

EDPR 250 EC
Guidelines for the Written Assignments – The Response Paper
By: Raúl A. Mora

A response paper is a very particular kind of written assignment. I know that for many of you, this is the first effort into this particular kind of writing. So, let us first begin by explaining what a response paper is *not*. It is not a summary, so don't spend too much time going over the article. I have read it already so I have a very clear idea of what it was about. Operate under that assumption. However, that does not mean you should not make an explicit reference to *which* article you are reading. Starting with "This week's article" alone is not enough. Explain briefly what the article was about and provide some general ideas about the topic(s) covered in the article. That can be done in a few sentences early in the introductory paragraph. Then, devote the remainder of the paper to *responding* to the paper.

A response requires that you take a stand about what you read. Do not be afraid to be explicit whether you liked, did not like, or plain *hated* it (believe me, sooner or later you may hate one of them, for very different reasons). Those initial feelings are important. They showed you paid attention to the ideas in the paper. Nevertheless, do not spend the rest of the paper simply praising or bashing the paper. A good response will look past that initial reaction (which is very fair, by the way, and I still want to learn about it) and explore good points and questionable issues.

One important thing to bear in mind is not picking too many issues. You only have *one page* (okay, page and a half tops if you're really into it!) for this task, so use it wisely. It is best to discuss two or three salient ideas that caught your eye in sufficient detail than try to talk about everything in just one or two sentences. The issue here is quality of arguments, not quantity of items listed. Also, remember again that all of us read the articles. One of us (myself included) may tackle on some of those issues you left behind.

As you discuss the issues in the text, you will find that some ideas from the text really resonate with your experiences. Part of academic writing conventions is supporting your ideas with portions (quotes) of the text. However, I caution you not to use quotes that are too long. Use quotes only if they are very compelling and not too long. Again, remember that it is only one page. If necessary, I would rather paraphrase the idea in a short sentence and make reference to the page number than read half a paragraph of quotations.

Part of taking a stand is placing yourself within the response. Responses are very personal in nature. You all react to the texts in different ways and bring a diversity of experiences to the table. You have been baby-sitters, teachers, camp counselors, etc. You also have young siblings, children, cousins, or nephews (or a lovely pair of twin nieces in South America... you catch my drift!). You were also infants and toddlers before. All that should and will come into play as you relate the text to your own lives. That makes part of a response. I love to hear those stories and I truly respect it when you share some more intimate ones in your responses (and believe me, I have heard very compelling stories in the responses!).

However, do not fall prey to relying too much on your own experiences as you write. Keep your eyes on the prize, that is, your practicum. For your first responses, it is reasonable to rely on your past experiences for examples and illustration. As your practicum progresses,

try to shift the balance toward what you are going through now. Feel free to question the reading in light of the discoveries you are making in your practicum or other coursework (you will find out that some ideas from this course overlap with other courses... please let me know when that happens!). Let us know when the reading helped clarify something you observed. Conversely, state when the observations totally contradict the reading. Finally, share any insights you have learned from your cooperating teacher. They are a valuable source

I have a tendency to read your papers *very thoroughly*. I will check for grammar and punctuation and will correct it. After all, I was a grammar teacher for six years. But, I do it because *I care*. I want you to be much better writers (you're in Education at the U of I. I already know you're pretty good at what you do! Only the best make it to this College, make no mistake!); that is why I devote my time. You will always receive feedback. As a fellow student, I invite you to see feedback as it really is: An opportunity to improve. As a writer, I know that feedback is what has helped me improve.

Although the papers will be graded, there is in fact a deeper purpose to my thoroughness. A response is actually a *dialog* between you and the reading. I just want to participate in the dialog. My marginal notes are my response to your response. Please read them. I will raise questions or counter-points. I may suggest issues you would want to tackle in future responses. I will agree and disagree with your opinions. But, my disagreement will never mean that I do not *respect* your opinion. I also use the responses as another way to learn about your placements and your practicum. That is a window to your classrooms. I learn about your teachers and your students, what your classrooms look like and what you do with every reading. I use all the responses as the basis of my discussion questions. In addition, this semester I will use the responses as another tool to help you draft your philosophy statement (more on that later). That is why it is imperative that you all turn in your responses, even if has to be late.

I hope these guidelines will help you as you start reflecting on your field placements and the kind of teachers you are and will be pretty soon (by the way, on my watch, you're no longer "future teachers." you *are* teachers already!). As your fellow senior students just said, you will get better as the semester progresses. On a personal level, I am looking forward to reading those papers. So, good luck and carry on!