Response Paper

This packet details the steps necessary to produce a response paper that may be required for work in various disciplines, including literature, history and the humanities. This packet is not intended to replace instructor guidelines and should not be used in that manner. The packet’s intended use is as a supplement to classroom instruction in creating an effective response paper. Therefore, it contains only general information that must be tailored to fit specific guidelines as required by your discipline and by your instructor.

This packet is subdivided into five sections:

I. General Information
   States what a response paper is and what purpose it serves.

II. Process
   Gives step-by-step instructions on how to get started on your response paper.

III. Format
   Gives a description of the format of a typical response paper.

IV. Checklist
   Allows you to review your completed response paper and assure that it follows all necessary guidelines.

V. Resources
   A list of helpful resources used to compile this packet is provided so that you may obtain further information on the topic.

★ General Information ★

Definition: A response paper is an essay that conveys a student’s response to one specific aspect in a text that he/she has read. Most often a response paper is written in response to a work of literature. Research is not typically done for this type of paper, and it is usually less than four pages in length.

In a response paper, a text is interpreted and analyzed in a manner that is as concise as possible. The response paper has a point or thesis that focuses on a single idea or aspect of the work. Arguments are used to justify that point, and these arguments are typically supported with evidence from the primary text in the form of paraphrase, summary and direct quotations. When information from the primary text is used, the page number is cited, MLA style, within the paper, but a works cited page is usually unnecessary since the paper’s information is all from the same source. However, if other writers’ points of view are included in the paper for support or refutation, then a works cited page must be included. Always check with your instructor.
Purpose: The response paper shows that a student is able to critically analyze a work instead of just reading it and composing a restatement or summary. A response paper requires the student to explore a work while arguing to validate his/her response.

REVIEW
1. What is the purpose of a response paper?

★ Process ★

1. Read the work. Highlight and take marginal notes when necessary. Be sure to record both your emotional and intellectual responses to the piece.

2. Establish a clear understanding of the work. What were the main conflicts in the work? What were the actions and/or feelings of the main characters? How did the main characters change during the course of the work? Why did they change?

3. Brainstorm to decide what point you will focus on in your response. There are several ways to do this:
   • Examine your notes
   • Use pro-con column analysis
   • Record new ideas
   • Raise and answer questions
According to E.V. Roberts (1995), the previous suggestions will help you to trace patterns that develop in the brainstorming process.

4. After brainstorming, choose your area of focus. The section below in italics provides some suggestions for focusing a response paper in a literature course.

Suggestions for Focusing a Topic in Literature
Listed below are suggestions for focusing a topic in a literature-based response paper. Note that these suggestions typically will not be used in isolation; sometimes they may overlap. For example, if you are writing a character analysis of Jane in “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, you may also use some elements of setting, such as the use of the color yellow throughout the story, to develop your analysis. Just remember that the following suggestions are not necessarily meant to function independently – you may choose to focus on one of them, but you will probably use others to support your main focus in the response paper.

• Plot
• Character Analysis
• Setting - place, objects and culture
• Imagery - the work’s link to senses
• Use of symbolism and allegory

• Structure
• Point of View or Stance
• Development of Theme
• Use of metaphor and simile
• Writer’s tone

5. Once you have chosen a focus, develop a thesis around it. Check your thesis to make sure that it is debatable and supportable with evidence from the text.

6. Organize an outline of the paper into three parts: an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

7. Refer back to the notes that you made in the text.

8. Use paraphrase, summary and direct quotations from the text to support your response. They should not occur frequently enough to become a distraction.
Consider this rule of thumb: The final draft should consist of no more than 1/10th borrowed material.

9. Develop a conclusion that reemphasizes your thesis/response to the work.

10. Write the final draft of the response paper.

11. Check over the final draft for grammar and punctuation

12. Use the checklist provided here to make sure that all main parts of the response paper are logically covered.

REVIEW
1. What do you consider to be the most crucial step(s) in the process of writing your response paper? Why? Justify your response(s).

★ Format ★

I. Introduction is usually brief and composed of about 2 sentences. Remember, the response paper is a relatively short assignment.

   a. State the title and author of the work within the text.
   b. Develop the problem/thesis statement around your topic.

II. Body supports the thesis with 2 or 3 pieces of evidence.

   a. Write one to two paragraphs about each piece of evidence you have pulled to support your argument.
   b. Use examples from the text (i.e. paraphrase, summary, quotations) to support each piece of evidence.

III. Brief conclusion reminds the reader of the point you are trying to establish.

   a. Restate the thesis.
   b. Explain the importance of the thesis to the reader.

REVIEW
1. How will you organize the body of your response paper? Construct a brief outline below.

★ A Response Paper Checklist: ★
Did I . . . . . ?

- State my claim or argument clearly
- Provide convincing arguments to support my thesis
- Include evidence from the text to support my arguments
Avoid giving a retelling or summary of the story

Recognize and consider opposing arguments

Use direct quotations in less than 1/10th of the paper

Apply the correct format for block quotations (if needed)

Lead into paraphrase, summary and quotes effectively

Use present tense throughout the paper

Incorporate transitions between new ideas and new paragraphs

Mention the author’s full name initially, but subsequently use his/her last name

Check for grammar and punctuation errors

Resources


*In traditional APA style, this section would be entitled “References” and would be listed on a separate page double-spaced. Due to space constraints in this packet, it has been formatted differently.

Additional Information A response paper may written about any work of literature, including poetry, prose (novel, essay, short story) or drama. Visit the Texas A&M University Writing Center Website for specific information on analyzing each type of work:

- Poetry http://uwc.tamu.edu/handouts/poetry.html
- Prose http://uwc.tamu.edu/handouts/prose.html
- Plays http://uwc.tamu.edu/handouts/plays.html

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