

# A Guide to Writing Reading Responses

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A reading response is your opportunity to demonstrate that you've read the assignment and thought about it; ideally it should present a mini-analysis of some part of the work that struck you as important or meaningful. Your response should succinctly state what part of the work you see as significant and then explain its relationship to the work as a whole. Don't tell me what happened or summarize the text. I've read the material and don't need this information. Your focus should be on explaining to me as clearly as possible how and why a detail or incident shapes your analysis and is important to your overall understanding of the work. Make certain that you support your generalizations with specifics and that you offer me some less-than-obvious insight as a reward for your reading your response. Don't worry about length; instead worry about saying something worthwhile.

I've provided a guide to get you started doing analysis below. These steps to analysis are loosely adapted from Writing and Thinking Analytically, David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen, Harcourt, 2000.<sup>1</sup>

1. Suspend Judgment: Try to figure out what something means before deciding how you feel about it.
2. Define Significant Parts and How They're Related: Try to figure out what it is made of and how its parts help us understand the meaning of the subject as a whole
3. Make the implicit explicit: Convert meanings that are suggested but not overtly stated to direct statements.
4. Look for Patterns: repetitions or resemblances; organizing contrasts or binaries; and anomalies. The latter are especially important for they help us refine our claims and keep us from ignoring evidence; they often lead us to new and better questions and ideas.
5. Keep reformulating questions and explanations: uncertainty is a normal and necessary part of writing.
  - a. Which details seem significant? Why?
  - b. What is the significance of a particular detail? What does it mean?
  - c. What else might it mean?
  - d. How do the details fit together? What do they have in common?
  - e. What does this pattern of details mean?
  - f. What else might this same pattern of details mean? How else could it be explained?
  - g. What details don't seem to fit? How might they be connected with other details to form a different pattern?
  - h. What does this new pattern mean? How might it cause me to read the meaning of the individual details differently?

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<sup>1</sup> In turn, this handout is adapted from Marilyn Elkins, Ph.D., Professor of English at California State University, Los Angeles and AP English Language and Composition Chief Reader 2000-2003.