

HOW TO WRITE A RESPONSE PAPER

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A response paper is a very particular kind of written assignment. I know that for many of you, this is the first effort into this particular genre of writing. So, let us first begin by explaining what a response paper is *not*. It is not a summary, so do not spend too much time going over the article. Sure, you will still need to explain what the article was about and provide some general ideas about the topic(s) covered in the article. After all, you cannot assume that the readership has read the article at length. Devote a few sentences early in the introductory paragraph to summarize the main ideas. Then, devote the remainder of the paper to *responding* to the paper.

A response requires that you take a stand about what you read. Do not be afraid to be explicit whether you liked, did not like, or plain *hated* it (and believe me, sooner or later you may hate one of them, for very different reasons). Those initial feelings are important. They showed you paid attention to the ideas in the paper. Nevertheless, do not spend the rest of the paper simply praising or bashing the paper. A good response will look past that initial reaction (which is very fair, by the way, and I still want to learn about it) and explore good points and questionable issues.

One important thing to bear in mind is not picking too many issues. You only have two to three pages for this task, so use those pages wisely. It is best to discuss two or three salient ideas that caught your eye in sufficient detail than try to talk about everything in just one or two sentences. Readers are more interested in the *quality* of your ideas than on the *quantity* of subjects you discussed.

As you discuss the issues in the text, you will find that some ideas from the text really resonate with your experiences. Part of academic writing conventions is supporting your ideas with portions (quotes) of the text. However, I caution you not to use quotes that are too long. Use quotes only if they are very *compelling* and not too long. Again, remember that you only have two to three pages. If necessary, I would rather paraphrase the idea in a short sentence and make reference to the page number than read half a paragraph of quotations.

Part of taking a stand is placing yourself within the response. Responses are very personal in nature. You all react to the texts in different ways and bring a diversity of experiences to the table. You have been in school yourselves at different levels, whereas some have already had forays into teaching. You also have relatives and friends in school as teachers and students. All these things and many more should and will come into play as you relate the text to your own lives. That makes part of a response. I love to hear those stories and I truly respect it when you share some more intimate ones in your responses (and believe me, I have heard very compelling stories when students in my education courses have responded to articles!).

At this point, I want to stop for a second and talk to the teachers who might read a student's response paper:

Dear teachers, make sure you read the papers *very thoroughly*. Check for grammar and punctuation and correct it. Devote your time to reading the papers and give feedback. Make feedback a teachable moment for you and your students: Tell your students to see feedback as what it really is: An opportunity to *improve*. As a writer, I know that feedback is what has helped me improve.

Although you will probably grade the papers please remember that there is in fact a deeper purpose to your thorough feedback. A response (as Rosenblatt and others have argued) is actually a *dialog* and a *transaction* between you and the reading (going back to Bakhtin and Dewey). As a teacher, you want to participate in this dialog. Marginal notes are, then, a teacher's response to the students' responses. When you write your notes, raise questions or counterpoints, suggest issues you would want students to tackle in future response papers. Feel free to agree and disagree with your students' opinions. But, make it clear that your disagreement will never mean that you do not *respect* your students' opinions. Use the responses as another way to learn about your students' experiences as learners and (in the context of a preservice teacher education program, as is my case), future teachers. In the case of the teachers, the responses may very well open a window to your classrooms. One can learn so much about teachers and students, what classrooms look like and what teachers do with every reading

Author's Note:

This is the third version of this handout. I wrote the first version for the course EDPR250: School and Community Experiences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The second version was for the course Academic Reading and Writing at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana in Medellín, Colombia. While all ideas in this paper are my original thoughts, I want to thank Dr. Karla Möller at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who taught me about response papers and, through her teachings, helped me build the conceptual background for this handout.