

Writing Response Papers

PS/IR 101: Introduction to International Relations

What is a Response Paper?

A response paper is a short essay that reacts to one or more of the readings assigned during the week. These assignments are designed to encourage you to think critically about the arguments the reading assignments are advancing, how these arguments relate to each other, and how they fit into the course as a whole. These assignments are not meant to be a simple reading check. We assume that everyone is doing the reading, so you should **avoid** spending much time summarizing the reading's arguments in your paper.

Even though these assignments are relatively short, we still expect you to treat the response paper as a formal writing assignment. This means that your response paper should have a clear introductory paragraph, two or more body paragraphs, and a conclusion. It also means that you should proofread your essay and avoid informal language.

What Should a Response Paper Do?

Fundamentally, your response paper should advance an argument. While this argument can take many forms, your response paper should **have a clear thesis statement** at the end of your introductory paragraph. This thesis statement should make a claim that you will show or "prove" in the rest of your paper. The rest of your paper, then, should provide evidence for the argument you present in your thesis statement. Be careful to avoid making unsubstantiated claims.

You should feel free to respond to the study questions posted on the Canvas website for your response papers, but you are certainly not limited to writing only about these questions. Here are some other things you can seek to accomplish in your paper:

1. Critique one or more of the readings. Refer to the handout on "reading political" science for different ways to critique a reading's logic, research design, or evidence.
2. Propose an alternative explanation. Is there a different explanation that is consistent with the author's primary findings? If so, explain this alternative argument and provide evidence that your alternative argument is more convincing. You could also brainstorm ways to arbitrate between your explanation and the one in the reading.
3. Arbitrate between different arguments. Do two (or more) of the readings this week present conflicting claims? If so, which one do you find more convincing and why?
4. Apply an author's argument to a current event or historical case you are interested in. Is there a current or historical case to which the author's argument should apply? If so, how does the evidence for this case stack up? What does this case reveal about the author's theory?
5. Extend the author's argument. Can you use the logic the author uses to advance his/her theory to explain another important and related phenomenon?
6. Identify an interesting puzzle that the readings raise. Do the authors arguments or evidence raise an interesting puzzle about international politics? If so, what is this puzzle? Thinking through what the readings and class material might be able to say about this puzzle, as well as your own thoughts on why this puzzle might exist.

Other Frequently Asked Questions

- Q: Do I have to reference the readings for the week?
A: Yes, your paper should explicitly address at least one of the readings of the week.
- Q: Do I have to reference ALL of the readings for the week?
A: No, you do not. In fact, since the reading assignments are quite short, it is probably better to focus on one or two of the readings.
- Q: Do I have to include a bibliography for the response paper?
A: If you only reference the assigned readings for the week, then no. But if you reference outside material, then you will want to include citations for that material.
- Q: Is it okay to use the word "I" in my response paper?
A: Yes, that is fine. You should avoid overusing it, though. In general, you want each of your sentences to make a clear claim or to provide support for those claims with logic or evidence. To do so, there's not much of a need to self-reference.
- Q: Will I be graded on my grammar and writing style?
A: In short, yes. While I will not be explicitly counting the number of awkward phrases or grammatical errors in your paper, these things do inevitably play a role in how we evaluate your performance on the response papers and other writing assignments for this class. The main reason is that we want you to express your ideas and arguments clearly. If your paper is overly verbose, clunky, and riddled with grammatical errors, then then presentation of your ideas is not as clear as it should be. You might want to visit the Hume Writing Center if you are worried about your writing style, and you may also want to submit your first response paper early so that I can give you feedback before any of the other writing assignments for this class is due.
- Q: How should I submit my response paper? Do I really have to submit it as a word document (.doc or .docx) via email?
A: Yes, you do. You should follow the guidelines for submitting the assignment outline in the course and section syllabus. You should also follow all formatting requirements outlined in these documents as well.
- Q: Is it okay if I go over the page limit?
A: No, your assignment should not be longer than 2-pages, doubled-spaced. If you have one sentence that trails onto a third page, that is fine, but more than that is grounds for penalizing your grade. One point of the assignment is for you to learn how to write in a concise way.
- Q: Will late assignments be accepted?
A: No.