

Understanding Response Papers¹

Definition

A response paper communicates your intellectual reactions to an idea, situation, or specific materials like books, articles and papers. Much like a book review, the response paper usually provides your overall point of view, position, and concerns of the material read.

Steps to write a good response paper

Writing good response papers is more demanding than it might appear at first. You need not only to read the text, but understand it and express an opinion about it. You must allow yourself enough time to be clear about what each text says and how the texts all relate to one another. In other words, response papers require you to synthesize the intellectual work of others—that is, bring it together into an integrated whole. In preparing to write response papers, therefore, it is crucial that you allow yourself not just enough time to do the readings but enough to digest what you have read and to put the results together into a unified account.

1. As you read, highlight the most important points discussed in the article and think whether or not you agree with them.
2. Think of the importance of the article. Why would it be important (or irrelevant) for other people to read this article? Who should read it? What are its implications for the subject at hand?
3. Because you cannot respond to every idea in the book/paper, you will have to be selective and choose the most important and most interesting ideas to which you will respond.
4. In the process of writing your response paper, you should argue convincingly whether or not the article:
 - a) has a clear central claim.
 - b) is good enough to be thoroughly analyzed.
 - c) lacks coherence or is ambiguous.
 - d) is simplistic or fails to cover significant issues or questions, thus is irrelevant.
 - e) is based on strong assumptions and/or does not present persuasive evidence to support the main assumption(s) or argument.
 - f) is contradicted by other authors' theories or your own.
5. Response papers should be written using the standards for any academic paper (i.e., excellent spelling and grammar, special attention to quotations and citations, double spacing, standard one-inch margins, and legible font size).
6. Do not just summarize the text(s). You are supposed to be reacting or responding to them, not repeating what they say. If there is no analysis involved, then you have not responded, only regurgitated.
7. If there are things in the text that you do not understand, do not try to gloss over them. Try to find out what the text means. If you still cannot make sense of an argument in a text, then it may be the case that the argument does not, in fact, make sense. If that is the case, point it out in your paper.

Structure of a response paper

¹ This text has excerpts from materials prepared by the Duke University Writing Studio and the University of South Dakota Academic Advising Center.

1. A major theme should be introduced in the first paragraph of the response paper and should help to organize and unify your paper. *Do not just respond to the issues discussed in the paper's introduction and conclusion. Often times, a student will use this as a rather transparent strategy to avoid reading the paper. Avoid the appearance of negligence by paying special attention to overarching themes as well as specifics.* Many times readers become more interested in a response paper when the author's intellectual reaction is clearly stated in the introductory paragraph.
2. In the following paragraphs (i.e., the body of your response paper), you should discuss the issues where you agree or disagree with the author(s), explain your position, evaluate the evidence the author(s) provides/provide, and give examples. Be specific and detailed. The evidence should be connected to your major theme. If you are responding to multiple articles, you may compare and contrast the authors based on your major theme. Be sure to cite the page when you are using specific ideas or quotes. Your thoughts or beliefs, should you decide to include them in your discussion, must be supported by facts and logic. If you cannot back up a statement with facts and logic, leave the statement out of the paper. Do your best to characterize the text's arguments fairly and accurately. Consider both sides of issues at stake. If the author(s) is (are) on one side of an issue, consider the other side. If the author(s) offers (offer) both sides of an issue, consider where agreements and disagreements lie and what each side's strengths and weaknesses are. Keep an eye out for omissions, and raise counterarguments when you detect arguments that are not well-supported.
3. You should conclude your response paper by summarizing your reaction and setting out your ideas about the significance of the article, as well as its implications, and perhaps who else should be reading it.

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