

Discussion Questions

Before you go

1. In her stage directions for *The Niceties*, Eleanor Burgess warns directors and actors against viewing either Janine or Zoe as the “mouthpiece for the truth.” Why do you think she wants them to take this into consideration when developing these characters? How does it impact what you think you may hear discussed in the play?
2. How much do you know about the American Revolution, and many of its central figures? What are your opinions of them? What information do you think might make you reconsider how you view them?
3. Think about a time when you’ve had a discussion about a sensitive topic. How did you approach the conversation? Were you able to appreciate the other person’s point-of-view – even if it was considerably different from yours? If so, how did that affect the exchange? Do you feel like it changed your outlook?
4. Many of the differences in opinion between Zoe and Janine stem from the fact that they belong to different generations. Think of people you know who are significantly older than you, and the ways that you think about complicated topics. Are there similarities? If so, what are they? Where do your views differ?
5. A major point of contention between Janine and Zoe is the use of technology – and, in particular, the internet – as a resource for research. How often do you go online to gather research for a paper or project? How much trust do you place in those sources? Do you verify the information elsewhere? What happens when you encounter information that conflicts with the other research or with the thesis of your paper?
6. Zoe is active in a number of political and social movements on her campus, and views this participation as an important part of who she is as a person. Janine has also participated in protests in the past, but sees them as part of a larger whole and believes that there are many ways to register your opposition aside from marches and rallies. Have you ever taken part in a protest or demonstration? How did it make you feel? Do you believe that your opinions were heard? Do you think the action made a difference?

After the show

1. Have you ever had a disagreement with a teacher? If so, how did you discuss your differences? Were there any similarities to what you saw in the play? What other tactics could Zoe and Janine have used in order to convey their points, while still respecting the point-of-view of the other?
2. Did Janine’s office look like what you expected to see? What was different than your expectations? How might you have designed it differently? Were you able to gather insights into Zoe and Janine from other design elements (lights, sounds, and costumes) of the show? If so, what did you learn about the characters?
3. What do you think of Zoe’s recommendation that Janie take steps to decolonize her syllabus? How might Janine go about making those changes? Have you had a teacher change their course outline based on the suggestions of students? Is it a conversation that you think you could have with your teachers?

4. What do you think about the balance of power between Janine and Zoe? Is Janine right to assume that she knows more than her students? Is Zoe correct in believing that Janine often uses her intelligence to belittle those with opinions different from her own? Can they be, as *The Niceties* scenic designer Mariana Sanchez says, “both right and wrong at the same time?” Reflect on how the power dynamics shift throughout the play, and the impact those shifts have on the conversations.
5. Consider the effects of Zoe’s activism on her health. Are there other ways for her to effectively communicate her beliefs while still maintaining her well-being? What might be the results if she chose to focus on certain aspects of this work as opposed to attempting to attend every protest, demonstration, and march?
6. What do you think of Janine’s argument that a “dark spot on a person’s record does not negate everything they’ve accomplished.” Can you still respect a person who has made some bad decisions but has also done much good? Does one cancel out the other? Why, or why not?