

Definition of Genre

In a reaction or response paper, writers respond to one or more texts they have read. A popular assignment with instructors in the social sciences and humanities, such papers require students to understand each text individually and evaluate how well each accomplishes its own objectives. If you are responding to multiple texts, you must also discover how the texts relate to one another. (If responding to just one text, you might need to situate it within the larger context of class discussions, readings, etc., depending on the prompt.) A reaction paper may include a discussion of interesting questions that the readings raise for the student, but such a discussion is not sufficient by itself.

Writing good response papers is more demanding than it might appear at first. It is not simply a matter of reading the text, understanding it, and expressing 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.

Questions to Ask

Consider texts individually:

- What is the main problem or issue that the author is addressing?
- What is the author's central claim, argument, or point?
- What assumptions does the author make?
- What evidence does the author present?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the text?
- What are possible counterarguments to the text's claims?
- Why are the problem(s) and the argument(s) interesting or important?

Consider texts collectively:

- How do they relate to one another? Do the authors agree? Disagree? Address different aspects of an issue? Formulate a problem in different ways?

- In what way (if any) does the information or argument of one text strengthen or weaken the argument of others? Does integrating the claims in two or more of the texts advance your understanding of a larger issue?

Actions to Take

- Pay attention to the instructions your instructor provides for the assignment. He or she may have specific expectations, which you should be careful to take into account. The prompt may also give you clues that will help you to understand what you should be getting out of the texts.
- Explain the key terms, main arguments, and assumptions of each text.
- Do your best to characterize each text's arguments fairly and accurately.
- Evaluate the evidence that each text presents: point out strengths and weaknesses, both internal to the text and in relation to the others. For example, if one text makes an argument based on an assumption that another text either confirms or refutes, then you can use the latter text to evaluate the plausibility of the claim made by the former.
- Explain how the texts relate to and “speak” to one another. Synthesize them if you can, and if you cannot, explain what the barriers preventing such a synthesis are.
- Consider both sides of issues at stake. If all the texts are on one side of an issue, consider the other side. If the texts fall on both sides of an issue, consider where agreements and disagreements lie and what each side’s strengths and weaknesses are.
- Include your own voice by weighing arguments, evaluating evidence, and raising critical questions. If there seems to be something important that none of the authors addresses, point it out and state what you think its significance is. Try to be as specific as possible.
- Be careful to do all parts of the assignment. Accord each text the weight it deserves. Don’t forget to synthesize your account by showing how the texts relate to one another. The authors are in a figurative, if not literal, “conversation” with one another, and you must be able to recognize and explain what is going on in that conversation.
- Keep an eye out for authors’ omissions, and raise counterarguments when you detect authors’ arguments are weak.

Actions *Not* to Take

- Do not wait too long to start writing. Remember that reading and understanding the texts are only the first steps toward putting the paper together.
- Do not write an autobiographical essay. Reaction/response papers are not about how you feel—even how you feel about the texts. They are not simply a venue for you to say whether you like or dislike the texts. Give praise or blame where you think it is due, but avoid commendation or condemnation for its own sake.

- Do not just summarize the texts. You are supposed to be *reacting* or *responding to* them, not simply repeating what they say. If there is no analysis involved, then you have not responded, only regurgitated.
- If there are things in the text that you don't understand, do not try to gloss over them. Try to find out what the text means. Ask questions of your instructor. 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's the case, point it out in your paper.

Helpful Links

<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/reaction.html>

Additional tips on writing response papers from the Literacy Education Online.

<http://www.longwood.edu/staff/mcgeecw/sampleresponsepapers.htm>

An instructor of Longwood University provides a collection of strong response papers from students.