

Writing about Pithy Quotes

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The Pithy Quote writing assignment was suggested to me by a Philosophy student in 1996. She explained that she learned more when she decided what was important, or "pithy." (The pith of a plant is that center part of the stem that contains and carries nutrients to the rest of the plant; hence it is its most rich and important part.) Since then the Pithy Quote assignment has been a big part of my course instruction.

Many students like the freedom to choose what they think is important or meaningful in a reading and apply it to their own lives. They say that the responsibility of judging what is important and having to defend that judgment enables them to learn more personally and better.

The pithy quote assignment has four parts. The first is to find a section of the reading that you find to be important or meaningful and quote it directly. The second part is to explain the meaning of the quote in the context of the overall reading. The third part is to relate a personal connection to the quote, in effect explaining how and why this quote is meaningful to you personally. The last is the writing of questions about the reading that you want answered or a statement about your reaction to the writing.

I have never given out example or models of pithy quote assignments because I feel that they tend to overly define quality in that assignment and some students are intimidated by such exemplary work. I want you to be guided by my instructions, but to search for and find internal standards of quality. You may read the pithy quotes of others or ask me as many questions about the assignment as you

feel the need, but ultimately, I believe you know and can recognize when you have done quality work.