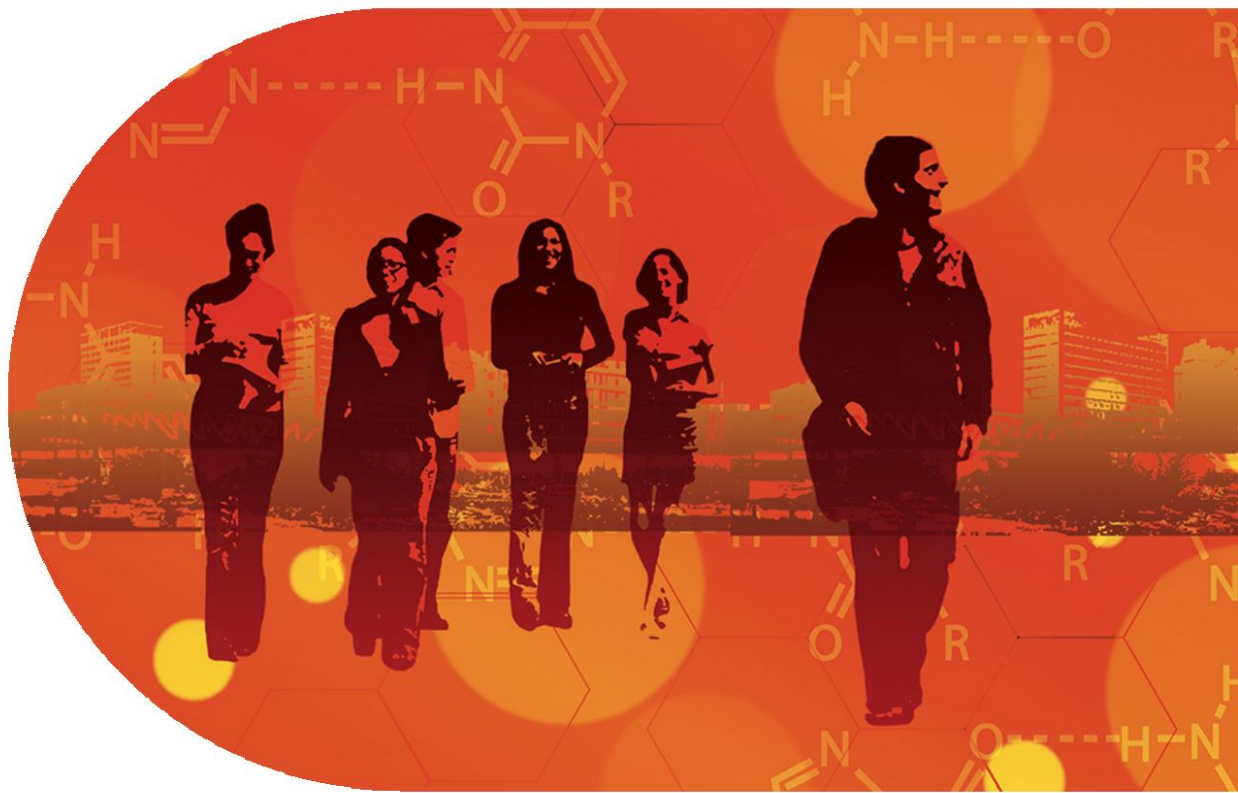


Dennis Kelly's *DNA*

Resource Materials



**BIRMINGHAM
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Introduction

These resource materials are designed to provide additional information for students and teachers for The Young REP's production of Dennis Kelly's *DNA*.

It includes interviews with the production's writer and director, as well as suggested drama and other classroom activities.

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About The Young REP

The Young REP is Birmingham Repertory Theatre's youth theatre company, working with young people aged 7–25 across Birmingham and the West Midlands. Young people work with professional theatre-makers to create and produce a broad range of high quality theatrical experiences. All of our members will perform at Birmingham Repertory Theatre during their year.



Photo Credit: Robert Day

Production: The New Kid (2016)

Dennis Kelly on *DNA*



“Work for theatre includes DEBRIS, OSAMA THE HERO, AFTER THE END, LOVE AND MONEY, TAKING CARE OF BABY, DNA, ORPHANS, THE GODS WEEP, THE RITUAL SLAUGHTER OF GORGE MASTROMAS, GIRLS & BOYS and PINNOCHIO. His plays have been performed worldwide and to date have been translated into nearly forty languages. For television he co-wrote and co-created PULLING and wrote and created UTOPIA, and for film he wrote the screenplay for BLACK SEA, directed by Kebin MacDonalD. He also wrote the book for the Olivier and Tony winning MATILDA THE MUSICAL. In 2010 DNA became a set text on the GCSE English Literature Syllabus.” - <http://www.casarotto.co.uk/client/dennis-kelly-11505>

When our production opens the play itself will be just over ten years old. When you wrote the play were you thinking about it as a response to a specific event at the time?

Not really. It was just about the idea of whether it's ever justified to do something that hurts the individual for the sake of the group. It follows our country going to war and the fear of increasingly draconian laws being put into place because people were scared.

It's a really interesting structural decision to introduce a character as strong as John Tate and then for him to disappear. What was your reason for this?

It just sort of felt right at the time, but I think if he stayed he would've ended up swallowing the play. And I feel that sometimes that happens in life, people just fade out of our vision for reasons we don't fully understand - it's very rarely reflected in drama as we're slightly obsessed with beginning middle and ends. But real life isn't interested in rules like that and it's always more interesting trying to reflect the real world.

In a number of scenes Leah consistently talks to Phil who almost never answers. Were these difficult scenes to write? For you, why doesn't Phil speak? And, why does Leah keep talking?

They weren't difficult as Leah was doing the talking and that seemed fine. I think she talks because Phil doesn't, and I think Phil doesn't talk because it makes the most sense. He knows that this is a dangerous time in his life, the kids around him are behaving in increasingly dangerous ways - he figures if he just keeps quiet and eats for the next couple of years he may just get through this. Unfortunately he doesn't, he stops eating, starts talking and gets involved. And that's when things go wrong.

What advice would you give to young theatre makers and performers who are putting on DNA?

Try and say the lines as accurately as you can. I don't say that as the writer trying to make you say what I've written, but I've noticed that with plays like this because sometimes the lines feel a bit stumpley and natural people are sometimes less accurate - but whenever that happens they get into trouble. The best actors I know work on every comma and full stop - they try and find out the reason they're there and use them. The lines are a structure for your performance, and if you build strength into that structure you build strength into your performance.

Interview with Director Tom Saunders

Tom Saunders is the Head of Youth Theatre at Birmingham Repertory Theatre.



Photo Credit: Gil Gillis

What is *DNA* about?

DNA is about a group of young people who accidentally commit a serious crime and attempt to cover it up. These characters do something pretty awful, and by telling this story through the guise of young people, we're looking at the entirety of society's response towards cruelty, empathy, pack mentality, and some would even say bullying.

The young people in the play are a microcosm of a wider society and by calling it *DNA*, Dennis Kelly poses a question about whether or not these behaviours are societal and learned, or whether these behaviours are just in us all.

What do you think makes *DNA* successful as piece of theatre?

DNA was developed ten years ago as a part of National Theatre's Connections Scheme,

where they commission ~~ten to twelve~~ writers every year to write plays for young performers aged fourteen to eighteen; this scheme gets the work out there, allowing hundreds of companies to perform its plays all over the country. They are performed in schools, community settings, youth theatres, as well as being published.¹

What makes it so successful is how Dennis Kelly doesn't patronise young performers; he writes with the same high quality and intense, ~~deep~~ dialogue that ~~he writes~~ appears in his other work. Dennis Kelly is one of those writers where someone could give me a piece of his work that I've not read before, ~~and~~ and from his dialogue I would have an inkling that it was his. His writing is short, sharp and very rhythmic, which is very close to real dialogue. Very often with his work, ~~you~~ you know exactly what a character is saying, even though they haven't said it. I think that's really powerful.

For me, *DNA* is also successful because it feels utterly contemporary. There are almost no cultural references in it, and there's ~~no~~ barely any technological references in it as well, much like a Shakespearean play, I suppose it could sit in any time, and I think that's its strength is that he's avoided routing it somewhere, meaning we can still stage it ten years later without it dating.

How is *DNA* relevant to today's social climate?

There's a great line in the play, where Leah says 'It feels this is an important time', and I ~~don't know how you feel but~~ agree. ~~Right~~ Right now really does feel like an important time. For the first time in my life it feels like we are standing on ~~the~~ a precipice. ~~In the UK we're of a nation that's~~ about to seriously separate ~~sever~~ its ~~our~~ ties from ~~other countries~~. ~~Across Europe and across~~ the pond there ~~is's been~~ a seismic and scary shift in the political conversation, ~~which is quite scary really, and~~. I think certain things ~~which that~~ liberal ideologies have ~~have tried to~~ pushed away, seem to be back with a vengeance.

~~If you link Leah's statement saying 'it feels like we're living in an important time' with right now,~~ if we look at the play through the lens of the current political climate then what could we saying about our society? Do we protect the vulnerable enough? Do we act in too much self-interest? Are we stronger society when we are unified against something or for something? then the actions of the young people in the play relate to the way they protect each other, but also at times they look after themselves; sometimes So many of the characters in DNA they are not empathetic do not behave in an empathetic way and they don't do the most caring thing because self-preservation is ~~so~~ such a strong impulse. ~~that~~ Protecting themselves from harm becomes paramount and stops them from doing the ~~nice~~ right thing. Does self-protection kick when we're in change or crisis? That is an interesting

¹ More information for National Theatre Connections can be found online: <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/learning/connections>

~~conversation to have~~ And how does that affect our decisions and actions as a society when it comes to Brexit and Donald Trump? ~~and #MeToo and all the things that have recently happened. That makes me think we too are~~ We are definitely living in an important time.

What do you want students who come and see the production to take away from it?

I have come across a lot of teachers speaking about the play through the lens of bullying, and whilst bullying does happen in the play ~~is a useful way to talk about it~~, to say that *DNA* is a play ~~just~~ about bullying is quite reductionist. ~~because it's actually about a lot more.~~ Bullying is the means in which ~~a lot of the~~ some characters get what they want but for me it's not the main focus. Phil wants Brian to go and lie to the police, and ~~he~~ uses fear and intimidation to make Brian do what he wants. Obviously, that is bullying but perhaps we should instead be questioning Phil's intentions and asking why the group allow it to happen? ~~which is true bullying.~~

I am hoping that our production will help students see the wider social conversation ~~that we are having,~~ about what happens to a society if ~~you it exclusively acts only act in terms of in~~ self-interest, ~~because what~~ What we see in this play is a group of young people who only act in ~~the interest of~~ self-preservation, ~~but ultimately what happens is and~~ you see the effect that this has on everyone ~~else~~. You've got a group of eleven people, ~~including and the one who seems like the strongest person,~~ ~~but immediately goes off the rails and vanishes~~ is the first to remove himself from the situation. Does that make him weak or sensible? Arguably ~~the~~ the weakest person, Adam, ~~has chosen to remove himself from~~ decided not to return to society, possibly because even though living out of society is on the outside is bad, it is preferable to the thing ~~life~~ he left. We've got younger people like Jan and Mark who have been so emboldened by ~~this situation~~ their collective crime that they start to commit other crimes, ~~getting away with other things.~~ Whereas ~~people like~~ Cathy, who's who is titillated by ~~this the~~ thing they have done, ~~and ends~~ up becoming a callous and scary person. You have relationships falling apart, you've got potential careers ruined, you've got a society with aspirations ~~for the future~~ ruined, and as it happens, we're left at the end of the play with Phil and Cathy convincing the most vulnerable person in the group to do something awful. And this time it's not an accident.

Three words to describe Dennis Kelly as a writer

Exciting, Scary, Unique.

Three words to describe *DNA* as a play

Modern, Important, Non-Patronising.

Three words to describe your production of *DNA*

Clear, Intense, Entertaining.

Thoughts from the Cast

We asked members of the Young REP to discuss the characters they played in the 2018 production of DNA.

Dehjaun Abono Lahera (John Tate) and Peter Harrison (Richard)



Photo Credit: Gil Gillis

Dehjaun: John Tate is a typical alpha male; he becomes the natural leader of the group during the crisis. For me, the play is about the changing dynamics of power in groups. This makes him an ideal initial holder of power in the play.

Peter: And I guess that's where Richard comes in, because I think he presents the first challenge to John Tate's power.

Dehjaun: Yeah but Richard fails to remain high status the group because his relationship with John. With John his attempts to stand up for himself just come across defensive.

Peter: I think his defensiveness is to some extent because he wants to raise his position in the group too. It doesn't come out the way he wishes. However, I do think that when he challenges things it's because he feels that something doesn't make sense and needs to be questioned. Not tactical or anything.

Dehjaun: Yeah I don't think John Tate is tactical but just good in the moment. His need to control the group is about feeling secure. He's built up an empire and needs to it to stay safe. Even though he keeps in together in the moment, it gets too much for him in the end.

Peter: We need to say three words that describe our character.

Dehjuan: For John Tate it's "keep the crown".

Peter: And for Richard it's thoughtful, frustrated and afraid.

Niamh Franklin (Jan) and Elijah McDowell (Mark)



Photo Credit:
Gil Gillis

Niamh: Jan is someone who needs a plan. She acts like she has power but this isn't actually the case most of the time and she mainly follows the others but is less obvious about it than Lou.

Elijah: Mark's a bit of a sheep too. He follows Phil's instructions and also goes along with Cathy when she frames the postman. The only main difference between Mark and Jan is that he knows what is happening at the start of every act and it's his job to pass this information on to Jan.

Niamh: Jan and Mark aren't very independent. They're always together which adds a consistency to their lives alongside their chaotic predicament.

Elijah: Yeah, their relationship is crucial because they need each other to seem important. They'd be weak alone, like Brian.

Niamh: I think Jan's interesting. Why doesn't she even suggest going to the police? She immediately asks 'what are we going to do?', then she accepts Phil's plan with no questions. She's only really bothered by Adam's death because it might affect her.

Elijah: Basically our character's main purpose in the play structurally is to provide information so that the audience know what's going on. Beyond that our characters are just cowards. They're rude, selfish and childish.

Niamh: Yeah that's definitely the best word to describes our characters; cowards.

Sophie Reynolds (Leah)

Sophie: I absolutely love playing Leah. With all of her little quirks, she is such an interesting character to play- she's basically a bundle of pent up emotion and random facts. I think it's her unique outlook on situations that keep her interesting. Her whole relationship with Phil (Daniel Kenton) is strange to say the least, but her bubbly character seems to just counter-act all of the negative events in the plot.

You can't fault her when it comes to dedication. Why she stays with Phil or even how the pair of them ended up together is a bit of an enigma really, but I can only imagine Leah initiated it with some sort of long babbling speech. Throughout the course of the play she tries every possible tactic to get her boyfriend to notice her which is brilliant to perform- Dennis Kelly has really



captured those sudden thought changes and desperate attempts in a funny and relatable way.

In the middle of all the chaos, you can always rely on Leah to be spouting random information and be making a fool out of herself which is what makes her so fun to play. When you're given a character so care-free you really get to go to town with it and finding that comedic timing between her and Phil has been one of my favourite parts of rehearsal. I think we should all channel a little bit of Leah in every day life, it would definitely make life a bit more interesting, if nothing else!

Photo Credit: Gil Gillis

Drama Activities

Practically Exploring *DNA*

How much can a scene change from what is read on the page, once it has been practically explored by a group of actors?

This activity allows participants to physically explore the play *DNA*, to understand the intentions of each character further, and consider the subtext within the play.

Main Activity:

Ask young people to get into pairs and read out a duologue from *DNA*, ideally a scene between Mark and Jan. Tell the participants that they should not try to act, but instead understand the rhythm of the lines, and how the pace of the scene works.

Discuss what may be happening in the scene. Who or what may be 'dead'? Who in this scene has more status and power?

Ask the pairs to build up their scenes by adding each of the following activities:

- 1) Think of the characters and their own scale of 'power' from 1-10. 1 being a character that is low status, and 10 being a character that it is high status. Ask pairs to decide on a number on their scale and act as Mark and Jan at opposing ends of the spectrum. Once they've run through initially, ask them to reverse the number and see which feels better.
- 2) Ask pairs to then play with the idea of proxemics (space between actors). Consider opening the scene with the characters standing far away from each other, repeat it again starting close together, and moving away from each other. Why would their proxemics change during the scene?
- 3) Ask pairs to introduce a gesture with every line they say. How can each gesture be completely different to the previous gesture? What gesture worked with each line and what didn't work?

Conclude the activity by asking the pairs to incorporate their chosen ideas from the previous activities. Ask the remaining groups to discuss what they initially expected when they read *DNA*, and how their impressions may have been altered now they have experienced multiple interpretations.



The Characters in *DNA*

We meet the characters in *DNA* at a crucial time; they can either accept responsibility for their actions, or protect the innocent reputation of the group. They know each other extremely well, and can speak openly to one another. The following activities allow the participants to explore how the characters would act when they are in the presence of outsiders.

This section encourages young people to proactively develop the thoughts and personalities of the characters within *DNA*.

Hot-seating

Ask one volunteer to take a seat in front of an audience. Ask the volunteer to act as one of the characters within *DNA*. Begin by asking the audience to put their hands up and ask the character an assortment of questions about their life. These initial questions should be entirely random (E.g. what is your favourite biscuit?) and allows the young person to have freedom with their interpretation of the character.

Hot-Seating (Part Two)

Once the volunteer is comfortable answering questions as their chosen character, start asking questions about characters and events within the play.

Encourage the character that you are merely an audience, and not a character, meaning they can talk freely about any topic. Make sure the questions are open, and try to encourage the volunteer to talk about how they might have felt during separate moments within the play. Are they guilty? How do they feel about the group's joint decisions, in relation to their own personal decisions?

Hot-Seating (Part Three)

Inform the volunteer that they are now being interviewed by a member of the police department, and that they are a suspect in relation to Adam's disappearance. How would their answers now differ knowing that they have something to hide? Make it important to the volunteer that the character needs to keep the group's secrets safe. Why do they need to do this?

Repeat this activity with a number of volunteers, each trying out a different character. Encourage multiple volunteers having a go as the same character, as this will allow the other volunteers to gain an additional insight into how one might approach the character a different way.

Main Activity

Once each volunteer has a character, ask them to independently think of what their character might have thought about Adam. Ask them to write down a list of five opinions their character might have had in regards to Adam.

Next, ask the volunteers to imagine that their character has been asked to provide a tribute to Adam at his funeral. Ask them to write down five points of memories of positive opinions they might want to mention in front of a public audience. How close to the truth would the characters remain, especially knowing that they had to protect their own gang?

Ask the volunteers to perform their eulogies. Make half the group sit on one side of the room as Adam's close friends, with the other half of the group

sitting on the opposite side of the room as the characters within the play. Ask the volunteer to perform to both groups at the same time.

How would the character react when speaking to each of the two groups?

Would they feel any guilt?

Shifts in Power in *DNA*

Throughout *DNA* we see the characters compete to become the leader of the group. At times, the struggle for power is explicit in the text, and the balance constantly shifts as the play progresses.

This activity allows its participants to discuss who has the highest status in each scene, as well as considering the personal relationships between each of the characters.

Warm Up:

Ask each member to write their character's name on a sticker. They must wear the stickers so all members of the group could see their name visibly.

Imagine we are at the beginning of the play. Make the characters all walk around the room and greet one another. How would they react to one another? Experiment with making the character what they have always truly thought about the other, as they meet them.

What would the characters say to one another if there were no consequences from their actions?

Main Activity:

As a group, ask the members to decide the five most important moments for the gang within the play's plot, chronologically starting at the beginning of the play.

Label one side of the room as the highest point of status, with the opposite side of the room acting as the lowest point of status. Still using the beginning of the play as a starting point, ask the characters to stand themselves somewhere between the highest and lowest point of the room, depending on how powerful they are in relation to the group at the beginning of the play. If they believe that they are the most powerful, and in the most control of the group, then they stand at the highest point of status, and vice-versa.

Ask each character to give examples of why they have stood where they chose, and if they feel as though any other character should be in a different position of power. If the majority of the group decides that somebody should be in a different position, they have to move.

Alternate between the five most important moments, asking the characters to move around the room accordingly. Once the positions for all five moments have been chosen, repetitively cycle between each moment, seeing which of the characters move up or down on the scale.

Were there any notable changes in a character's status within the group?



Photo Credit: Gil Gillis

Portraying Group Mentality in *DNA*

How would you feel if you were faced with a gang?

There are moments where the characters fight to defend the close-knit nature of their group. Through the use of masks, the following activities are great for a young company looking to perform *DNA*. Explore how a gang can be artistically portrayed onstage, on top of discovering how an outsider might feel when they encounter a faceless group.

Required:

Full-face masks (these can be purchased cheaply online or even made)

Before starting:

Give each student a mask.

If this is their first time using masks, explain a few simple rules:

- Don't touch the mask, it ruins the illusion
- Don't speak with a full face mask on – your voice will be restricted
- Use your hair or a hood to cover any string or edges.
- Keep the mask facing the audience at all times.

Warm up:

Split the students into two groups. Give one group an emotion to perform and then encourage them to show the emotion as they are walking across the room. The other group have to guess what the emotion is. Explain to the students that this helps them think about how to use just

their body (as their face is hidden). Encourage them to make their movements slightly larger than life. Swap the groups over once one group has performed a few emotions.

Emotions can include:

Happy
Angry
Sad
Scared
Bored
Confused
Shocked
Confident/proud
Disgust
Shy
Love
Hate

First exercise:

Discuss the theme of gangs in *DNA*. Are there gangs? Do they work together? What brings them together? Is it healthy?

Explain they are going to try and create the feeling that they are a 'gang' by working together as an ensemble. Get them to create a pose as a whole group as if somebody is trying to take their group photo. Explain you are going to help them move together and create a slightly eerie intimidating feeling.

With their masks on, show them three points in the room, ideally at least two of them will be different corners in the room. Get the group to snap their heads at exactly the same time to one of these points. Agree on the point and then tell them to move on your clap. Experiment with slow movements from one point to another then snapping. Direct them in this and then split them into smaller groups and see if they can move at the same time without your direction.

Take one student out and ask them to watch the effect. Ask them how does it feel to watch this group moving together? Is it threatening? Get the group to move to look at the student at exactly the same time (on your clap). Ask them how does that feel?

Second exercise:

Explain that you are going to try an exercise looking at the exclusivity of the gang. Pick a small group to be the gang and select a student to be 'the outsider'. Explain that the gang need to use their bodies to exclude the 'outsider' as much as possible and the 'outsider' needs to keep trying to be part of the group. Introduce rules that are necessary for your group, e.g. no one is allowed to touch another person.

Discuss how does it feel to be the outsider? Is it uncomfortable for those watching?



Photo Credit: Gil Gillis

Further Resources

Additional information on the content of *DNA* can be accessed via external resources. There are multiple resources available to buy and access to explore Dennis Kelly's *DNA* further. A list of the resources can be found below:

Articles and Reviews

[-http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/9052744/Dennis-Kelly-Rioters-thought-there-were-no-rules-but-my-characters-know-right-from-wrong.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/9052744/Dennis-Kelly-Rioters-thought-there-were-no-rules-but-my-characters-know-right-from-wrong.html)

[-https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/feb/14/dna-review](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/feb/14/dna-review)

[-https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-dna-hull-truck-theatre-company-unicorn-theatre/](https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-dna-hull-truck-theatre-company-unicorn-theatre/)

[-http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/dna-rose-theatre-ki-7193](http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/dna-rose-theatre-ki-7193)

[-http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/dna-salisbury-playh-7300](http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/dna-salisbury-playh-7300)

Existing Schools Resources

[-https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/dna-by-dennis-kelly-6182735](https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/dna-by-dennis-kelly-6182735)

[-https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/dna-by-dennis-kelly-6182735](https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/dna-by-dennis-kelly-6182735)

[-https://www.teachitenglish.co.uk/ks4-drama/dna-by-dennis-kelly/tags/2950](https://www.teachitenglish.co.uk/ks4-drama/dna-by-dennis-kelly/tags/2950)

[-http://resource.download.wjec.co.uk.s3.amazonaws.com/vtc/2015-16/15-16_44/DNA.pdf](http://resource.download.wjec.co.uk.s3.amazonaws.com/vtc/2015-16/15-16_44/DNA.pdf)

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<https://www.artsunit.nsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/erossier/Teacher%20Resources%20DNA%20by%20Dennis%20Kelly.pdf>



Amazon Revision Guides

[-https://www.amazon.co.uk/DNA-Dennis-Kelly-Revision-Revision/dp/1786821176/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-1&keywords=dna+dennis+kelly](https://www.amazon.co.uk/DNA-Dennis-Kelly-Revision-Revision/dp/1786821176/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-1&keywords=dna+dennis+kelly)

[-https://www.amazon.co.uk/GCSE-Notes-Dennis-Kellys-DNA/dp/1973331705/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-3&keywords=dna+dennis+Kelly](https://www.amazon.co.uk/GCSE-Notes-Dennis-Kellys-DNA/dp/1973331705/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-3&keywords=dna+dennis+Kelly)

[-https://www.amazon.co.uk/Study-Guide-Dennis-Kellys-DNA-ebook/dp/B01KU3KWFO/ref=sr_1_6?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-6&keywords=dna+dennis+Kelly](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Study-Guide-Dennis-Kellys-DNA-ebook/dp/B01KU3KWFO/ref=sr_1_6?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-6&keywords=dna+dennis+Kelly)

[-https://www.amazon.co.uk/DNA-GCSE-Genius-Revision-Guide-ebook/dp/B00CCT6AT2/ref=sr_1_7?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-7&keywords=dna+dennis+kelly](https://www.amazon.co.uk/DNA-GCSE-Genius-Revision-Guide-ebook/dp/B00CCT6AT2/ref=sr_1_7?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-7&keywords=dna+dennis+kelly)

[-https://www.amazon.co.uk/Oxford-Literature-Companions-DNA-Fielder/dp/0198398921/ref=sr_1_11?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-11&keywords=dna+dennis+kelly](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Oxford-Literature-Companions-DNA-Fielder/dp/0198398921/ref=sr_1_11?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-11&keywords=dna+dennis+kelly)

[-https://www.amazon.co.uk/DNA-GCSE-Student-Guide-Guides/dp/1350038865/ref=sr_1_13?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-13&keywords=dna+dennis+kelly](https://www.amazon.co.uk/DNA-GCSE-Student-Guide-Guides/dp/1350038865/ref=sr_1_13?ie=UTF8&qid=1513867450&sr=8-13&keywords=dna+dennis+kelly)

The information and activities for this Resource pack were collated by Ben Cain, Becky Deeks, Bhavik Parmar and Tom Saunders.