

Lesson 5.2: What Clothing Communicates

Unit: Unit 5, Make It, Mend It, Wear It (Apparel and Textile Production and Design) **Topic:** 5.1 What We Wear and Why **Grade:** 6 to 8 (written at grade 7; see Differentiation for the grade 6 support and grade 8 stretch) **Days:** 1 class period of 40 minutes (day 117 of the year) **Room:** Either. Desks in a circle or a U if the room allows it.

This is the lesson I care most about in this unit. It comes out of two places: a Queens College course on the meanings of dress, where I wrote about clothing as communication and identity, and a real week at Brentwood South. After an 80s Day during Spirit Week, a colleague and I stopped the planned lesson and built a segment on what is and is not okay to say about what somebody is wearing, because the comments in the hallway had gotten mean. That segment is the heart of this period. The class writes the agreement, not me.

One hard rule for today, stated to students at the start and enforced all period: we talk about clothing in general, in pictures, and in scenarios. Nobody's own clothes are the example. No student is asked to explain, defend, or justify what they have on. If a student volunteers their own outfit, I turn it back to the general question.

Standards

- NYS module line: NYS ATPD 1. Selection c) Describe ways personal image and style is projected to others through clothing choices
- NYS module line: NYS ATPD 1. Selection b) Identify appropriate clothing for individual roles and activities
- CTE theme line: CTE CIR 1. Communication b) Describe types of communication (e.g., oral, verbal, nonverbal, digital)
- CTE theme line: CTE CIR 1. Communication c) Examine communication styles and their effects on relationships
- NYS FACS Learning Standard 2 (Intermediate), Key Idea: Students will know the basic principles of home and community safety. They can demonstrate the skills necessary to maintain their homes and workplaces in a safe and comfortable condition. They can provide a safe and nurturing environment for themselves and others.; Performance Indicator: Students use age-appropriate techniques to select and maintain clothing.
- CDOS Standard 3a Universal Foundation Skills: Interpersonal Skills. Students demonstrate the ability to work with others, present facts that support arguments, listen to dissenting points of view, and reach a shared decision.
- National FCS 3.0: 16.3.1 Explain how fiber, fabric, texture, pattern, and finish change how a garment looks.

Note on the citations: the crosswalk pairs ATPD 1. c) with CIR 1. b) and assigns CDOS 3a Interpersonal Skills, which is what this lesson uses. CIR 1. c) is added because the class agreement is about the effect of a communication style on a relationship, which is that line exactly. National FCS 16.3.1 is the only Area 16 competency about visual appearance; it is written about fabric and finish rather than about identity, so it covers the “same shirt, three

settings” part of the lesson and not the agreement. No Area 16 competency covers clothing and identity directly, so nothing is cited for that; the state module line ATPD 1. c) carries it.

Enduring understanding and essential question

Big idea: Clothing talks before you do. That is a fact about how people read each other, not a rule about what anybody should wear. Knowing it gives you a choice: you can dress on purpose. It does not give you the right to grade what anybody else is wearing. **Essential question:** What does clothing say, who decides what it means, and what is it okay to say out loud about what somebody else is wearing?

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. (Low: remember or understand) Explain, using two examples, how clothing is a form of nonverbal communication, and name one thing a uniform says and one thing a costume says.
2. (Mid: apply or analyze) Given one shirt shown in three settings (a job interview, a family cookout, a school hallway), analyze how the meaning of the same garment changes with the setting and the audience.
3. (High: evaluate or create) Working as a class, create a written agreement of what is and is not okay to say about what somebody is wearing, and defend one line of it with a reason the whole class can accept.

Vocabulary

Tier 2 (general academic): impression, assume, intent, impact, agreement, audience Tier 3 (FACS): nonverbal communication, first impression, uniform, costume, personal style, cultural dress, generation. See the unit vocabulary list (Vocabulary 05.md) for Turkish, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Materials and setup

- Handout, one per student: Handout 05.02 - What Clothing Says and the Class Agreement.md
- Slides: Slides 05.02 - What Clothing Communicates (outline in 05 Materials; the site renders it as a deck)
- Chart paper and two thick markers for the class agreement, or a projected shared document if the room has one
- Sticky notes, three per student, two colors if possible
- One plain garment that can be shown three ways: a plain button-down shirt on a hanger is the easiest. Show it with a tie, with the sleeves rolled and untucked, and with a hoodie over it. *[Sal: bring one of your own shirts. It reads as real, and it keeps the example off any student.]*
- Index cards for the closure, one per student

- Setup notes: write the one hard rule on the board before the bell: “Today we talk about clothing, not about each other’s clothes.” Hang the chart paper where it will stay up for the rest of the unit. Read the room before the period; if something happened in the hallway this week, the agreement is going to do real work today and Step 4 needs its full time.

Pre-assessment

The do now asks students to read two people from clothing alone, which shows me how fast they jump to a judgment and how comfortable they are saying it out loud. Add a silent sticky-note count at the start of Step 4: each student writes one comment about clothing they have heard at this school on a sticky note, no names, and drops it face down in a box. I read a few aloud, with any name or identifying detail skipped. That count is the pre-assessment for the agreement.

Do now and hook (Time: 5 min)

On the board as students enter: “Two people walk into a store. One is wearing a suit. One is wearing a delivery uniform. Write down the first thing you assume about each one. Then write one reason your assumption could be wrong.”

Debrief in two minutes: take three answers, and take at least one “how it could be wrong.” Then the hook: hold up the plain shirt. “This is one shirt. I am going to show it to you three times, and each time you are going to read it differently. The shirt does not change. You change. That is the whole lesson.”

Procedure

Step	Teacher will	Students will	Time
1. Direct instruction: clothing as nonverbal communication	State the state’s idea in plain words: clothing projects personal image and style to other people, whether or not you meant it to. Put the four channels on one slide: words, voice, body, and appearance. Clothing lives in appearance, which people read in about a second and a half, before you speak. Teach two special	Fill in Part 1 of the handout: the four channels, and two lines, one on what a uniform says and one on what a costume says.	9 min

	cases with the shirt in hand. (a) A uniform says "I have a role here": it tells you what somebody does and who to ask for help, and it takes personal choice off the table on purpose. Examples: a nurse, a referee, a team, a school with uniforms. (b) A costume says "this is not me today": it is on purpose, it is temporary, and the wearer and the audience both know it. Examples: a play, a mascot, Spirit Week. Name the trap: a costume only works when everybody knows it is a costume.		
2. Learning activity: the same shirt, three settings	Show the shirt three ways (with a tie; sleeves rolled, untucked; under a hoodie) and name the setting for each: a job interview, a family cookout, a school hallway. For each, ask the three questions: What does it say here? Who is the audience? Would it work in one of the other two settings? Then add one more layer: the same shirt on a person the	Fill in Part 2, a three-by-three grid: setting, what it says, who is reading it. Then one sentence: "The shirt did not change. What changed was ____."	7 min

	audience already has an opinion about reads differently again, and that is about the audience, not the shirt.		
3. Guided discussion: culture, generation, and clothing	Two short slides, no personal questions. (a) Across the world: clothing carries meaning that is religious, regional, practical, and old. Name specific examples with respect and accuracy: a hijab, a sari, a kilt, a kente cloth, a guayabera, a kufi, a huipil. The rule is: an item that belongs to a culture is not a costume. That is why “it is just a costume” is not an answer. (b) Across generations: show three decades of the same garment type (jeans in the 1970s, 1990s, and now) and ask what each generation thought looked right, and what their parents said about it. Land the point: every generation in this room’s families got criticized for what they wore, and every one of them thought the criticism was unfair.	Fill in Part 3: one example of clothing that carries cultural meaning, one thing that has changed between their family’s generations, and one sentence on why “it is just a costume” does not work for cultural dress.	7 min

4. Learning activity: the class writes the agreement	Read four or five of the sticky notes aloud (skip anything with a name or a detail that identifies a person). Then give the task in two columns on the chart paper: “Okay to say” and “Not okay to say.” Take nominations, one at a time. Push every nomination with one question: why? Keep the list to about five lines per column so it can be read from the back of the room. Steer toward lines students can actually keep. Examples that usually come up and are worth keeping: okay to say a compliment about the item, not the body; okay to ask where something is from; okay to say nothing; not okay to price somebody’s clothes out loud; not okay to comment on the same person twice; not okay to make a joke about a religious or cultural item; not okay to say “you always wear that.” When both columns are full, read the whole thing	Nominate lines, argue them, vote. Copy the final agreement into Part 4 of the handout. Sign.	8 min
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	and take a thumbs vote. Sign it: I sign it, and every student who agrees signs the chart paper or the handout. Post it for the rest of the unit.		
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Day total: 5 (the do now) plus 9 plus 7 plus 7 plus 8 plus 4 (the closure) = 40 minutes.

Questions to ask

Monitor understanding:

- Which of the four channels is clothing part of?
- What does a referee's uniform tell you that a referee never has to say?
- Same shirt, cookout and interview. What changed?
- Is a hijab a costume? Why not?

Deepen learning:

- If clothing talks before you do, is that fair? Does knowing it change what you would wear to an interview?
- A compliment and a comment can sound almost the same. What makes one land well and the other land badly?
- Somebody wears the same hoodie every day. There can be a lot of reasons for that. Name three, and then say why "you always wear that" is a bad thing to say out loud.
- Your grandparents got criticized for what they wore. Your parents did too. Why does every generation do this to the next one?
- Who benefits from a school uniform? Who loses something?

Check for understanding

Two checks. During Step 2, read the "what changed was" sentence over five shoulders; a "got it" answer names the setting or the audience, not the shirt. During Step 4, listen for the reason behind each nomination. A student who nominates a line and can give the reason in one sentence has Objective 3. Mark those names on the clipboard as you go, because the vote does not tell you who did the thinking.

Closure (Time: 4 min)

Exit card, three lines: (1) one line from our agreement you will actually use, (2) one thing clothing says without words, (3) one question you still have. Three students read line 1 aloud. Sort into "got it" and "needs more." Keep every card; the agreement's lines get read back out loud on the first day of the sewing work, because the same class that just agreed to be decent about clothing is about to hold up their own crooked first stitches.

Differentiation and supports

- ELL: the four-channel slide is a picture diagram, not text; the cultural dress slide is all images with labels; Part 2 is a grid with sentence frames, not paragraph writing; the agreement is copied, not composed, so an ELL student can take the line in English and write the reason in their first language in the margin. Word bank with Turkish, Portuguese, and Spanish for impression, uniform, costume, culture, agreement, respect (see Vocabulary 05.md).
- IEP and 504 (general): the sticky note is anonymous and can be blank; nobody is called on for a personal story; a student may nominate an agreement line in writing handed to me instead of out loud; printed copy of the four channels and the three-setting grid already filled halfway for a student who needs the structure; extended time means Part 3 can be finished at the start of Lesson 5.3; fidgets allowed. No student is asked about their own clothing, ever, and that protection matters most for the students who have the least choice about what they wear.
- Grade 6 support: the three-setting grid uses two settings instead of three (interview and hallway), and the cultural dress task asks for one example with a label instead of a written explanation.
- Grade 8 stretch: write a short paragraph on the difference between intent and impact using a clothing comment as the example, and draft one line for the agreement that covers a case the class did not think of (online comments about what somebody wore in a photo, or a comment about a uniform somebody has to wear for work).
- UDL checkpoint used: multiple means of engagement (the class sets its own rules, which is the strongest move a teacher has for getting students to care about a norm) and multiple means of action and expression (a line can be nominated out loud, in writing, or on a sticky note).
- No-kitchen or no-machine alternative: not applicable. Nothing here needs a kitchen, a machine, or a tool. If the room has no chart paper, the agreement goes on the whiteboard, gets photographed, and gets printed on the back of Handout 05.05 so it sits at every sewing station for the rest of the unit.

Assessment

Objective	Standards met	Learning task	Assessment (formative or summative; tool)
1. Explain clothing as nonverbal communication; name what a uniform and a costume say	ATPD 1. c); CIR 1. b); National FCS 16.3.1	Handout Part 1, Step 1	Formative; handout checked for the channel and two correct lines; exit card line 2. Summative on Assessment 05.1 item 11c
2. Analyze how the same garment's	ATPD 1. c), 1. b); Std 2 PI C	The three-setting grid, Step 2	Formative; the "what changed was"

meaning changes with setting and audience			sentence read over shoulders; scored complete, partial, or missing for daily work
3. Create and defend a line of the class agreement	CIR 1. c); CDOS 3a Interpersonal Skills	The agreement, Step 4	Formative; clipboard note on who nominated a line and gave a reason; the signed agreement is the class artifact and is posted for the rest of Unit 5

Homework

None. Optional: ask one adult in your family what they wore at your age that somebody gave them a hard time about. Bring the story, not a photo.

Connections

English language arts: intent versus impact is the same lesson the ELA teacher runs on audience and purpose; trade the clothing examples for their persuasive writing prompt. Social studies: cultural dress connects to whatever region the social studies class is in this quarter, and the social studies teacher will have better images than I will. Health: the comments-about-appearance piece overlaps the health teacher's unit on body image and bullying, so tell the health teacher the week this runs and use the same words they use. Community: nobody outside the building is needed for this one, and that is on purpose.
[Sal: the counselor may want a copy of the agreement. Give them one.]

Sources

- NYS Middle Level CTE FACS Content Module 03, Apparel and Textile Production and Design (nyctecenter.org, June 2018), lines 1. b) and 1. c). Copy in 02 Standards/NYS Module PDFs/.
- NYS Middle Level CTE Theme Module 02, Communication and Interpersonal Relationships, lines 1. b) and 1. c). Text per 02 Standards/NYS ML CTE FACS Modules - verbatim extract of all twelve.md.
- NYS Learning Standards for Health, Physical Education, and Family and Consumer Sciences (1996), Standard 2, Intermediate, Key Idea and PI C. Wording per the crosswalk, Part A.6.
- National Standards for Family and Consumer Sciences Education 3.0 (LEAD FCS Education, 2018), competency 16.3.1, per 02 Standards/STANDARDS SOURCES - web research.md, section 4.16.

- Sal's own materials: the Brentwood Spirit Week segment on what is and is not okay to say about what somebody is wearing, built after 80s Day with a colleague; and the dress-as-communication and identity writing from FNES 727, The Meanings of Dress (Queens College, summer 2026). The FNES 727 course content itself stays in that course; only the idea is used here, in my own words. The "Dress the Part" packet's style-profile activity is the optional stretch in Part 3.
- The first-impression timing claim (people form an impression in roughly one to two seconds) is widely reported in social psychology. *[Sal: either cite a specific study on the slide or drop the number and say "almost instantly." Do not put a number on the site you cannot source.]*

Teacher notes

- Protect Step 4's eight minutes. Everything else can be trimmed. If you have to cut, cut the generation slide in Step 3 to one image and take one answer.
- The sticky notes will include something mean. That is the point, and it is also why they are anonymous and why you read them, not a student. Skim them before you read any aloud. Skip anything that identifies a person, and skip anything that is about a staff member.
- Common mistake in Step 1: students think a uniform has no message. Ask what a police uniform says, then what a referee's says, then what a school uniform says. Three different answers, all loud.
- Common mistake in Step 3: "it is just a costume" gets used to defend something that was not okay. Have the answer ready: a costume works only when the wearer and the audience both know it is one, and an item that belongs to a living culture is not a costume for anyone outside it.
- Keep the chart paper up through Lesson 5.18. When the finished pouches and upcycled items go on display, the agreement is what keeps the gallery walk from turning into a roast.
- *[Sal: tell the 80s Day story in your own words, in first person, in about 45 seconds, right before the sticky notes. Say that you and a colleague stopped the planned lesson to deal with it. Students believe a story about a teacher changing his plan. Do not name the colleague or any student.]*