



THE WRITING PROCESS

Writing a Response or Reaction Paper

Each semester, you will probably be asked by at least one instructor to read a book or an article (or watch a TV show or a film) and to write a paper recording your response or reaction to the material. In these reports—often referred to as response or reaction papers—your instructor will most likely expect you to do two things: summarize the material and detail your reaction to it. The following pages explain both parts of a report.

PART 1: A SUMMARY OF THE WORK

To develop the first part of a report, do the following:

- Identify the author and title of the work and include in parentheses the publisher and publication date. For magazines, give the date of publication.
- Write an informative summary of the material.
- Condense the content of the work by highlighting its main points and key supporting points.
- Use direct quotations from the work to illustrate important ideas.
- Summarize the material so that the reader gets a general sense of all key aspects of the original work.
- Do not discuss in great detail any single aspect of the work, and do not neglect to mention other equally important points.
- Also, keep the summary objective and factual. Do not include in the first part of the paper your personal reaction to the work; your subjective impression will form the basis of the second part of your paper.

PART 2: YOUR REACTION TO THE WORK

To develop the second part of a report, do the following:

- Focus on any or all of the following questions. Check with your instructor to see if s/he wants you to emphasize specific points.
 - How is the assigned work related to ideas and concerns discussed in the course for which you are preparing the paper? For example, what points made in the course textbook, class discussions, or lectures are treated more fully in the work?
 - How is the work related to problems in our present-day world?
 - How is the material related to your life, experiences, feelings and ideas? For instance, what emotions did the work arouse in you?
 - Did the work increase your understanding of a particular issue? Did it change your perspective in any way?

- Evaluate the merit of the work: the importance of its points, its accuracy, completeness, organization, and so on.
- You should also indicate here whether or not you would recommend the work to others, and why.

POINTS OF CONSIDERATION WHEN WRITING THE REPORT

Here are some important elements to consider as you prepare a report:

- Apply the four basic standards of effective writing (unity, support, coherence, and clear, error-free sentences) when writing the report.
- Make sure each major paragraph presents and then develops a single main point. For example, in the sample report that follows, the first paragraph summarizes the book, and the three paragraphs that follow detail three separate reactions of the student writer to the book. The student then closes the report with a short concluding paragraph.
- Support any general points you make or attitudes you express with specific reasons and details. Statements such as "I agree with many ideas in this article" or "I found the book very interesting" are meaningless without specific evidence that shows why you feel as you do. Look at the sample report closely to see how the main point or topic sentence of each paragraph is developed by specific supporting evidence.
- Organize your material. Follow the basic plan of organization explained above: a **summary** of one or more paragraphs, a **reaction** of two or more paragraphs, and a **conclusion**. Also, use transitions to make the relationships among ideas in the paper clear.
- Edit the paper carefully for errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation, word use, and spelling.
- Cite paraphrased or quoted material from the book or article you are writing about, or from any other works, by using the appropriate documentation style. If you are unsure what documentation style is required or recommended, ask your instructor.
- You may use quotations in the summary and reaction parts of the paper, but do not rely on them too much. Use them only to emphasize key ideas.
- Publishing information can be incorporated parenthetically or at the bottom of the page in a footnote. Consult with your instructor to determine what publishing information is necessary and where it should be placed.

A SAMPLE RESPONSE OR REACTION PAPER

Here is a report written by a student in an introductory psychology course. Look at the paper closely to see how it follows the guidelines for report writing described above.

A Report on *Man's Search for Meaning*

Part 1: Summary

*Topic sentence for
summary paragraph*

Dr. Viktor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966) is both an autobiographical account of his years as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps and a presentation of his ideas about the meaning of life. The three years of deprivation and suffering he spent at Auschwitz and other Nazi camps led to the development of his theory of Logotherapy, which, very briefly, states that the primary force in human beings is "a striving to find a meaning in one's life" (154). Without a meaning in life, Frankl feels, we experience emptiness and loneliness that lead to apathy and despair. This need for meaning was demonstrated to Frankl time and again with both himself and other prisoners who were faced with the horrors of camp existence. Frankl was able to sustain himself partly through the love he felt for his wife. In a moment of spiritual insight, he realized that his love was stronger and more meaningful than death, and would be a real and sustaining force within him even if he knew his wife was dead. Frankl's comrades also had reasons to live that gave them strength. One had a child waiting for him; another was a scientist who was working on a series of books that needed to be finished. Finally, Frankl and his friends found meaning through their decision to accept and bear their fate with courage. He says that the words of Dostoevsky came frequently to mind: "There is one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my suffering." When Frankl's prison experience was over and he returned to his profession of psychiatry, he found that his theory of meaning held true not only for the prisoners but for all people. He has since had great success in working with patients by helping them locate in their own lives meanings of love, work, and suffering.

Part 2: Reaction

*Topic sentence for first
reaction paragraph*

One of my reactions to the book was the relationship I saw between the "Capos" and ideas about anxiety, standards, and aggression discussed in our psychology class. The Capos were prisoners who acted as trustees, and Frankl says they acted more cruelly toward the prisoners than the guards or the SS men. Several psychological factors help explain this cruelty. The Capos must have been suppressing intense anxiety about "selling themselves out" to the Nazis in return for small favors. Frankl and other prisoners must have been a constant reminder to the Capos of the courage and integrity they themselves lacked. When our behaviors

and values are threatened by someone else acting in a different way, one way we may react is with anger and aggression. The Capos are an extreme example of how, if the situation is right, we may be capable of great cruelty to those whose actions threaten our standards.

*Topic sentence for
second reaction
paragraph*

I think that Frankl's idea that meaning is the most important force in human beings helps explain some of the disorder and discontent in the world today. Many people are unhappy because they are caught in jobs where they have no responsibility and creativity; their work lacks meaning. Many are also unhappy because our culture seems to stress sexual technique in social relationships rather than human caring. People buy popular books that may help them become better partners in bed, but that may not make them more sensitive to each other's human needs. Where there is no real care, there is no meaning. To hide the inner emptiness that results from impersonal work and sex, people busy themselves with the accumulation of material things. With television sets, stereos, cars, expensive clothes, and the like, they try to forget that their lives lack true meaning instead of working or going to school to get a meaningful job, or trying to be decent human beings.

*Topic sentence for
third reaction
paragraph*

I have also found that Frankl's idea that suffering can have meaning helps me understand the behavior of people I know. I have a friend named Jim who was always poor and did not have much of a family—only a stepmother who never cared for him as much as for her own children. What Jim did have, though, was determination. He worked two jobs to save money to go to school, and then worked and went to school at the same time. The fact that his life was hard seemed to make him bear down all the more. On the other hand, I can think of a man in my neighborhood who for all the years I've known him has done nothing with his life. He spends whole days smoking and looking at cars going by. He is a burned-out case. Somewhere in the past his problems must have become too much for him, and he gave up. He could have found meaning in his life by deciding to fight his troubles like Jim, but he didn't, and now he is a sad shadow of a man. Without determination and the desire to face his hardships, he lost his chance to make his life meaningful.

Concluding paragraph

In conclusion, I would strongly recommend Frankl's book to persons who care about why they are alive, and who want to truly think about the purpose and meaning of their lives