Response Papers

What is a response paper?
Response papers are frequently used in the Humanities to help refine your close reading and analytical skills. They ask you to look at a text or a group of texts and provide a response based on your reading. Response papers should be narrowly focused and should address specific parts of the text(s). Although you may use “I” in response papers (always check with your instructor or prompt to confirm), they should not be overly reactionary and autobiographical. Your professor wants to know why you had a certain reaction, not just a list of your feelings about a work.

What are the types of response papers?
There are two types of response papers: single-text response papers and multiple-text response papers. In single-text response papers, you only respond to one text and many times your instructors will ask you to situate it within class discussions or homework. In multiple-text response papers, you are asked to respond to a number of texts and look at the similarities and differences between them. For these kinds of response papers, you will need to come up with an overarching theme that connects the texts.

What is the difference between a response paper and a summary paper?
Response papers require you to engage critically with the text and ask why you respond in a certain way after reading it. Summaries generally just ask for an overview of the text and the author’s argument. Summary essays do not require you to evaluate the text.

How do you get started?
1. To begin, carefully read the text you are responding to, which may require you to annotate the text or take notes about any issues that come up while you are reading. You might have to read the text more than once before you fully understand it so plan ahead. As you read you might ask yourself if you agree or disagree with the author’s points, if there any obvious biases in the work, or if there are any gaps in the author’s discussion.
2. After reading through the text(s), free write a response to the text(s) and/or ask yourself the questions below to help generate some ideas.
3. Once you have an idea, begin to organize your response. Although response essays are less formal than some other types of essays, they usually still require an Introduction, Thesis, Body Paragraphs, and a Conclusion. However, always check with your prompt or instructor to see if there any specific requirements that you need to address in your paper.
4. Once your ideas are organized, begin writing your paper!

Questions to ask while reading:
- What is the author’s thesis or main claim? Why are the author’s claims important?
- What types of evidence does the author give? Are they convincing? Do you see any potential issues? Any potential biases?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the claims or the discussion?
- Do you agree or disagree with the author’s claims? Why?
- Can you come up with any counterarguments?
- How do the texts relate to each other? Do you see any overarching themes?
- Do the authors disagree or agree with one another? Can one of the texts be used to weaken the argument of a different text?
- Does the text bring up any specific questions that you want to explore? Are there any words or phrases that stand out?
Example of a Strong Response Paper*

Nodelman discusses the Typical Case Prototype portrayed in adult-written children’s books. Nodelman's stereotypes include bright colors, fantasy, common childhood experiences, and simple linguistics. Richard Scarry's picture book, THINGS TO KNOW demonstrates all of these qualities producing a didactic anecdote.

Color radiates from the pages of this short story. From the pink background on the front cover to the bright blue costume worn by an elephant on the title page, the book is filled with bright shades. The use of color culminates to the very last page, which exemplifies and identifies the colors used in the book (23). The book ambiguously teaches correct color schemes by ensuring each object is the color found in nature. For example, in the “Seasons” grass is green, the sky is blue, sand is brown, apples are red, pumpkins are orange, and snow is white; the author easily could have painted these objects in hues of imagination, however the writer chose to demonstrate these objects in their naturally expected forms, encouraging standard ideals of the world (14,16,18, 19).

While the color usage discourages imagination, Scarry's use of fantasy promotes creative ideology. A personified animal or insect represents every character in the book. Animals play instruments, eat with spoons, count to ten, have hands, arms, and noses, rake leaves, watch TV, write, and eat cookies (5,6,8,12,11,17, 22,9). Scarry limits the readers’ imagination, allowing only classic fantasy. Richard Scarry personifies the characters to be similar to his readers.

Nodelman’s research suggests the ideal that children enjoy characters they can relate to. Scarry creates childlike characters based on their actions. Illustrating childlike behavior, a pig spills a glass of juice, a cat wears an inner tube to swim in ankle deep water, and a worm jumps in a pile of autumn leaves (8,16,17). The children are distinguished from the adults by size, position, and in some cases clothing. On page one, a giraffe sits on a stool wearing a suit and tie reading a book to a tiny, casually dressed mouse. Of course the mouse is the childlike character and the giraffe is the adult; the giraffe know how to read, is formally dressed, and is much taller than his counterpart. This example signifies the view of adults being superior to children and being responsible for the knowledge children gain. In the manners section a tall pig wearing a dress helps a short pig in red overalls put on a rain jacket, obviously this is the mother aiding her child (10). This suggests that children require parents to guide them even in simple tasks.

Finally, the language of the book signifies children's short attention span and the idea of reading levels. The syntax is limited to include no more than eleven words, the longest sentence being, “We rake the falling leaves and pick apples in the autumn.” (17). The vocabulary of this book is simplistic, using predominately one or two syllable words to identify objects, directions, or sizes. The book contains only two four-syllable words: accordion and interrupting (5, 8). The language is simple for young readers and the identifying nature of the book is most likely targeted toward a preschool audience.

The book overtly teaches the things adults believe small children should learn; like distinguishing the four seasons and naming body parts (13-20, 11). The most obvious example of a moralistic or instructive agenda is the section titled “Manners.” Scarry devotes four pages to “Manners,” while most other topics have two pages. Scarry clearly encourages his ideas of etiquette when he writes, “Everyone should have good manners. Do you? I hope so.” (9). Other examples of the educational goals appear in sections labeled “Count to Ten,” “Opposites,” “Shapes and Sizes,” “Things We Can Do,” and “Colors” (12, 3, 1, 21, 23). The book didactically impresses children with adult view of essential knowledge and encourages the stereotypical natures Nodelman mentioned.

*Example taken from http://www.longwood.edu/staff/mcgeecw/sampleresponsepapers.htm