

**ADVANCE ESSAY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR
THE PENCIL TEST**

1. In his article titled *White*, Richard Dyer makes the following assertion: “[I]f the invisibility of whiteness colonises the definition of other norms—class gender, heterosexuality, nationality and so on—it also masks whiteness as itself a category. White domination is then hard to grasp in terms of characteristics and practices of white people.” (p 46) How does Guilford’s narrative “unmask” whiteness? In what ways does the narrative argue with racial categorization? How does the novel reveal white privilege? How does the novel undermine the concept of white privilege? In other words, in what ways does *The Pencil Test* posit a type of “black privilege”?
2. The author of *The Pencil Test* admits an investment in postmodern and postpositive ideology. Central to these outlooks is a belief in subjectivity, in the absences of a single or absolute truth, and in the ability of the individual to determine meaning and purpose. How are post-modern ideas communicated in the text? Where does the text deviate from these ideas? For what purpose? Can *The Pencil Test* be called a postmodern text? Can it be seen as engaging in critical race theory? Explain your position.
3. “As commonly understood,” writes Richard Morin in his June 2005 Washington Post Article titled *The Price of Acting White*, “acting white is a pejorative term used to describe black students who engage in behaviors viewed as characteristic of whites, such as making good grades, reading books or having an interest in the fine arts. The phenomenon is one reason some social thinkers give to help explain at least a portion of the persistent black-white achievement gap in school and in later life.” In what ways has this theory of “acting white” influenced the narrative of *The Pencil Test*? Do you think the author agrees or disagrees with the position that acting white is a burden for black students—that the pressure to act a certain way impedes black students’ success? (For more information on “the burden of acting white” refer to the seminal study by Ogbu and Fordam “Black Students' School Success: Coping with the "Burden of 'Acting White.'”). How does the narrative complicate these ideas?
4. Names are used as a motif in Guilford’s novel. One primary example is the name of the main character, Kendry (Kendra/Umoja). Consider the names of characters, places, and organizations—pay special attention the acronyms of black organizations on the first page of Chapter 29. What patterns emerge? What is Guilford positing about the significance of names? What ideas are being subverted? Challenged? Questioned? How would you describe Guilford’s position on blackness? On black radical propaganda? On categorization?
5. “Why does *nigger* generate such powerful reactions?” asks Randall Kennedy in his book *NIGGER: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. “Is it a more hurtful racial epithet than [other] insults...Should blacks be able to use *nigger* in ways forbidden to others?” What do you think is the author’s position on this word? Do you agree or disagree with the author’s position? Explain. (Reference the first chapter of Kennedy’s book at the Washington Post’s website: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/nigger.htm>).