, and take away their rights and possessions. This is the process of 'othering' – making it clear that some people are part of the dominant society while some are 'other', different, not of that same group. Read Act 1 Scene 7 and make a list of language used by each character to dismiss or diminish others.

SYNTHESISING TASK/ACTIVITY

- **Director's commentary task.** (The model for this task is the director's commentary that can be found on the special features of most DVDs.) This task involves presenting two versions of a short scene (or part of a scene) from *No Sugar*, demonstrating how verbal and non-verbal conventions of characterisation can be interpreted to encourage different responses to the ideas explored in the scene. Students will then need to offer a brief explanation of what they were trying to achieve in their performance. Questions may also be asked by the audience. Students should be provided with time to plan and rehearse the scene in small groups, before presenting to the class. Note:
 - The focus here is on dramatic conventions relating to character – sets, lighting, and so on are not required. Focus instead on dialogue and action, though indicative costumes and props would be appropriate.
 - As this is an oral task, students need to pay careful attention to their use of verbal and non-verbal oral language conventions.
 - Assessment is not based on dramatic performance but the understanding of verbal and non-verbal elements of the drama and the oral presentation of these ideas.
- **Response: close reading**
In one class period, students should be provided with a non-marked copy of Act 2 Scene 1. In this time they should read the scene closely and answer the question below in an essay-style response. **Essay question:** Explain how the use of dramatic and language techniques in Act 2 Scene 1 works to promote ideas about division and power to the audience.

[Next Page](#)

WAYS OF READING THE TEXT

- **Postcolonialism and posthistory.** Davis' text is clearly embedded within the postcolonial discourse and it is important that students understand the historical evolution of the postcolonial perspective. It is not necessary to read this text through a postcolonial lens or construct a postcolonial reading; it is enough simply to understand that the play is informed by this theory and first performed to an audience aware of the issues and perspectives central to postcolonialism. Exploring other examples of postcolonial literature (described below) in a comparative study with *No Sugar* would help to make this theory clear to students. Davis prefers to use the term '**posthistory**' to describe the position from which he

understands his story. This term seeks to separate time frames for the Indigenous experience with posthistory symbolising an end to the white historical perspective. This view also reconnects Davis' contemporary context with the stories of Aboriginal culture that were dominant and highly valued before white settlement, placing himself as a continuation of Indigenous heritage and storytelling. Kim Scott's work also continues this tradition, but without the element of protest that Davis includes.

The Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, and the picture books published as a result of the project, could work as helpful illustrations of this storytelling continuation. If teachers choose to explore this concept with students, Wai Chee Dimock's theory of 'Deep Time' could also be helpful. This theory looks at the ideas that predate the formation of nation-states and the cultural divisions that this entailed. It looks to the continuation of literary and cultural forms and ideas, regardless of imposed national descriptions.

- **Regional Studies – Western Australian writers.** The specific inclusion of historical figures and events in *No Sugar* connects the drama to the policies and politics of Western Australia as a discrete region. It is not only this history that makes the play uniquely Western Australian. The play is placed within a literary and cultural location also – Western Australian writers of drama, poetry, literature and film have a particular setting that is represented in their work through language, structure and theme. It can be useful for teachers to consider 'region' within programming in seeking to liberate Australian literary studies from the project of nation building and the continual question of what an Australian text can tell us about being an Australian.
- **Transnational perspective.** Often we consider the style and content of Australian works to be unique or relevant only within the geographical confines of our island nation. Many of the considerations that our writers explore are, however, indicative of global concerns or movements and should be viewed within a global context. One important consideration for Davis' work is that postcolonialism is a transnational movement – colonialism being a global project of the Enlightenment era. Placing Davis' play alongside other postcolonial works from places such as Ireland, South Africa, India, Canada and the United States (to mention but a few) can help to reinforce the ideological interrogation that is central to texts such as *No Sugar*.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER TEXTS

- **Translations by Brian Friel (Stage drama)** – This text is an example of a postcolonial play from Ireland. It is written at the same point in time as *No Sugar* and would assist students to understand the transnational connections between those disenfranchised by British colonialism. As a dramatic text it also offers helpful similarities and differences to discuss the elements of dramatic writing and performance, and, like Davis, Friel focuses on the importance of language to cultural heritage and identity.
- **'Act of Union', 'Digging' and 'Relic' by Seamus Heaney (Poetry)** – A small selection of Heaney's most well-known poems, these three provide a focused comparison with the Irish experience under British colonial rule, as well as the cultural significance of time, language and land.
- **'Prologue', *That Deadman Dance* by Kim Scott (Novel)** – Fellow Western Australian and Nyoongah man, Kim Scott, is a helpful figure to study alongside Jack Davis. Not only are there comparative possibilities in terms of region, Scott's conceptualisation of the settler frontier on the south-west coast also explores the importance of language as a signifier of culture and power.
- ***To the Islands* by Randolph Stow (Novel)** – Stow is an acclaimed novelist and poet whose Western Australian writings can provide helpful comparisons through representations of historical events within fictional texts. This particular novel of Stow's also represents the

Oombulgarri Massacre of which Billy provides an account in Act 2 Scene 6 of *No Sugar*. Stow's representation of Western Australian landscape would also provide many opportunities in a regional study.

- ***The Rabbits* by John Marsden and Shaun Tan (Picture book)** – This is a powerful allegory to assist the teaching of postcolonial perspectives. Explore allegory as an important literary device and ask students to attempt their own allegorical telling of a situation as an experiment of how carefully crafted the device must be. It also makes an interesting comparison to Davis' employment of biblical lessons and figures, and the implied meanings that they carry.
- ***Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Phillip Noyce (Feature film)** – Considering Noyce's visual representation of this narrative is helpful in providing an understanding of the context of Davis' story. It raises many similar issues, but also depicts some of the same historical figures. Asking students to compare the representation of these figures and their construction would make a very constructive learning experience.

EVALUATION OF THE TEXT

- Students should consider the value of interrogating historical moments or events through drama. In an individual writing exercise students should write a response to the question 'What role can drama play in the way history is recorded?'
- **Class investigation: heritage of protest.** Many countries have well-recorded and popularised histories about protest. The American Civil Rights Movement, the Irish Troubles and Nelson Mandela's (and the **ANC**) struggle against apartheid are all subjects for study and are featured heavily in popular culture. Australia's traditions of protest, particularly in relation to Indigenous rights, are not as well popularised. Divide the class into groups to research the many moments of protest that have been critical to the advancement of Indigenous rights in Australia. Once this is complete, ask students to write a reflection about Davis' place in this history.

RICH ASSESSMENT TASKS

- **Comparative study – Australia and Ireland as colonial literatures.** Often we consider Australia and Ireland as having close cultural connections due to the number of Irish people who settled in Australia. There are, however, close comparisons that can be made between Australia's and Ireland's colonial experiences and this is a common feature of the literature from both countries. Making this the connecting factor of a comparative study would present interesting opportunities for exploration. If programming allows a full comparative study between *No Sugar* and Brian Friel's *Translations*, at the completion of the study students could answer the following question in an extended essay: 'Explore the way dramatic texts can present historical commentary.' If a full comparative study is not possible, compare the opening two scenes of each play as a class and ask students to write a short reflection considering the similarities of how various social oppositions are portrayed in these plays.
- **Comparative passage study: 'Prologue', *That Deadman Dance*.** Kim Scott's 2011 novel *That Deadman Dance* explores a different interaction in Western Australian history but a moment that makes an interesting comparison to *No Sugar*. Central to this novel is the importance of language as a signifier of cultural exchange. Read only the prologue of this novel to the class and provide students with a copy of the passage. This comparison should enable a thorough discussion of the importance of language to communication and heritage. A helpful class discussion question would be 'Does legitimacy of language equal legitimacy of culture?'
- **Response: essay task.** Students should respond to the following question under conditions decided by their teacher, but consistent to the class: Discuss how the construction of characters helps to present ideas about power in *No Sugar*.

[Next Page](#)

SYNTHESISE CORE IDEAS

- **Reconsidering your response.** Our response to a text can shift and alter at different stages of a study. After their study is complete, students should write a summary of their response to the text as a class or homework task, assessing whether their reaction and understanding of the text altered through the process, trying to surmise what caused any changes. Below are some aspects of literary study that might inform and help provide structure for student responses.
 - Context
 - Dramatic form
 - Theatrical mode
 - Language
 - Symbolism
- **Class wiki/blog completion.** To finish the shared record of studying this play, each student should register their comments about the play on the shared online space for others to read and respond to. Providing some prompts might help students to make more complex statements about their study. Some prompts might be:
 - Which scene was the most powerful moment of the play for you and why?
 - What is your most lasting thought about a character from the play?
 - What would you like to think happened to the characters after the end of the story?
 - If you had the chance, what question would you ask Jack Davis about this play?

RICH ASSESSMENT TASKS

1. **Response: issues article.** Dennis Carroll wrote '[i]n drama, the concept of "Aboriginality" predicates the most important defining characteristic of content, namely political engagement; and most leading Aboriginal writers . . . [including Jack Davis] have in fact been Aboriginal rights activists.' Construct a feature article that explores the role of playwright as activist and the importance of theatre to the discussion of civil rights.
2. **Composing: epilogue.** While *No Sugar* is not the end of the story told by Davis in the trilogy of which the play is part, the play is usually performed as a solitary piece of theatre. Write an epilogue for this play that might resolve an aspect of the play or raise an additional question.
3. **Response: student debate.** The year 1967 saw a landmark decision by the Australian people to redress the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia through constitutional change. Part of the continual postcolonial program to rebalance the Australian Constitution is the proposal for another referendum to amend the recognition of Indigenous Australians in this foundational document of the nation. Read the 'Background' to this debate in the [Law Council Association's discussion paper](#) and become familiar with some of the views expressed in the popular media about this topic by figures such as [Marcia Langton](#), [Taiaiake Alfred](#) and [Andrew Bolt](#). Teachers may decide to structure this as a formal or informal debate format but students should argue the statement that 'Australia needs to alter its views on race'.

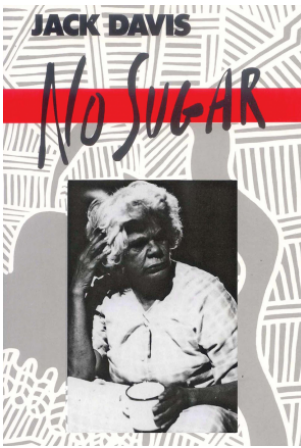
[Back to Top](#)

Unit Suitable For AC: Year 12 (English Unit 3)

Duration This resource is intended as a guide for teachers to shape a teaching program. It is recommended that studying this drama in a comparative style should take between four and six weeks.

Curriculum Summary

Find a [summary table](#) for Australian Curriculum: English content descriptions for this unit.



No Sugar is a play with complex themes that is sophisticated in its construction, as well as its connection to other works of literature. The play also contains some situations that would not be appropriate to explore with younger students. Studying Davis' stage drama within Unit 3 of the Australian Curriculum: English Senior Secondary course allows for close reading of the text as well as exploring important intertextual comparisons relating to style, construction, thematic similarities and contextual connections.

Please note that this resource contains suggested activities. Teachers should choose from the activities to create their own teaching program. Completing all of the activities would make this program longer than the suggested duration below.

Themes

Aboriginality, belonging, connection to place, corruption, family, First Nations texts, hypocrisy, isolation, love, Power, race, racism, resilience, violence, women

General Capabilities

Critical and Creative Thinking, Digital Literacy, Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding, Literacy, Personal and Social Capability

Cross-curriculum Priorities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

FURTHER DETAILS

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