

Reaction Papers or Discussions on Reading Assignments

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(with many thanks to Maurice Elias, who originated this approach)

Student reactions to assigned readings have a variety of uses, whether as assigned papers or as the focus of in-class or electronic discussions. They can:

- strengthen relationships among students and with the instructor;
- alert instructors to nuances regarding student understanding or misunderstanding;
- suggest topics for more comprehensive coverage in class;
- lead to discussion of disagreement and critical analysis of concepts and assertions in the reading, especially on issues of diversity;
- afford a story-telling mode of discourse that encourages student engagement and application of learning;
- promote student articulation of their own ideas, experiences, and voices;
- provide instructors with lively illustrations for abstract concepts.

We encourage you to develop your own topic questions for structuring student reaction papers and discussions. One framework is the following.

Consider each of these questions about the reading:

What were the most important revelations or insights for me?

What emotional reactions did I have, at what points in the chapter, and why?

What questions do I have now about the topics of this chapter?

With what might I disagree? How is that related to my own life experiences?

Some tips for assigning written reaction papers: have students boldface the concept or idea they are discussing, and give a page number in parentheses even if you do not require APA citation and referencing. Suggest a limit: one or two pages is usually sufficient. Emphasize that you want to read examples or illustrations of concepts, not definitions. Also emphasize that you want personal engagement and reactions. Finally, consider carefully your own workload in deciding how many papers to assign.

In class and in grading papers, encourage thoughtful disagreement with the author and with you. One way to do this is to frame how diverse life experiences lead to differing perspectives, emotions, and questions.