

GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDENTS TO PAPERS

ADAPTED FROM MATERIALS ORIGINALLY PRODUCED BY DR. PAMELA M. EISENBAUM

The primary objective of responding to a paper is two-fold: 1) to assist the author with constructive criticism so the author might thereby improve the quality of the paper; 2) to articulate issues and questions that will generate discussion (if the paper is being presented to a class) or help the author think further about the arguments made in the paper.

1. *Articulate in your own words what you understand to be the author's primary thesis in the paper, including what you think its significance is or might be.* You should do this in no more than 3–5 sentences. If there is a thesis statement that you wish to highlight by quoting, that is fine, but it is not a substitute for putting it in your own words; you still must interpret that thesis statement. Be sure, however, you can state the page on which you see the author's thesis statement (if there is one). If the thesis is not clear, articulate what you think is the general topic, and then say you are uncertain what is the central thesis. *Do not summarize the contents of the paper.*
2. *Identify the strengths of the paper.* If it is very well written and -argued paper and you find yourself listing more than a half dozen, limit yourself to what you see as the most important ones (e.g., ones that get at issues central to the themes and topics of the class, one that you think fulfill the assignment particularly well). If you only can find one strength, then name only one—do not try to force it. For each strength you name, you must give a reason why you think it is a strength. Do not engage in unnecessary or (even worse) insincere flattery.
3. *Identify the weaknesses of the paper.* Your focus here should not be on very minor things (e.g., “incorrect spelling of the author's name in footnote 2”) but on things that characterize the paper or major sections of it (if the author has used inappropriate footnote style or bibliographic citation throughout, that deserves comment). As with Guideline #2, any weakness you name must be backed up with an argument or example explaining why you think it is a weakness.
4. *Wherever possible, make constructive and concrete suggestions about how the paper might be improved.* Here you most likely will focus on the paper's weaknesses, but you need not limit your comments to them. You may also see ways the author can build on the paper's already existing strengths (e.g., a particular passage, secondary reading, or argument may add subtlety to the author's arguments).
5. *Highlight anything in the substance of the paper that you find especially compelling, illuminating, or convincing,* as well as points of agreement between yourself and the author of the paper.
6. *Articulate points you find unconvincing, strained, obvious, or untrue.* As always, you must explain why this is the case. If you *cannot* say why, don't mention it.
7. *Articulate questions.* Questions may serve different purposes. Here are a few examples:
 - a. They may enable the author to see the same issues from a different, perhaps better, perspective, thereby assisting the author in improving the paper.
 - b. They may signal to the author certain issues or subtopics either are unclear (i.e., poorly explained or argued in the paper) or that require further elaboration in order to become cogent and persuasive to future readers.
 - c. If you are doing the review for the purpose of a class discussion, questions may enable you to generate material for discussion that you think will be of interest to the group.
8. *Do not make generalizations about the person (or even the person's academic work) drawn from the paper.* In other words, your job is to provide a critique of the paper, not the person.

9. *All critical comments—positive and negative—should use language appropriate to an academic context and discourse and be as substantive and specific as possible.*
 - a. Inappropriate: “Your first example was stupid.”
 - b. Appropriate: “Your first example failed adequately to illustrate your point, because...”
10. *Respect the limits articulated for the review*, so as to be as effective as possible in relation to the primary objective articulated above.