

Duane Johansen

“Put Your Hands Up”: The History and Usage of the Raised Fist Gesture

Lesson objective: Students will gain perspective on how the raised, clenched fist gesture has been used as a symbol of protest, solidarity, and celebration around the world and throughout history.

Lesson duration: Two to four fifty-minute class periods. May be truncated to just one class period.

Grade level: Upper level high school or early college. May be adapted for lower grades as necessary.

Tasks and activities: The centerpiece of the lesson is a PowerPoint slide show entitled “Put Your Hands Up.” Teachers may elect to have the students do additional writing or research activities.

Materials and equipment required: Computer capable of presenting PowerPoint slide show, projector, etc.

Additional activities: Suggested writing and research activities outlined in Appendix A.

Suggested alterations: Split the presentation up at the “brain break” section and eliminate the pictures of cute hamsters. Truncate the history section to just the 1968 Olympics slide(s) and then present the “USA Today” section. Skip right from the “History” to the “USA Today” sections.

Notes: Please give credit to Duane Johansen for the Ohio State University. Teachers are welcome to alter the presentation in any way they see fit. I made it intentionally comprehensive, and teachers may choose to leave out as much or as little as they’d like while still maintaining the integrity of the lesson. Basically, you don’t need to say all of what’s written. If you do change things, please add “adapted from” to the credit.

Teachers may want to preface the lesson by mentioning that you will be discussing some topics that some may find to be controversial and may want to state that it is presented for educational purposes only.

Appendix A: Suggested Additional Activities:

Research activities: Encourage students to learn more about one of the people or institutions mentioned in the slide show. Students may also want to research another country that is not mentioned in the slide show that has also used the raised fist. Encourage them to find one that uses the fist to represent something that it was not used for in the presentation.

Artistic activity: Have students make an outline of their own fist and write about something that they feel strongly about, something that would make them want to “raise the fist.”

Writing activity: Gwen Berry, like Tommie Smith and John Carlos, caused a controversy when people felt as though she disrespected the flag at the Olympic Trials in 2021. Some people called for Berry to be excluded from the Olympic Games in Tokyo that year. Have students write about their opinion of that. Find more information here:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2021/06/30/gwen-berry-critics-protest-i-never-said-hated-country/7811325002/> and here: <https://www.yahoo.com/now/dan-crenshaw-says-gwen-berry-141949271.html>.