The exercises in this section pull back even further than the ones in “Genres,” inviting students to think about literature as literature (what counts?), about the role of authors (how do they matter?), and even about syllabuses (why read this instead of that?). Many are icebreakers or first-day exercises, designed to get students thinking about some of the assumptions they may have brought to a course on literature in the first place. All the exercises encourage reflection on the larger questions that underlie discussions of literary canons: what belongs, what doesn’t, and why?

Do we know a work of literature when we see it? The first two exercises (“What Is ‘Literature’?” and “Is This Book Literature?”) let students grapple with this question by literally handing them texts to inspect, compare, and debate. The next two exercises (“Putting a Face to a Name” and “Literature Class Band”) turn from the matter of the text to the figure of the author. How does one’s sense of an author—including his or her age, or gender, or reputation, or race—shape expectations about the status or value of the literary texts that author produces? The last three exercises (“Judge a Book by Its Cover,” “The Blank Syllabus,” and “Build-A-Canon”) use your own course syllabuses to prompt discussions about the ways canons themselves are built and rebuilt, shaped and reshaped, by scholars and readers alike. After trying one or more of these activities, your students will likely never look at a syllabus, an author, or the text in their own hands the same way again.

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