

Ensuring Students Come to Class Well Prepared

To ensure that your students come to class well prepared, consider requiring a think piece to be submitted prior to class. Examples include:

- 1. A reading abstract:** A succinct summary of a required reading.
- 2. A reading annotation:** A brief evaluation of an articles' strengths and weaknesses
- 3. A response paper:** A reaction to specific elements in a reading: the effectiveness of the argument, the quality of the data, and the validity of the research design
- 4. A position paper:** A student's point of view on an issue
- 5. A discussion starter:** A key issue or questions raised by the readings
- 6. A reading evaluation:** An assessment of a newspaper or journal article's accuracy, use of evidence, and conclusions.

Each of these papers will ensure that students have read and thought critically about the course material.

Warning: Be explicit about what you want the students to do. Provide the students with a sample. Identify the issues that they need to cover.

Responding to Response Papers

Many of us ask our students to write response papers, reacting critically to an assigned reading, prior to a class discussion.

A response paper is a great way to ensure that your students have thought seriously and creatively about the reading. It also helps them learn how to express their ideas succinctly and analytically. And these papers can help you generate topics to discuss in class.

How, then, can you respond to these papers in a way that is helpful but not burdensome for you? Here's some practical advice.

1. Make sure that the students know what you expect.

Tell them at the outset: A response paper is not a summary. Nor is it simply an expression of students' feelings or emotional response.



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Rather it addresses a problem raised by the text or a particular passage within a text. And it presents a reasoned argument supported with specific evidence.

A response paper might assess the strengths and weaknesses of the text's argument and counterarguments that might be advanced. Or it might ask how a particular text's arguments compare or contrast with other related texts. Or it might explore how a writer is able to elicit a particular emotional response.

2. Read like an ordinary reader.

Did the paper provoke you? surprise you? Then ask why.

3. In your comments, enter into a conversation with the student.

-- Start with something positive: E.g., "You identify an important issue..."

- Has the student identified a key issue raised by the reading?
- Has the student accurately summarized a particular reading's argument?
- Does the student demonstrate understanding of a particular concept or theory?

-- Rather than simply being corrective (marking all errors in red) or directive (telling students to rewrite a sentence or move a paragraph), be facilitative.

Say how it might be strengthened.

- How might the analysis be made clearer?
- Is there a relevant issue that wasn't addressed?
- Is there an ambiguity or contradiction in the student's argument?
- Has the student failed to take a position on the argument?

4. Consider phrasing your suggestions as questions, in order to make the student responsible for improving the argument and writing.