

## EDUCATORS' GUIDE

# Navigating Ambiguity

## Understanding Your Attitude toward Ambiguity

*Navigating Ambiguity*, copyright © 2022 by The Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University on behalf of Hasso Plattner Institute of Design. Published in the United States by Ten Speed Press, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

Some things about our future are uncertain (*Will the tornado season be bad?*), and many more things are unknown (*How will humans respond to the climate crisis?*). Then there are ambiguous things. These are things that are unformed and emergent—they could be created or interpreted in any number of ways. While ambiguity may contain uncertainty, they're different. Uncertainty implies that there is something to be certain about. An absolute truth or fact exists. With ambiguity there's no singular, correct answer. It allows for layers of meaning on anything. Your mind is free to explore—and to imagine possibilities that are unknown or don't currently exist.

Ambiguity gives you permission to be creative. Which is a good thing, right? But ambiguity also evokes associations with something being unsettled, unclear, and frustrating. So how do you respond when faced with ambiguity? Our response to ambiguity—both our interpretations and our emotional response—is deeply connected to our experiences, context, history, and character. What you see might not be what anyone else sees. What you see today might be different tomorrow.

The aim of this activity from *Navigating Ambiguity* by Andrea Small and Kelly Schmutte is to help you understand your attitude toward ambiguity so you can better respond when facing the unknown. It has been adapted for use in both K12 and higher education classrooms.

# Activity: What Are Your Attitudes toward Ambiguity?

## LEARNING GOAL

To help learners understand their personal reaction when faced with ambiguous challenges. To help them develop self-awareness, creative confidence, and problem-solving skills.

## WHERE TO USE THIS ACTIVITY

Classrooms | Virtual learning sessions (Zoom, etc.) | Workshops

## MATERIALS

Paper | Writing instrument

## FORMAT

Individual work, with opportunity for individual or paired reflection

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Create a metaphor.

Start by thinking of a specific time you experienced ambiguity or some unknown. This could have been when:

Your next steps were unclear.

You recognized multiple pathways or possibilities.

Your idea of a singular outcome was challenged.


Think back to that time. What were you feeling? How did you respond? Why? Based on that memory, take a stab at crafting a metaphor statement that captures your relationship to ambiguity. You can use the fill-in-the-blank structure below as a guide. Have some fun with this, and try a couple on for size if you're feeling stuck.

Ambiguity is like \_\_\_\_\_ [object, action, moment, place, anything]  
because \_\_\_\_\_ [reason it resonates with you].

Note: Your comparisons can be as expressive as you want them to be. Your metaphor might be very simple or conceptual—there are no right answers here!

## 2. Dig for meaning.

Now put on your detective hat. Answer the three questions below to help you decode the attitude(s) reflected in your metaphor. There are three common ways people relate to ambiguity: enduring ambiguity until it is over; engaging with ambiguity and choosing to explore it (for better or worse); or embracing ambiguity as a field of opportunity. Where can you spot attitudes of enduring, engaging, or embracing ambiguity? Write down which attitude(s) is/are represented in your metaphor and capture the clues in your metaphor that led you to choose that attitude.

	 <b>endure</b> ambiguity	 <b>engage</b> ambiguity	 <b>embrace</b> ambiguity
<b>How would you describe your ability to act in your metaphor?</b>	Ambiguity happens to me.	I can choose to take part in ambiguity.	Ambiguity is a tool and a resource.
<b>What does your metaphor say about your openness and adaptability?</b>	I need to get to certainty and find the "right" outcome.	I accept that there are many possible outcomes.	The more possible outcomes, the better.
<b>Does your metaphor include any of these elements?</b>	Feeling lost or disoriented, like seeking the exit of a maze  Overcoming a fear or challenge, like climbing to the top of a mountain  Wrestling with the "right" choice, like standing at a crossroads	Choosing or creating your own path, like swimming in the ocean  Taking the plunge, like paragliding  Sensing danger and excitement simultaneously, like watching a summer storm	Working to find something of great value, like making a scientific discovery  Actively making something better with time, like painting a blank canvas  Choosing to turn challenges into opportunities (like having too many zucchinis)

### 3. Notice how “when” can change things.

Your attitude toward ambiguity might shift depending on the context. Try answering the following questions to explore when your past and present strategies for dealing with ambiguity were to endure, engage, or embrace ambiguity:

What is/was your attitude on a recent or current work project?

What is/was your attitude in your personal life?

What is your attitude regarding your next career move?

What was your attitude ten years ago?

It’s valuable to notice when and why your attitude varies!

Remember, ambiguity is not about the black and white, but rather the gray space in between. There are no hard lines between attitudes, no fixed mindsets, and there’s always room for interpretation and reinterpretation. If we’ve upped your self-awareness a notch, mission accomplished!

#### WE’D LOVE YOUR FEEDBACK!



This educators’ guide is a **prototype (hooray!)**. We’re hoping to understand what types of materials are useful to educators and learners in K12 and higher education classrooms. If you used this, please share your feedback with us in this four-question survey.

#### WANT TO READ MORE?

**Check out *Navigating Ambiguity!*** The book offers even more ways to nurture an inquisitive mind and the ability to act with intention.

Learn about all of our d.school books at [dschool.stanford.edu/books](https://dschool.stanford.edu/books).

To request a complimentary examination copy to review for use in your classroom, contact Penguin Random House Education at [k12education@penguinrandomhouse.com](mailto:k12education@penguinrandomhouse.com) for PreK–12 Education or [highereducation@penguinrandomhouse.com](mailto:highereducation@penguinrandomhouse.com) for Higher Education.