

Engagement with Text Beyond the Summary: Getting Students to Respond Critically

by Rebekah Johnson

It can be difficult to get our students to go beyond the summary when writing about a text. We not only need to teach students to summarize a text, but also to respond critically and personally to that text.

Response to Text

We can expose our students to various ways of thinking about, “digesting,” and writing in response to a text, asking such questions as “What does the text have to do with you, personally?” or “How much were your views and opinions challenged or changed by this text?” (Williamson, n.d.). Or, we can guide students through a series of writing exercises based on the text to promote various ways of thinking about the text, beginning with prompts like “try agreeing/arguing with the writer” and “write down striking words, images, phrases, or details” (West & Hurt, 2002).

Summary Writing

Students need a variety of skills to formulate a critical response in writing, starting with summary writing. They must practice writing summaries that acknowledge the author/title, are short, contain only key information, and paraphrase (rather than quote) the text.

To cite the author(s), students need a variety of words other than “says,” including neutral terms (e.g., comments, notes), argumentative terms (e.g., claims, contends), and inference terms (e.g., suggests, implies). Students may benefit from template phrases that “capture authorial action,” including “X acknowledges that . . .” or “X denies/does not deny that . . .” (Graff & Birkenstein, 2006).

One way to practice conciseness is writing one-sentence summaries that cite the author(s)/title, use a precise verb phrase, and capture the authors’ main idea(s). For example: “In their article ‘Coping with Procrastination,’ Moore, Baker, and Packer suggest that, in order to change the habit of procrastination, it is essential to look below the surface for the real reasons one puts off doing things.” (Dollahite & Huan, 2006).

Organization and Development

A response essay must have a clear thesis that includes *topic* (*what* the response will discuss) and *stance* (the *author’s viewpoint* on the topic). It is useful to model both weak and strong theses for students, such as:

Which thesis statement is a strong thesis?

1. Advertising is not good.
2. Advertising is everywhere, from banking machines to supermarket carts.
3. I think that we are inundated with advertising in our daily lives.
4. We are constantly exposed to commercials everywhere we look; this pervasiveness of advertising has several negative effects.

(Topic from sample text in CUNY Assessment Test in Writing [CATW]: Information for students)

In the above examples, the first one is too general and the second merely descriptive (no stance). The third has a stance, but the last one is best, with the topic and the stance very clearly defined.

The development of the response essay must continue the thread of the thesis statement and maintain the writer's stance. The author's ideas must be fully developed through a variety of approaches such as general discussion of the topic, narratives, or stories the writer knows (from the news or other texts) or reflection or commentary on the topic, and should include details and examples from both the text given and from prior reading and experience.

One useful model for fully developed paragraphs is P.I.E.:

P—Point

What is the point/argument of the paragraph/example?

How does this aspect/reason/example/solution relate to the thesis?

I—Illustration

Example/reference to other text(s)/statistics/writer's prior knowledge

E—Explanation/Evaluation

Explain the illustration in the context of your argument.

Provide analysis on how it supports your point.

An example of P.I.E. (based on the sample text in CUNY Assessment Test in Writing [CATW]: Information for students):

Some advertisements are so attention-getting that they are dangerous. One example of this is the new trend in “moving billboards,” where advertisements near the streets are on digital displays and play short videos. This is dangerous because drivers don't pay attention to what they are doing and can get into accidents or even hit pedestrians. Advertising agencies need to consider the repercussions of such distractions and govern their own commercials to protect consumers' safety.

Synthesis and Integration

The most difficult skill for students to master is that of synthesis—putting together ideas from various sources or experiences into one cohesive and coherent response piece. To successfully synthesize information in a response essay, the author must integrate ideas from the text with his or her own ideas (from prior reading and experience), and then must make (two or more) distinct and convincing connections to the text so it will flow together seamlessly.

To build synthesis skills, students must have repeated practice taking the ideas from two or more texts and weaving them together. It is a good idea to expose students to a variety of texts (news articles/reports, editorials/commentary pieces, letters to the editor, essays with obscure theses) in a variety of topics or disciplines (technology, sociology, cognition, health, education).

Academic Language

Students must be taught precise academic words. Generic words like “good” and “bad” must be replaced with more precise terms (e.g., “successful,” “effective”; or “weak,” “negative,” “ineffective”).

The best way to build academic vocabulary is to read academic texts and focus on a few of the academic words and phrases used in each text. Focused vocabulary building activities can also help students develop a larger repertoire of words in the target disciplines.

Conclusion

To recap, students need to practice reading a variety of texts and to practice a variety of critical response skills, including summary writing, coherent organization, full development of their ideas, synthesis and seamless integration of prior experience and knowledge with the ideas from the text, and a good repertoire of academic language. With practice, students can build these skills and write effective and interesting response pieces.

References

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