

Response Writing

In academic assignments, response writing often accompanies a summary. An instructor might ask you to read information, summarize it for others, and then present your response to its ideas. Depending on the purpose and audience, the format for your response may vary from an essay to a set of paragraphs (one summary, one response). This handout outlines the steps you could take to compose a paragraph response (but they're helpful in composing an essay response as well). Let's assume that you have already completed a critical reading of the source and a clear summary paragraph.

In response writing, an instructor asks you to respond to the ideas in a *source essay* oftentimes in the form of a **prompt**. A prompt is a guided question or statement that elicits a focused written response. If the instructor does not provide a prompt, then the challenge is to develop your own focused response to the source. Also, keep in mind the variety of responses requested. Some prompts ask for a critical response (e.g. *explain, compare/contrast, analyze*) while others ask for a personal response (e.g. *narrate, describe*). After the rigor of summarizing, many writers find response writing much easier to compose.

How to Write a Response

1. Begin by **reading the assignment prompts**. Note (underline, circle, highlight) key words in the prompt that direct the form your response should take: e.g. narrate, describe, identify, illustrate. Read the entire prompt closely; pay attention to all the questions included in the prompt. Often a prompt will include several questions designed to help you develop ideas; other times an instructor expects that you will address each question in the prompt. If you aren't certain, clarify your instructor's expectations by asking him or her.
2. **Brainstorm or free-write** ideas that the prompt generates. Think and write down all the specific details related to your topic.
3. **Organize** your ideas in a logical, coherent, and effective way with a rough outline.
4. **Draft** your response paragraph.
 - a. Begin with a **Topic Sentence**. Much like a thesis statement asserts the main idea in an essay, your topic sentence should assert the main idea of your response paragraph. Your topic sentence in a response paragraph should also accomplish the following:
 - a. Provide a **smooth transition** between the summary paragraph and your response paragraph. This transition will ensure that your reader understands when your writing moves from the summary of someone else's ideas to your own ideas.
 - b. **Focus** on your main idea and state that main idea precisely and effectively. All the supporting points in the paragraph should support this topic sentence in a focused way.
 - b. **Develop** your paragraph with details that support the focus, following your rough outline. The length of this paragraph should follow assignment guidelines. In WR115, those guidelines require a minimum of 12 sentences and a maximum of 15 sentences.
 - c. **Conclude** your paragraph effectively.

- d. **Revise** your paragraph.
 - a. Re-read the prompt and be certain that your paragraph clearly focuses a response to the prompt.
 - b. Check your paragraph for logical and effective development, coherence (sentences should logically and coherently link), and grammatically effective writing.
 - c. Make sure that you have not summarized in the response.
 - d. Share you draft with student collaborators, Writing Center Assistants, your instructor.

Sample of Response Paragraph Writing

Here is an example of a response prompt and a response paragraph to Sherman Alexie's *Superman and Me*. In this example, the instructions offer you a prompt choice. Once you've decided on a question to respond to, underline the key words (for this example, you'll see that they're in boldface).

Sample Prompt: Choose **ONE** of the following to focus your response:

1. How was reading viewed in your household growing up? **Explain** the ways in which reading was either important or not important to you as a child.
2. How important is reading to you now? **Narrate** a recent instance that demonstrates either a positive or a negative experience with reading as you focus your response on the importance (or lack of importance) you place on reading now.

Sample Response to "Superman and Me"

Like Alexie, I too was prompted to read at an early age and in the midst of a difficult childhood. I learned to read before starting school, mostly as a way to hide from the world that was going on around me. Books were my way to escape from the alcoholic –abusive household I was raised in. I read alone, most often, outside under a favorite oak tree or behind closed doors inside. This activity gave me hours of privacy and such great enjoyment. And the more I read, the more I wanted to read, wherever I was. As I grew older and began living on my own, I realized that all my hours of reading had paid off. The knowledge I gained from reading showed me that there was a different world out there. I didn't have to continue in the cycle of addiction and abuse. By extending my education, I could set an example for my children who, in turn, would do the same for their children as well. Knowledge and education have helped me lift myself as well as others around me out of the recycling bin of despair and has put us back on the shelf – a brand new product.

Points to appreciate in the model paragraph above:

- Topic sentence provides a smooth transition between the summary paragraph and the response paragraph.
- Topic Sentence provides focus for this paragraph.
- Paragraph develops details to support the focus (topic sentence) of the paragraph.
- These supporting points are interesting and clear.
- The response paragraph answers the prompt (option one).
- Paragraph begins clearly with a topic sentence and concludes effectively.
- Paragraph provides clear transitional words between sentences to provide coherence.
- Paragraph is effectively organized, well developed, and grammatically correct.

