

LUC WRITING CENTER – “HOW TO WRITE A SUMMARY RESPONSE ESSAY”

A **summary response** essay summarizes and responds to an author’s argument on a **particular subject or issue**. Firstly, this requires careful, faithful explanation of what the author is actually saying in the “summary” part of your essay, even if you disagree with their premise, chain of evidence, argument, or conclusion. The time for you to refute or agree with the author’s argument and state your own opinion on the subject based on evidence (facts, personal experience, etc.) will occur when you write the “response” part of this essay. The following essay format should help you when structuring your argument.

Topic Paragraph:

- Your first sentence should situate the issue within a certain context, also giving the full name of the author/piece that discusses the issue. If relevant, you could also write a sentence describing what the author’s contemporary culture thought about the issue (whether this opinion was divisive, brave, typical, etc. of the time period).
- Your second sentence should mention the author by last name, providing relevant background details such as profession, cultural or ethnic identity, etc. and then briefly describe what this person argues in the piece they wrote and why.
- Your final sentence should be your thesis, which should both sum up what the author claims and what your opinion is regarding the argument. You don’t need to use “I,” as all statements except those attributed to the author are **assumed** to be your own (See “To Use or Not to Use ‘I’ in an Essay”).
- Note: There is no need for proof or quotes in the topic paragraph. Instead, you must write a brief, but descriptive statement of what your argument will be.

Subsequent Paragraphs:

Summary: Lay out the author’s opinion **in brief** (*summary*) with **minimal direct quotes** (1-2 at most), and make sure to **cite** whenever appropriate. Presenting the facts of the author’s argument without bias is extremely important for any essay writer for the following two reasons:

1. You win your reader’s trust by reporting information *impartially*, allowing them to become familiar with a work they may never have read BEFORE hearing your opinion on the subject.
2. You pay your reader the courtesy of allowing them to at least *form an initial opinion* of the work BEFORE hearing your opinion of it. (However, remember that since you are, after all, the one writing the summary of the author’s work, this can allow you to **describe** and **focus** on the part of the argument that you will later disagree with, though your **language** appears impartial.)

Since most summary response essays in UCWR 110 are 2-5 pages long, remember to briefly summarize the author’s overall argument while focusing on how it supports their main point in roughly *half* of your essay (**Example**: in 2 1-2 pages if the limit is 5). If you have **two** paragraphs per page (See “The Essay Paragraph Equation”), this means you will have roughly four paragraphs after the topic paragraph in which to introduce and summarize the author’s argument.

In the *first* paragraph, start by discussing the historical context of the issue in more depth, and explaining the author’s overall opinion (thesis). Describe the author’s tone, expressed

LUC WRITING CENTER – “HOW TO WRITE A SUMMARY RESPONSE ESSAY”

intentions in writing this piece, etc. and any other information that will be relevant to your summary.

In the *second* paragraph, briefly summarize how the essay or piece begins to prove the author’s argument. Does the author start by describing an image? Telling a story of personal experience? Does the author present information logically, arguing for or against an unjust situation?

In the *third* paragraph, continue explaining the author’s argument. One way to make sure that you summarize the whole argument without becoming long-winded, is to try to **summarize the point of each paragraph** written by the author **in one sentence, in your own words.**

In the *fourth* paragraph, finish summarizing the end of the author’s essay or piece, and state their conclusion along with any recommendations for action meant for the reader.

Response: After summarizing the author’s argument, **it is time to respond to the author as if you were having a logical debate with them.**

Remember, even if this author is famous, well-published, or an expert in their field, *you are entitled to disagree with them if you can prove any part of their argument is wrong, could be phrased in a better way or proved more convincingly.* Critiquing and correcting or supplementing other thinkers’ ideas in a **constructive** way is what leads to human progress in any field of study. If you remain **respectful** of the other author and refrain from name-calling, personal attacks, or sarcastic comments on their work, you are participating **usefully in an ongoing academic, professional, and/or or social conversation on the subject under discussion.**

Ideally, the **length of your response should equal that of your summary** (i.e. 4 paragraphs for the response if you wrote 4 for the summary – keep within the assignment’s page limits).

In the first paragraph, begin as if you were writing the topic paragraph of a normal essay, by **summing up** what the author’s main point is, and then **expressing whether they are correct in their opinion or not**, and **why** that is. (Tip: Admitting that you agree with some part of the author’s argument is a very balanced way of beginning to respond to their argument.)

If your **thesis statement** is *strongly opinionated, illogical, and not descriptive*, your reader will be **unconvinced by your argument because it can’t be understood.** For instance, compare the following thesis statements for a Summary Response Essay:

Thesis #1: “Hurston’s opinion is not for everyone because her life might be different from other people’s.”

Thesis #2: “Though Zora Neale Hurston’s positive self-identification as a black woman is inspiring for minorities attempting to locate themselves as Americans, her attitude may not come so easily to minorities lacking her early self-confidence, good family background, and initial upbringing in a heavily minority community.”

Thesis #2 is the strongest, clearest thesis, **because it can be both proved and argued against.** If this was your thesis, you would **thoroughly** explain this opinion in the next paragraphs, describing how you think these factors helped formulate Hurston’s perspective on embracing racial and cultural difference. *You can allude to content from the summary you already wrote such as in the following topic sentence for a paragraph:* (“When Hurston describes thinking white tourists were an amusement for her instead of the other way around, she

LUC WRITING CENTER – “HOW TO WRITE A SUMMARY RESPONSE ESSAY”

expresses an unusual understanding of race relations that threatens the status quo despite being naïve”).

Don’t allude to content from the author’s argument that you have not already mentioned in your essay (remember that the reader supposedly has not read this piece or essay) (See “Writing for the Uninformed Reader”).

In your conclusion, sum up the **practical value** of considering the author’s argument (*pros and cons*), and state if it can be useful for certain readers (i.e. a certain *demographic*), or all readers in another way (*ideological, cultural*).

LUC Writing Center Curriculum, Lydia Craig 2017 ©