

WEEK 1 TEACHING GUIDE

focus

BIG IDEA

Focus on what God has said.

BIBLE

Matthew 4:1-11,
Psalm 119:9, 33-37

WHAT? *What are we talking about today?*

ACTIVITY | Fast Focus

- Welcome to our new series, *Focus!* For the next few weeks, we're going to be talking about a few important things we should all be focusing on. It might seem simple, but the truth is, focusing isn't that hard — until it is.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your teaching time, print multiple copies of the handout provided in your Week 1 folder and cut it into quarters. To play, give every student a quarter-page handout and set a timer for 30 seconds. On your signal, have everyone carefully tear along the outline of the star using only their hands. The person with the most accurate star wins. If you'd like to play multiple rounds, try playing tournament-style with additional shapes, where students are paired with an opponent each round and only one student from each pair can advance to the next round. Keep playing until you have a winner.*
- Some of you really "tore it up" under pressure, but some of you seem like you struggled to focus.

ACTIVITY | Staring Contest

- For those of you who feel like focus wasn't your problem on that last challenge (maybe you're just bad at tearing paper), you have a chance to redeem yourself.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Split students into pairs and play an upbeat song. When the song begins, students must stare into each other's eyes without blinking. The first person to lose focus and blink loses, while the other gets paired with a new partner. Keep playing until you have a winner.*

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups!*
 - **What's one thing you could focus on for hours?**
 - **When is it most difficult for you to focus? Why do you think that is?**

QUESTION | How do you focus?

- So many things compete for our attention, not just during a staring contest, but in our real lives too. Sometimes there's so much competing for our attention that it can be tough to get anything done.
- Did you know . . .

- There are over 3.2 billion images are shared on the internet every day?
- The average teenager might view between 6,000 to 10,000 ads every day?
- TikTok users spend close to an hour a day watching videos?
- With all of that going on, it's not surprising that many of us struggle to focus. **How do you focus when you need to get something done?**
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** For this question, you'll need a board with sticky notes or index cards and thumb tacks. As students respond to your question, write down any helpful hacks you or students come up with and add them to the board, like:
 - Turning off notifications.
 - Listening to your favorite playlist.
 - Chewing on a handful of Skittles.
 - Setting a timer.
 - Locking yourself in a library.
 - Building a fort in the woods where there's no phone service or Wi-Fi.
- It's a good thing we have so many hacks to work with here because focusing can be a challenge. Sometimes we need all the help we can get, like when we really need to . . .
 - Finish that school project.
 - Pay attention to what our friend is saying.
 - Stop losing our keys.
 - Stay committed to training for that new thing we're learning.
- And for some of us, one of the things we struggle most to focus on are the things that are supposed to help us grow closer to God.

SO WHAT? Why does it matter to God and to us?

STORY | Talk about a time you struggled to focus on the Bible.

- Have you ever struggled to stay focused when you were spending time with God? If you've ever tried reading the Bible or talking to God on your own, I'm guessing the answer is yes.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** Tell a story from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to tell a story) about a time you struggled to focus on the Bible. Share why it was so difficult for you to stay focused on what you were reading or trying to apply, what challenges you faced, and how your inability to focus made you feel about your relationship with God.
- If there's one thing I know, some things require some attention and practice. Like some of the all-time greatest athletes, musicians, or thinkers, who put in days, weeks, months, and years of practice for the thing that mattered most to them, we can grow in our ability to focus on the things that matter too.

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.
 - ★ **What are some ways a lack of focus might make it difficult to grow closer to God?**
 - **Have you ever tried to read the Bible but struggled to focus? What made it so difficult?**

SCRIPTURE | Matthew 4:1-11

- Look, reading and studying the Bible isn't always the easiest thing to focus on. I get it! But why does it matter if we focus on things like the Bible?
 - There's a fascinating story in Scripture that talks about Jesus, someone who was fully God and fully human, needing to focus to survive a big challenge.
 - Even though he had all of the ability in the world, Jesus still experienced the same emotions, thoughts, and feelings that we do. In this moment, Jesus had to choose what to focus on and what to ignore.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Matthew 4:1-11.*
- In this story, Scripture says the devil tries repeatedly to distract Jesus from the mission Jesus had come to earth to accomplish. But instead of letting himself be distracted, Jesus chose to do what would prepare him for the future — and overcome temptation in the present too.
 - This experience occurs before Jesus' preaching ministry began, before he invited the first disciples to follow him, and before he ever healed anyone.
 - It's clear Jesus knew the kind of strength his future would require and how important his focus would be — not just in this moment, but in the moments to come.
 - What's even more incredible is that Jesus was fasting during this exchange. I don't know about you, but when I'm hungry, focusing definitely doesn't come naturally. Jesus' hunger was a temptation that could have easily lured him to lose focus, but Jesus had another way to stick with his fast.
- Jesus fought the temptation to lose focus by doing something simple but so important: in the midst of temptation, he chose to focus on the true things God had said.
 - When the devil questioned his identity as the son of God, Jesus focused on the words he learned from the ancient Scriptures when he was growing up. The devil tried to tempt him with food, but Jesus said God's words were more important than bread.
 - When the devil told him to put his life at risk in order to test God's power, Jesus quoted yet another passage from those ancient Scriptures, telling the devil to stop testing God.
 - When the devil tried to tempt Jesus with power in exchange for worshiping him, Jesus focused on Scripture one more time. He reminded both himself and the devil that only God is meant to be worshiped and served.
- Jesus was in the habit of focusing on God's words, especially when he faced difficulties. But in those moments, Jesus didn't have quick access to the Bible app on his phone. Instead, he stored the truth of God's words in his heart and mind so they'd always be available when he needed them.

SCRIPTURE | Psalm 119:33-37

- Check out how this works in Psalm 119, a famous chapter in the Bible. It's the longest longest chapter in the whole Bible, and it has a lot to say about the value of God's words.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Psalm 119:33-37.*
- This psalm is over 2,000 years old but these folks are basically asking God for the same thing we are. They were asking for the ability to focus.
 - We may not know exactly what the writer was going through when they wrote this, but we know the help they needed is probably the help we need too.
 - This song is written by someone asking God to teach them, give them understanding, direct, refocus, and save them from anything that might tempt them to lose focus.

- The words, "teach" and "give" are asking God for wisdom through the words of Scripture. This person knew how important the words of God are – especially when we are wandering, confused, tempted, or needing wisdom or direction.
- You're probably not in the middle of a forty day fast like Jesus was, but you might be in the middle of a lot of stress or change you're not sure how to manage.
 - When you're not finding any hope, facing stress, hitting an academic hurdle, going through a change in your family, battling for your mental health, or sitting with someone else who is, there is something you can do to find focus in the chaos.
 - The psalmist found direction through God's words. Jesus fought the devil's lies and distractions with God's words. In the same way, you and I can find direction and fight lies and distractions with God's truth too. That's the power of **focusing on what God has said**.

NOW WHAT? *What does God want us to do about it?*

DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion time and save it for small groups! If you have fewer than 15 students, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
 - ✪ **Like Jesus was tempted to lose focus from his mission, what are some things that tempt us to lose focus on God? Are any of those true for you?**
 - **When we focus on God's words, how does it help us grow?**
 - ✪ **Do you have any questions or hesitations about the Bible that make it difficult for you to focus on what it says? If so, what are they and how can we help?**

STORY | **Share a few tips that help you focus on what God has said.**

- In order to focus on what God has said, we may need to build a little bank of words and promises in our memories that we can draw from, like Jesus did. But where do we find them? How do we collect them?
 - **READ GOD'S WORDS:** One way to begin is by starting with the words we find in Scripture. Read them, maybe by reading a book at a time, or following a reading plan, or maybe even starting at the very beginning. The point is to get in the habit of reading what God has said through Scripture, even if it's only a few verses at a time.
 - **LEARN ABOUT GOD'S WORDS:** There are so many ways to continue learning about what God has said besides just reading it on your own. We can also about God's words with others, study what God has said with others, and listen to Scripture taught at church or through videos or podcasts.
 - **MEMORIZE GOD'S WORDS:** Just like Jesus did, we can also commit God's words to memory so we always have quick access to God's truth and promises. It doesn't mean you need to memorize the whole Bible from cover to cover. It just means you might commit to remembering verses that mean something to you or you think could help you in a time of need.
- But how do we find enough focus to actually do those things?
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Refer back to the list you made earlier of tips that help people focus. Recommunicate those same tips in the context of reading and studying Scripture. Then share examples from your own life (or ask a volunteer or student to share examples) of specific tips that have helped you read, study, or memorize Scripture.*

REFLECTION | Center Of Attention

- Let me give us one more habit that can help us focus on our relationships with God by focusing specifically on God's words.
 - Whether you're getting to know God for the first time, rekindling your relationship with God, or wanting to make the relationship stronger, this habit will help you focus on what God has said.
 - There's an ancient habit that has helped people focus on what God has said for centuries. It's a way to make God's words the center of attention in our minds.
 - It's called Lectio Divina, a Latin phrase meaning "divine reading." It may sound super spiritual or complicated at first, but it's not! It's simply the habit of reading the Bible while being open to what God has to say.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your program, print and cut the handouts provided in your Week 1 folder. Place one under each seat, along with a pen. You'll also want to choose a passage of Scripture to practice Lectio Divina with. We recommend Psalm 119:33-37, but you can use any passage you'd like. You may want to put the verses you choose on a slide so students can read along. When you're ready, guide students through the four steps of Lectio Divina while you play some soft music. Encourage them to write down the steps:*
 1. **READ:** *Read the passage out loud to your students slowly. Read it a second time. Then read it a third time.*
 2. **MEDITATE:** *Encourage your students to write down any words or phrases that captured their attention. Why do they think these words or phrases stood out to them? Invite them to write or circle these words or phrases and journal any thoughts if they'd like.*
 3. **PRAY:** *Next, encourage your students to talk to God. While you can probably only have students pray silently at their seats, let them know prayer can happen through others expressions too, like speaking, writing, dancing, exercising, and drawing.*
 4. **CONTEMPLATE:** *Finally, it's time to simply listen. Ask your students to sit quietly and give God another chance to speak to them.*

DISCUSSION

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 - ✪ **What are some things that might make reading or studying the Bible easier for you?**
 - **Read Psalm 119:9. If you wanted to start memorizing Scripture, where would you start? How would you choose a verse? How would you memorize it?**
 - **This week, what's one way you're going to practice focusing on what God has said?**

RESPONSE | The Focus Journal

- We're all learning to focus, right? None of us have mastered the habit of spending time with God. Yet, we make little steps every day. One of those steps is simply saying "yes" to a little bit of focus.
- For the next four weeks, we've created a tool that's going to help you focus on your relationship with God in some new (or newly focused) ways.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Before your teaching time, prepare copies of The Focus Journal for each of your students. The instructions and files can be found in the Spring Discipleship section of your curriculum dashboard. Place one journal under each seat, along with a pen, and have a table filled with additional markers, pens, crayons, and colored pencils nearby. Invite students to open their journals to the first page, which prompts them to fill the page with the word "yes" in response to the question, "Are you ready to give God your focus?" While students write, play a song like ["We Say Yes," by SEU Worship](#) as a teaching tool, but make sure you have purchased any licenses required to do so. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)*
- If you decide to say "yes" to focusing on your relationship with God this month (starting with focusing on God's words), I can't wait to see how God takes what's been blurry in your life and makes them clear. That's the power of **focusing on what God has said.**

WEEK 1

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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It's not easy to stay focused. Especially these days, when we're connected to a never-ending stream of new notifications, ads, messages, videos, posts, and entertainment, it makes sense if we feel a little distracted sometimes. Maybe you've struggled recently to stay focused on your homework, or on the story your friend was telling you, or on the movie you were watching — but have you ever struggled to stay focused when you were spending time with God? In this four-week series, we're going to get honest about how difficult it can be to stay focused when we're trying to pray, read the Bible, or grow in our faith. Each week, we'll explore passages from Psalms and the Gospels as we challenge ourselves to focus on practicing four spiritual disciplines that can help us grow. Together, we'll try focusing on **what God has said**, on **giving something up**, on **talking to God**, and on **rest**.

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QUESTIONS

- What's one thing you could focus on for hours?
- When is it most difficult for you to focus? Why do you think that is?
- What are some ways a lack of focus might make it difficult to grow closer to God?
- Have you ever tried to read the Bible but struggled to focus? What made it so difficult?
- Like Jesus was tempted to lose focus from his mission, what are some things that tempt us to lose focus on God? Are any of those true for you?
- When we focus on God's words, how does it help us grow?
- Do you have any questions or hesitations about the Bible that make it difficult for you to focus on what it says? If so, what are they and how can we help?
- What are some things that might make reading or studying the Bible easier for you?
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Share your habit stacks with each other! See if anyone has identified a habit stack that would be helpful to someone else in the group.

WEEK 1

DISCUSSION GUIDE for middle schoolers

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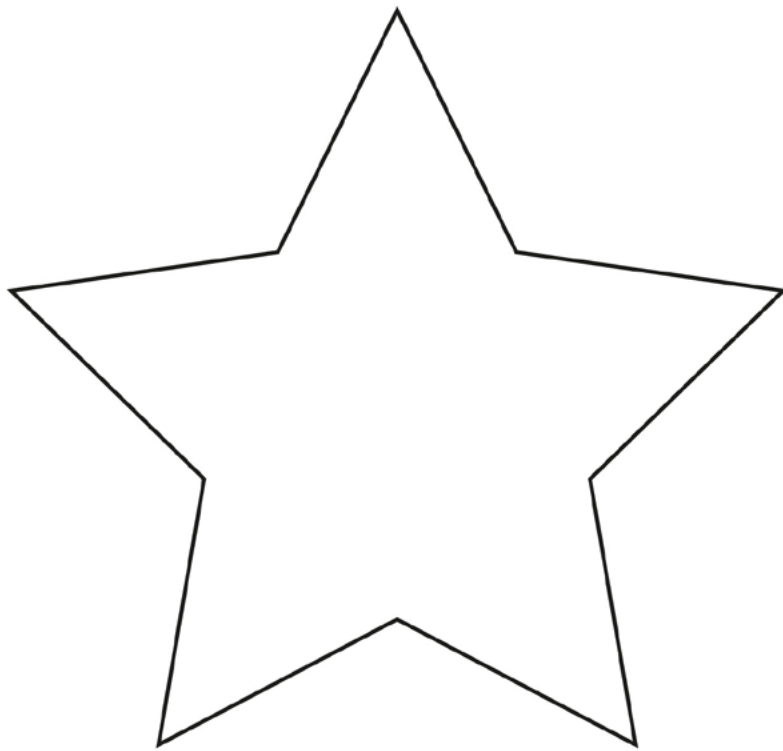
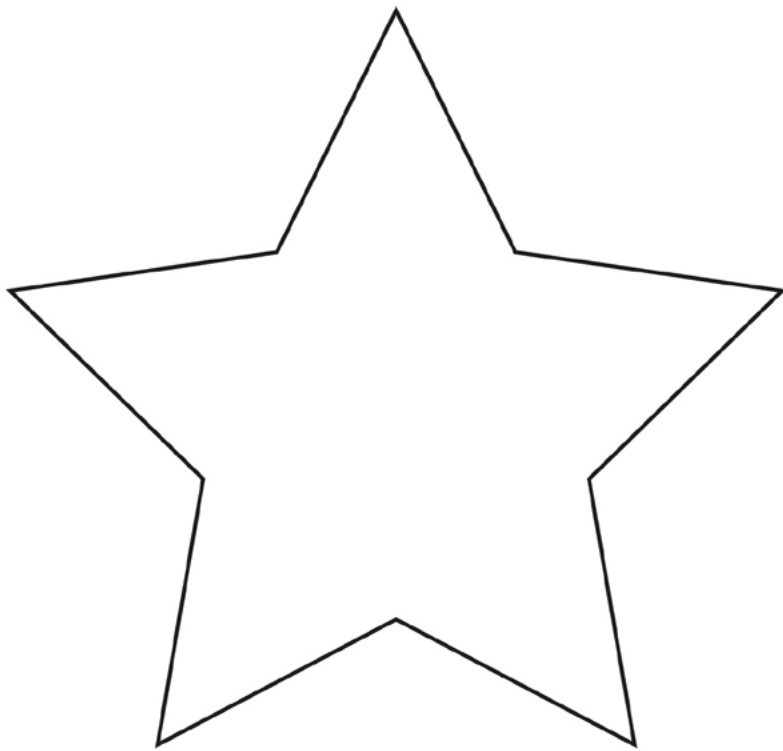
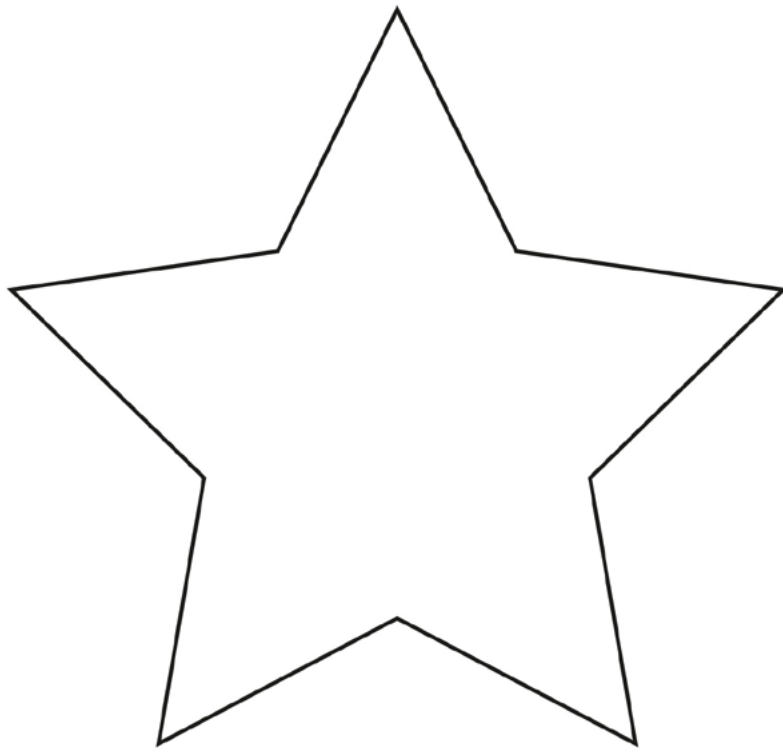
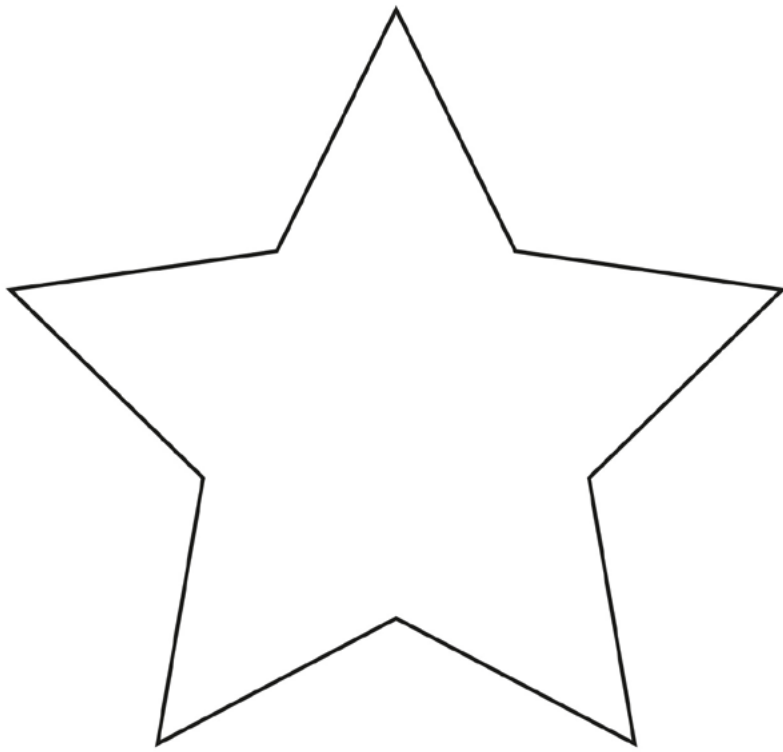
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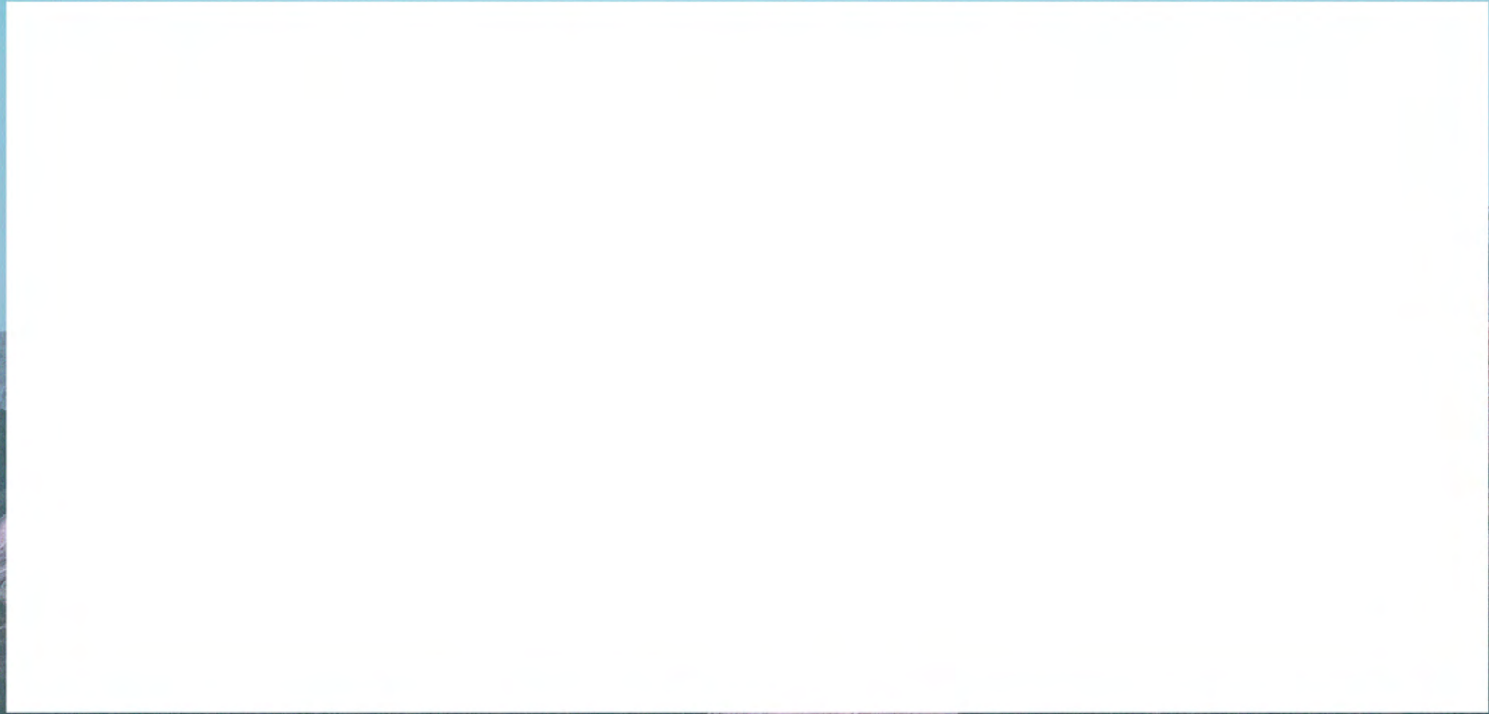


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