How to Write a Response Paper

Being a good reader means being an active reader. The intellectual purpose of the response paper (“RP”) is twofold: to give you a start in thinking in a focused manner about the material; and to give me a chance to register your impressions and adjust accordingly. The RP will train you in noticing, specificity, and formulating a grounded engagement with a literary text.

An RP is a single-spaced, substantive 600-word coherent set of paragraphs formulated around either a scene or pattern that is interesting and perhaps important; or a specific question having to do with the text under discussion the day the RP is due. Regard it as a mini-paper, but one for which you do not need a analytic critical thesis. You will however need a clear topic.

You may formulate your response paper (1) as a question, one which you begin to consider how to answer, or explain why the question emerges as an important one. Asking good questions is a skill that will serve you well. You could also (2) gather instances of a repeated term or image from across the text, and consider why several of them matter, or how they differ.

There is no single formula for a good RP and accordingly I do not supply templates. I don’t want you to sound like someone else.

Take for granted that the reader has read the book. Plot summary is a waste of time and space, and more importantly it often substitutes for clearly stating your critical point.

* + RP’s require focus. Specificity and reference to the text directly is key. Avoid questions like “What is the author's intention in using X?"; "What is the deeper meaning of Y?": they’re too big, and there’s no such thing as deeper meaning.
  + Think concretely, and **stay focused on what the text tells you, not what your impressions are at a general or sweeping level.** "How is race presented in this novel?" is impossible to answer in a page (and difficult in a 400-page book). Do ask, "In the scene in which Marlow meets the Accountant, is the word "white" used as a racial term, or a chromatic one?" That focuses on a scene, on page 123; and a word: “white.”
* Use quotations from the text, cited parenthetically with page number, like “this” (p. 42), to reference or explain your question, and your answer or tentative answers to it; or to explain why the question is an important one. The point is to keep you "close" to the text; don't speculate or engage in generalizations. Occasionally, in order to open discussion, you may be asked to present (verbally) your response paper to the class. If your RP does not have regular quotations from the text, you are making sweeping generalizations, and as an intellectual habit this is the path to being proven wrong. The text is the most recurrent source of reference for this class, not “our” sense of what constitutes truth.
  + The question you engage should not be answered readily by a simple yes or no; and indeed you are relieved of the burden of answering the question definitively—but you should begin to answer the question.
  + Do not ask a question that cannot be answered, or can be answered in so general a way that it does not bear directly on the text under discussion. For example, a school room scene in a novel might suggest something to do with the role of learning in the novel, but concluding that education is important is a throw-away.
  + I may announce a given topic or specific directions for the next response paper*.* If you turn in a response paper that does not respond to that announcement, it will count as a zero.
  + Give the RP a title. You can use an epigraph; please see the **epigraph format guide.**
  + Type the word count at the top of your first page. Neither epigraph nor title is included in the required word count.

Response papers receive a check minus, check [minus], or check—or a zero if it’s not on point: because you didn’t respond to directions. Your goal is to get and maintain a check. At the end of the quarter, I will assess your performance on the responses papers over the arc of the course as a whole and factor it into your participation grade. You can get a 4.0 in the course if you start out with a check minus.

Check minuses mean you need to try harder next time. There is at least one basic error. See the comments I’ve given you—in the text as well as overall--on what to not repeat next time: fragments for instance merit an immediate check minus. Repeating the same errors from RP to RP will increase the weight of the error.

A check [minus] means you’re on the fence, almost at a check.

Checks mean you are doing well.

* Do not use first person or references to “the reader.”This will force you to focus on the text. (“I love how X happens” will become “X is an important issue because [some reason more specific than your love for it: the way it mattered to the text, the way it was reversed later, etc.].”)
* Do not use these phrases: “really,” “truly,” or “in real life.”
* Do not ask what the intention of the author was in anything. This is not a research paper, and the RP’s point is to focus on form, not context.
* **See “Marginal Comments” on Canvas under “files” for a list of common errors in student writing—and avoid them. They will weigh ever more heavily on the assessment of the RP.** If by the end of the course you are still putting the titles of novels in quotation marks, rather than italicizing them; or rendering sentence fragments, this will be cause for an automatic check minus. Pedantic? Maybe. The point is for you to build the skill of leaving enough time “simply” to proofread—reading your own work through the eyes of another person is as good a stepping stone to empathy as any other.
* Proofread.