

Understanding and Re-Inventing Response Papers at Lake Forest College

Peter Elbow originally developed the concept of the response paper in order to move away from criterion-based forms of response, which focused on assessing analytical prowess and structural cohesion. In response papers, students would record their personal and emotional reactions to the text and interpret it based on their life experiences (reader-based response).

While some response papers at LFC will ask students to record their emotional response to a text, the most common format for a response paper is more a bite-size version of the academic essay. This particular kind of response paper will prompt students to include a brief **summary** of the text, a **focused analysis**, and, finally, an **interpretation or concluding statement** based on that analysis. The main goal of this response paper, then, is to get students to place the text within the broader analytical and theoretical conversation of the course and the text itself.

Because summary, analysis, and interpretation are mutable concepts in writing, it might be helpful to provide your students with a definition to guide their response. Here are basic definitions:

- **Summary:** a good summary should include key points and the author's position on the text. Summaries should not include your opinion or views on the text or topic; however, the key to a good summary is focus.
- **Analysis:** analyzing involves establishing connections between constituent pieces of the text and explaining how these connections result in surprising or contradictory ideas that had been previously implied and perhaps underdeveloped.
- **Interpretation:** an interpretation uses the ideas developed in the analysis to arrive at conclusions or questions that challenge, reinterpret, or probe into the text in a way not immediately suggested by the text itself.

Re-inventing the Response Paper

If you don't want students to be bound by structural or argumentative concerns but still want to avoid personal responses, think about using the following assignments to re-focus the traditional response paper.

- Use **microthemes**. Microthemes are short (1-2 pages) pieces of writing in which students delve into central concepts and theories within the course. Examples include defining key theories, identifying and analyzing examples, synthesizing critical perspectives, and exploring dilemmas or contradictions. Microthemes can help your students develop focused perspectives on the foundations of the discipline.
- Use **lenses**. A lens is a piece of writing that encourages students to interpret and analyze readings from different perspectives. Assign your students a framework for analysis ("you

are a Marxist”) and a text (“you have just watched an episode of *30 Rock*”) to examine. Focus on how the text can be read differently depending on the lens.

- Use **letters/editorials**. In these formats, students can write from different perspectives (by impersonating a key figure or perspective) and for different purposes (different people and publications). Vary these categories to show students how their “writing voice” should change depending on genre.
- Use **focus essays**. These are short (500-word) pieces aimed at providing students with a focal point (or having them choose one) from which to examine a particular text. Ideally, all students should have a different focal point (i.e. a character, setting, word, idea, example, etc.) and should carry out a close reading of the text based on that focal point. In class, these can be used to examine the text and suggest its fluidity.

Tips on Assigning Response Papers

- Provide your students with a (short) written assignment or write it on the blackboard for them to copy.

Why?

The chance of students forgetting, misinterpreting, or losing track of the assignment increases when there is no written record of it.

- Situate the response paper within the broader theoretical and analytical conversation that has taken place in the classroom.

Why?

This will force students to think about the implications of their response paper in terms of the discipline and dispel any ideas about it being “busy work.”

- Unless it is the express purpose of the assignment, avoid asking solely for personal thoughts or first reflections.

Why?

Too often, students are tempted to record their first impressions about a text and simply use those as the bulk of their response papers, thus encouraging swift judgement rather than careful analysis.

- Stress the need for a sound structure and, when relevant, argument and citation.

Why?

Students should use response papers to hone their skills for longer papers. By making the response paper a bite-size academic essay, students will be practicing argument, concision, and structure at a more manageable level.

Response Paper Assignment Examples

The following assignments from Professor Richard Mallette's courses are an example of how you can use very brief response papers (these are 1-2page) to develop analytical and structural skills.

- Please read Book One of *Paradise Lost*. Consider Satan. How does Milton present him? As a hero? How does Satan think of himself? Provide evidence from the text for your positions, please.
- Please read *Hamlet*, act one. We find two families, the Hamlet family and the Polonius family. How does the text present relations between the generations in each family? Compare and contrast. Cite evidence from the text for your claims, please.
- Consider act five of *Hamlet*, and examine the hero. Many find that he has changed while he's been absent. Identify the changes you see in Hamlet upon his return to Denmark. Be sure to cite evidence from the text, please.