

Tips on Writing a Good Response Paper

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The attached example response paper shows just one way of doing a response paper. My approach in this example was to take my own personal experience of having different ideas about what technology means to tie the readings together and pose one big question. Other approaches would be just as good, or even better. For instance, I could have agreed with one author over another (e.g., "I think Winner is right that technologies can have politics whether people use them or not, while Cowan is wrong to state that technologies have no politics until they are put into use within systems, for the following reasons [x,y,z]"). I could have critiqued the standpoint of the authors (e.g., "It seems that Winner is too pessimistic about the potential for technological change to bring beneficial social change. MacKenzie's idea of 'negotiation' is more hopeful, implying that ordinary people can direct technological change to fight entrenched sources of power"). I could have pointed out inconsistencies in the material (e.g., "All the authors take pains to define 'technology,' but when they use terms like 'large-scale' or 'nature,' they are much more lax"). Any approach you wish to take is fine, as long as it demonstrates your comprehension of the material and your ability to think critically about it, and takes up 1 to 2 pages of double-spaced, 12pt text. Good response papers will help you become a better reader and writer, and they will also help make discussions lively and focused. Since you're asking the questions, we'll be talking about what *you* think is most interesting in the course materials.

To write a really good response paper, keep in mind the following:

- When you're doing the reading, take notes. Highlighting is NOT a good way to take notes. You should write, on a separate piece of paper, paraphrases of the author's key arguments as well as your own thoughts about the reading. These notes will not only help you write good responses, but will *really* help you with the final exam. (Trust me on this one.)
- Don't waste space summarizing the authors' arguments. It is very important that you demonstrate that you understand what the author is trying to communicate, but you can do this very briefly. The most important part of a response paper is your *response*—that is, what did *you* think of these readings? What did you find interesting, wrong-headed, surprising, or thought-provoking about the readings?
- Be specific. Here's a bad sentence: "One of the authors thinks that the meaning of technology is socially constructed." Here's a good sentence: "Donald MacKenzie argues that people have different ideas about what is valuable about particular technologies like supercomputers."
- Feel free to include personal experiences, but only if they are relevant to the readings. You might have had a wonderful time on your trip to New Zealand over winter break, but if you cannot connect that experience to the coursework in a meaningful way, it doesn't belong in your response paper. If it does, though, go for it!
- Ask questions, even if you don't know the answers!!! Something in the readings that does not make sense to you may not make sense to anyone else either. If you put the question in your response, we can have a good discussion about it in class.
- Be creative! This may be the only class you have this semester where you get the chance to think about things you've never thought about before. Let your mind stretch itself out, and writing will be easy and fun for you.