

HANDY-DANDY GUIDE TO WRITING A REACTION PAPER

If you were to ask 10 people, "How do I write a Reaction Paper?" you'd probably get 10 different responses. No one seems to know exactly how to do one, yet almost everyone is assigned one at some point in his or her academic career. Here is a guide to what faculty are usually "looking for" in a well-written reaction paper.

Remember, however, that every faculty member is different: some will want you to spend more time "analyzing" or "evaluating" the piece, others on giving your personal reactions to it. The best rule of thumb is to ask your faculty member for clarification. You might even consider giving him or her this guideline and asking him or her to revise it to reflect his or her expectations.

I. SUMMARY/SYNOPSIS – What are you reacting to?

GOAL: Show that you understand the thesis, main ideas, and supporting ideas in the piece you're writing about.

Identify all of the "basic information: about the book that you can, including:

- the **author** of the piece, the **title** of the piece, the title of the **book or journal** from which it was taken (if relevant), the **publisher**, and the **year of publication**;
- the **topic** or **subject** of the piece—for example, "The Triangle Shirt-Waist Fire" or "Revitalization efforts underway in Roxbury's Codman Square." In other words, tell what the piece is about in a word or a phrase;
- the author's **purpose** or **motive** for writing the piece—for example, "to expose the dangerous conditions factory workers in the United States faced prior in the early decades of the twentieth century" or "to show how residents can unite to improve their neighborhood";
- the author's **thesis statement** (might be similar to the purpose, but not necessarily);
- the author's **primary supporting ideas**.

II. Analysis/Evaluation--What are the strengths and weaknesses of the piece?

Goal: Show that you understand what the author does well and what he or she does not do so well.

1. Answer the "w" questions, like **why, why not, what, what if, what for, where, why there, who, how, when . . .** Specific questions you might take up include:

- was the piece convincing? why or why not, specifically? is it well-researched? are the sources the author uses reputable? why or why not?
- did the author overlook or leave out anything important? what?
- did the author overemphasize or overprivilege anything? what?
- is the author one-sided (even if he or she takes your side), or does the author presented a balanced view?

III. Your Reactions--How do you react to the piece on a personal level? How does the piece relate to your experience?
Goal: Share your own impressions and your own experiences with readers.

1. Here are some questions you might consider answering:
 - did the piece hold your interest? Why or why not?
 - did the piece bother or annoy you? why or why not?
 - what would you ask, or tell, the author of the piece if you could?
 - what did you realize as a result of reading the piece?
 - what questions does the piece raise for you -- about the material, about other things?
 - does the piece remind you of other readings you've done for the class? compare and contrast the piece to those readings.