

5 Critical Response Papers

wgs 352 / spring 2016 / university of oregon / chang



The central intellectual, imaginative, and academic activity of this class is reading and writing analytically, rhetorically, critically. You will write up to 10 short, critical response papers, of which the best 5 will be counted toward your grade. These single-spaced, one-page writings serve as close readings of, analyses of, and articulations of the texts and connections you see, read, and talk about in class. These responses are more than just summaries or personal reactions and will be graded on clarity, focus, coherence, critique, argument, support, and your ability to concisely formulate a precise claim.

Goals and Outcomes

Short response papers are a common genre, a common practice across many different disciplines – writing an abstract, an annotated bibliography entry, a project proposal, an academic book review, a business memo – and share similar conventions: **exigence, concision, precision, and analysis**. In other words, response papers ask a single question, make a single provocation, articulate a single intervention (into or about a text or matter) and provide a well-thought out answer. Since you only have about 600-700 words, you must have a very clear goal in mind, a narrow argument, and telling detail and evidence. **Every word and idea must do work**; there is little room for digression or over-generalization. Do not let the brevity fool you. It's very easy to write a short paper full of sound and fury signifying nothing; it's much harder to write a short paper that makes a substantive claim and analysis.

For these short response papers, you will focus on the literary and narrative text for the week, using the scholarly readings to help you generate a claim and analysis. Close read the texts (preferably a couple of times). Think about the week's class discussions. If needed and relevant, do a little outside research. Then identify one or two passages, points, questions, confusions, connections that catch your attention, your curiosity—these places, moments, and particulars are the starting points of a good response paper. Select one of these starting points to generate a more complex argument about the episode and the reading. Consider the following questions (not as a laundry list to answer, but as a way to brainstorm and formulate a claim):

- What question does the text leave you asking? Your claim will be the answer that critical question.
- How does the text demonstrate or complicate the goals of the class?
- What connection between text and scholarly essay can you make? How might you use one of the framing theoretical texts as a way to close read or analyze a critical passage or concern in the week's text?
- How might the text push, expand, or focus your understanding of a key concept, definition, theory, practice?
- Finally, for all of the above, why is that important? What is the analytical, rhetorical, or literary stake?

Guidelines and Due Dates

Format: formal, academic paper, response paper formatting
1 page only, typed, no title page, single-spaced, block format or standard paragraphing, proper heading, neatly printed
MLA citation and documentation, bibliography (for outside sources) if necessary
see the course policies for response paper formatting guidelines

Due: at the end of each week by **Saturday by 12 NOON**
e-submit through Canvas: <https://canvas.uoregon.edu/courses/60834/assignments>

Response Paper Dos and Don'ts

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- 1. Begin *in media res*.** Dispense with a formal, “five-paragraph” variety introduction. Get to your argument right away, then support it. Your first paragraph will begin right away with your overall point and claim. Be specific. Develop your exigence for the ‘response’ from the get go. Be immediate. Your claim will identify a single interrogation, point of entry, or analytical desire, and the rest of your paper will expand, explicate, critique, and articulate it.
- 2. Keep your eyes on the prize.** Your essay should begin with a focused claim and then develop equally focused support, analysis, and discussion. Topic sentences and subclaims should support the overall claim. Evidence, quotes, and commentary should support subclaims. Do not drift away from your main idea, wax too philosophical or esoteric, over-generalize, or resort to banal platitudes, criticisms, or opinions. Organization is key to shaping and maintaining a useful, tasty, specific, and neat paper.
- 3. Between a rock and a hard place.** One of the challenges of writing a response paper is keeping things short and sweet and making an interesting and useful argument or analysis. By definition, response papers should be very focused, very specific, and very narrow in claim, scope, evidence, concern, analysis, and conclusion. Again, develop your paper around only one main idea or one critical question.
- 4. It's all about your ideas.** Response papers are a window into your ideas, analytical processes, reading practices, reactions, and critical thinking—tidied up and nicely framed, of course. It is your moment to shine, to ask a sharp question and make a witty, relevant, well-conceived, and well-timed response. Make sure that from your first sentence to your last, it is your argument and analysis that is being heard and developed. Be sparing and strategic with quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing. Introduce quotes and ideas from the text. Quotes should be brief and illustrative and properly cited. Then provide your analysis, commentary, why the evidence is important. Support should be just *that* and should not supplant your writing.
- 5. It's not all about you.** The corollary to the last piece of advice is that your response paper should not be simply your own personal opinion. A response paper is not a simple reaction to the question, “How does the text make you feel?” Your response paper must be more than your visceral disagreement with or vituperation of the text. Likewise, it must be more than just an empty agreement with or celebration of the text. And your response paper must be more than just your summary or retelling of the text. In other words, your reactions and opinions matter, of course, but they must be clothed in your best fitting, most appropriate, and well-tailored argument and analytical and academic writing.
- 6. The bigger picture.** You might find it useful to read the introductions provided with a text, to do a little bit of outside research, to historicize or contextualize the text, to find a current, relevant article, to investigate other people's responses to the text. Though not necessary to write a response paper, this additional background information and material may help narrow, clarify, and support your argument (and not serve as an excuse or unexamined complication to broaden or fill your paper).
- 7. Get in and get out (but with a flourish).** As with the introduction, your response paper need not end with a formal, generalized conclusion. You might not reach a hard-and-fast conclusion at all. Rather, you should articulate the stakes of your argument or leave the reader with a final, specific provocation or end by establishing connections to other readings or concerns of the class. You might see your response paper as the proposal for a larger paper or project and your conclusion would be a further development or refinement of your initial argument.
- 8. Take risks.** Just because a response paper is a formal academic assignment, it does not mean that you cannot be experimental or challenging or creative. Response papers are opportunities for you to expand and explore your intellectual comfort zones and to try to formulate arguments that are a little bit ambitious, a little bit of a stretch, a little bit out-of-the-box. Of course, this isn't license for wild speculation, pure supposition, or unfounded claims. Rather, you can use the space of the response paper to pursue a line of inquiry new to you, to draw surprising connections, and to offer a further alternative or counter perspective.