

# HOW TO WRITE A RESPONSE PAPER

A response paper or reflection paper asks students to write about one or more texts that they have read. These texts can be a book, a section of a book, research paper or journal article. The purpose of a response paper is to get you to engage critically with the texts using close reading guidelines, and present your ideas and thoughts pertaining to the text in a cogent manner. A response paper needs to demonstrate your understanding of the text as opposed to providing a summary of it. You should refrain from regurgitating the content of the reading since your professor is already well-versed in the text. Instead, you should focus on three or more key ideas, concepts or terms and analyze those in reference to your own understanding, experience, and other academic texts you may have read.

## The components of an ideal response paper:

1. It states the central argument put forward by the author in the text. Distilling the main argument of the text is necessary, as it will serve as a backdrop to your essay for which you can provide further insight. It should be noted that this section should be brief as the main goal of a response paper is for the professor to gauge your understanding of the text.

Following is an extract of a sample response paper for the book *Mosquito Trails: Ecology, Health, and the Politics of Entanglement* by Alex Nading; a student has penned down the central argument as follows:

“Nading spent 16 months in Ciudad Sandino, a slum contiguous to Nicaragua’s capital, Managua, accompanying a group of community health workers – brigadistas – in an attempt to write a “*trail guide*” for dengue programs in Nicaragua. For Nading then, there exists no causal relationship to easily explain dengue’s existence, because what he is interested in exploring is the route of transmission (or the “trail”) because it is all the various trails of these connections that constitute dengue as it exists in the world in the first place. Thus, the book becomes an exploration of “*whos, whats, and wheres of dengue*””.

2. What evidence/data does the author present in order to illustrate and/or substantiate her/his argument?

For instance, the student explains the underpinnings of Nading's argument:

“Since these are really big questions, and all connected to each other, Nading uses the concept of entanglement which means “*at once a material, temporal, and spatial condition*” (pg. 11). In concrete terms, this means that he is not just investigating dengue as an “emergent” disease (in fact he is very critical of this term) but goes to great lengths to interweave the socio-cultural history and geographical landscape of Nicaragua into the account of dengue, a style which is reminiscent of Gordillo in *Rubble*.”

3. How convincingly does the data/evidence support the argument? Explain your assessment.

Here the student highlights why the methodology used by Nading is pertinent:

“I think this method works exceptionally well for investigating dengue because, as Nading shows, the possibility of a person's or communities' exposure to the disease is predicated on a truly intersectional base; their race, gender, and class are all important markers and as we know these markers are constructed historically, thus, excavating the structural reasons for how dengue moves through a community necessitates investigating that history too.”

4. What interested you about this reading? Here is where you can talk about some aspect of the reading in relation to your thoughts, feelings and experience.

“Another way Nading shows us the benefits of reading the problem of dengue through its “entanglements” is in chapter 2 where he sketches out how scavenging or the economy of garbage collection is based on a specific political, historical, natural, and economic infrastructure which makes garbage scavenging “[a] mode of personal survival that, paradoxically, threatened population health”. This analysis of Nading resonates with me since the dengue epidemic in Karachi has mostly affected low-income areas due to lack of proper sanitation and the economy of garbage collection.”

## Some things to be mindful of when writing a response paper:

1. It shouldn't be an amalgamation of opinions. A response paper indeed is a reaction to the text where the student is allowed to express his/her ideas. However, it should be done with critical engagement; the strengths and weaknesses of the text should be highlighted but condemnation or praise for the sake of it must be avoided.
2. It shouldn't be a summary of the text. A response paper is a way for your professor to assess your engagement with the course material. It is to see whether or how far you have been able to grasp the reading material. Therefore, focus on providing an analysis of the text as opposed to a mere summary.
3. Do not gloss over ideas that you have trouble understanding, for it will impact the overall coherency of your paper. Academic texts can be dense i.e. they contain complex terms and concepts which can often be hard to grasp. Thus, it is important to try and understand difficult concepts before writing about them in your paper.
4. Avoid repeating the same ideas by rambling incessantly. This can be avoided by carefully reading the text and drafting an outline for the response paper. It is certain that your response paper will have a word limit. Hence, it is imperative that you must adhere to it by being as concise as possible.