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## “Your Pettiest Hill” journal assignment

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## Your Pettiest Hill Journal Assignment

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### Great Ideas For Teaching Students (G.I.F.T.S)

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#### Abstract

The purpose of this assignment is to have students feel comfortable discussing difficult topics in a low stake's manner. Getting students engaged in the material allows everyone to feel comfortable in the class space. This assignment allows students to focus on the "trees" in their journal entries. They are then primed and more comfortable discussing the "forest" (i.e., tougher topics) in class.

**Keywords:** film, journal, race

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#### Introduction

The purpose of this assignment is to have students feel comfortable discussing difficult topics in a low stake's manner. To accomplish this, I ask the students in my Films of Spike Lee course to write entries in their electronic journals (on Blackboard), which I read before the beginning of the next class. The weekly assignment is to have students think about the movie/reading and write three comments—with at least one being "petty"—in their journals.

Given that Spike Lee's films deal with challenging topics such as police brutality, sexual violence, racism, and colorism, many students feel uncomfortable participating in class and getting students to speak about these issues can oftentimes feel like a struggle. Having the students write a "petty" comment (e.g., "I hated Rosario Dawson's character in He Got Game because that aint how Spanish girls act"), allows them to feel comfortable speaking up in class and subsequently a deeper, thoughtful discussion ensues. Therefore, because this assignment allows the students to focus on the "trees" in their journal entries, they are then primed and more comfortable discussing the "forest"—i.e., tougher topics, in class.

#### Goal

The goal of this assignment is to get students comfortable to have discussions of serious and difficult topics before coming into class.

### **Pedagogical Rationale**

The rationale behind this assignment is that many students are uncomfortable discussing issues of race and racism. Since the material in my course deals with many difficult topics, I want to have students feel comfortable speaking in class. Discussion is an extremely valuable aspect of the learning experience, but difficult topics add additional hurdles to students being willing to engage.

### **Procedure**

Your Pettiest Hill! For each week's viewings and readings write at least 3 comments or questions that come to mind. One of the comments should be on something you find odd or annoying that may be petty. Why does this bother you? For example: Is one actor or character rubbing you the wrong way, but you don't know why?

### **Explanations**

Weekly, after each film/reading, students are required to write three comments in their journal before the start of the next class when we discuss the film. In class, the students willingly talk about their comments. Furthermore, if there are common themes that I notice in their journal entries, I discuss these as well.

### **Typical Results**

I have found that many students enjoy being able to make initial comments that do not have to tackle the difficult aspects of the content. If it stop at that point, however, this assignment would be detrimental because students would simply be avoiding difficult discussions in a different manner instead of staying silent. What I find is that after we mix in some lighter points, it is much easier to transition into the meat of the course. The quiet students feel comfortable speaking up and the students who already speak are were more likely to continue to participate. For example, when discussing the Spike Lee film *Do the Right Thing*, some students have petty comments related to the acting—particularly, Spike's. When we get to the major issue of the film: police brutality against black men, students are more engaged than previous semesters. Since they had already spoken, it is easier for them to join in on the conversation. The silence is broken before students feel the stakes are too high to join in. Many of the student evaluations I receive during and after the

class come from students who say they had never felt comfortable being part of these types of discussions but felt they could in my course. Getting passed the initial silence is the biggest hurdle for many of my students.

### **Additional Resources**

Fuss, D., & Gleason, W. A. (Eds.). (2015). *The pocket instructor: Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral-proquestcom.gate.lib.buffalo.edu>

Garrett, H. (2020). Containing classroom discussions of current social and political issues. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(3), 337–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2020.1727020>

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