

STS.001: Technology in American History
How to Write a Response Paper
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Reading response papers have three basic purposes: to help you think critically about the readings, formulate your own ideas, and pose questions for further discussion. They offer you the chance to think on paper and clarify your own ideas before you present them to the class. Response papers are not like formal essays in which you have a thesis clearly in mind when you begin and then marshal evidence to support your argument. Rather, you will often write your way *to* a central idea or a set of questions that appear toward the end of your response paper, not at the beginning.

How should you go about writing your response? There is no one best way. You can have various starting points. You might begin with a personal experience that is relevant to the topic, or with a particularly compelling or confusing quotation from the readings, or with whatever idea in the readings seemed most important to you. You can also adopt various approaches. For instance, you could agree with one author over another (e.g., "I think Winner is right that technologies can have politics whether people use them or not, while Cowan is wrong to state that technologies have no politics until they are put into use within systems, for the following reasons [x,y,z]"). You could critique the standpoint of the authors (e.g., "It seems that Winner is too pessimistic about the potential for technological change to bring beneficial social change. MacKenzie's idea of 'negotiation' is more hopeful, implying that ordinary people can direct technological change to fight entrenched sources of power"). You could point out inconsistencies in the material (e.g., "All the authors take pains to define 'technology,' but when they use terms like 'large-scale' or 'nature,' they are much more lax").

Regardless of whatever approach you take, all reading response papers should be insightful, analytical, and clearly written. Reading response papers should be 1-2 pages in length, typed, double-spaced, and in 12 point font.

Here are some concrete suggestions to help you get started:

- When you're doing the reading, take notes. Highlighting is NOT a good way to take notes. You should write, on a separate piece of paper, paraphrases of the author's key arguments as well as your own thoughts about the reading. These notes will not only help you write good responses, but will *really* help you with the final exam.
- Don't waste space summarizing the authors' arguments. It is very important that you demonstrate that you understand what the author is trying to communicate, but you can do this very briefly. The most important part of a response paper is your *response*—that is, what did *you* think of these readings? What did you find interesting, wrong-headed, surprising, or thought-provoking about the readings?
- Be specific. Here's a vague sentence: "One of the authors thinks that the meaning of technology is socially constructed." Here's a more precise sentence: "Donald MacKenzie argues that people have different ideas about what is valuable about particular technologies like supercomputers."

- Ask questions, even if you don't know the answers! Often you need to wrestle with a question for a while—both on paper and in class discussion—before you can come up with a good answer. And the most interesting historical questions don't have easy or obvious answers anyway. So you should feel comfortable with some intellectual risk-taking here: try out ideas and questions even if you are not sure where exactly you are headed.
 - Be creative! Remember, writing is thinking, and both are a lot more enjoyable when you are playing with ideas that excite you.
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