

A Guide for Composing Response Journals

Professor Bob Broad, Department of English, Illinois State University

In this course I will require you to compose a “Response Journal.” Since reasons and methods for assigning/composing response journals aren’t familiar to (or the same for) everyone, I’ll explain mine briefly below.

Rationale

I require you to write responses to questions, texts, events, and other things because I believe that writing promotes learning and thinking. My favorite explanation of the doctrines of “writing-to-learn” and “writing-to-think” comes from Peter Elbow’s *Writing without Teachers*:

Think of writing then not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message. Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn’t have started out thinking. Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you free yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive. You make available to yourself something better than what you’d be stuck with if you’d actually succeeded in making your meaning clear at the start.

If you consider the above quotation closely, you will learn a lot about what I believe, value, practice, and encourage regarding writing, thinking, and learning. In short, I believe you will learn more and better if you make active and creative use of your response journal in this course.

Frequently Asked Questions

“What is the journal for?”

Use your journal as a tool to help you think and learn more and better about the content of this course.

“To what will I ‘respond’?”

Most entries I assign will probably be responses to readings for the course. Other entries might be: answers to questions posed by the professor and/or students, reflections on your writing processes, self-evaluations of your work in the course, records of your out-of-class research, “open” entries in response to whatever you find useful to yourself and the other members of the class (including the professor), or something else.

“How much should I write?”

The length requirement for each of your journal entries depends on your “level” within the university’s hierarchy of courses. Find your course level and for each entry write at least the number of words indicated.

- 100-level courses: 300 words of intensely focused but informal exploratory writing
- 200- and 300-level courses: 500 words of intensely focused but informal exploratory writing
- graduate (400- and 500-level) courses: 750 words of intensely focused but informal exploratory writing

For 100- and 200-level undergraduate courses: In most of these courses, I assign between 8 and 12 journal entries. To help avoid “journal burnout,” if you are assigned more than seven (7) journal entries, then you may skip one (1) journal entry of your choice out of those required without penalty or guilt.

For graduate and advanced undergraduate courses: Here, I usually assign between 6 and 8 journal entries. Because I assign fewer entries in these courses (and also because you are graduate or advanced undergraduate students), I normally do not provide the option to skip journal entries. Also for graduate students: readings for a particular journal entry will usually include multiple chapters and/or journal articles. In most cases, I encourage students to discuss **more than one** of the chapters or articles assigned, as a way of getting different parts of the readings “talking to one another.” However, if *in one or two cases* a student wants to focus exclusively on a single chapter or article in greater depth, this is acceptable.

“What about ‘grammar’?”

Make your entries readable, but beyond that don’t expend energy on adhering to the conventions of academic dialect, sometimes referred to as “standard written English.” Rather than focusing on spelling, punctuation, syntax, and usage, you need to focus on “cooking and growing” your ideas and insights. (Command of academic dialect is, I believe, a very important consideration in most formal and/or published writing. But not for the raw, exploratory writing-to-learn that you’ll do in your response journal.) Writing a journal entry is a creative, intellectual, emotional process. Write fast. For the sake of readability, write your entries on a computer or word processor if possible.

“Who is the audience for my journal entries?”

Your audience will in all cases be your fellow students and your professor. Treat your response journal as a *public document*; you will very likely be asked to share every journal entry you compose during the subsequent class meeting.

“What should I write about?”

I urge you to write about what most interests, concerns, and moves you in whatever you are responding to. Assuming your own questions, insights, feelings, and imagination are exciting to you, journal writing need not be busy-work or drudgery. Since everyone gets stuck now and then, and since suggestions may help you jump out of a “journaling rut,” below I offer some specific suggestions for what you can do in a response journal entry.

- **Summarize.** If it helps you get started on your response, briefly summarize the text (or whatever) to which you are responding. *Note, however, that summary does not “count” as part of your response.*

- **Extend/Apply.** Grasp the ideas in the thing to which you are responding and take them further. If the text is theoretical, pursue the implications of the ideas with regard to a specific situation or example.
- **Connect/Compare.** Bring the text to which you are responding into “dialogue” with other texts we’ve read, class discussions, your experiences, your expectations for the future.
- **Agree/Disagree.** It’s easier to be interesting by disagreeing than by agreeing, but I believe the ability to agree creatively is also important.
- **Discover/Interpret.** Try to read (that is, make meaning of) the text in a way that will not be obvious to most readers. Try to notice something others might not notice.
- **Question.** Raise some intelligent, fruitful questions. You may also want to answer your own questions. You can speculate by asking “What if . . . ?”
- **Synthesize.** Pull together ideas and examples from diverse sources and pose a unifying idea, insight, or theme related to the reading.
- **Revise.** Look back on a previous reading, journal response, class discussion, or other experience, and see whether the current text gives you a new idea or leads you to change your mind.
- **Inform.** In response to the reading, do some research. Share relevant information, evidence, facts, quotations, clippings, details, and other data.
- **What’s missing?** What do you wish or believe *should* have been addressed in this reading that was not addressed?
(Thanks to student Matthew Medrala for inspiring this journaling strategy in fall 2014.)

[Note: I borrowed, sometimes verbatim, some of these categories of thinking from Toby Fulwiler’s *The Journal Book*.]

“What about ‘non-alphabetic’ entries?”

Following the suggestions of Patricia Dunn in her book *Talking, Sketching, Moving*, I encourage (but do not require) every student to experiment with any or all of the following kinds of journal entries.

1. **Oral/Audio.** Provide a spoken journal entry in audio format. Original music and/or song is another audio option. You can record your entry on my office voice mail (309-438-7704) or record it and provide it in mp3 (via e-mail) or wav (on CD) file format.
2. **Visual.** Create a visual response. Make a collage, sketch, cartoon, sculpture, Venn diagram, graph (bar, pie, etc.), conceptual web, flow chart, puzzle, multimedia, etc.
3. **Moving.** Drama, dance, puppet show, mime (“Dancing is drawing the world.” –Paolo Freire)
4. **Other.** Some combination of the above options or something I have not yet heard of that represents an engaged response.

“How will Professor Broad evaluate my journal?”

Your Response Journal is an important part of the work you do in this course. It also makes visible important kinds of work that otherwise remain invisible (e.g., reading and thinking). You can therefore expect it to count as a significant part of your grade for the course.

I will assess both the *quantity* and the *quality* of the writing you do in your journal. At some point in the semester I will evaluate the quantity and quality your journal writing and offer you some response. Then at the end of the term I will re-assess your journal as a part of your course portfolio, a collection of all the written work you produce in the course.

“What do students say about response journals in Professor Broad's classes?”

“I must admit that having to do a journal entry forces me to actually read the chapter or the article, instead of skimming it like I would do many times, as sad as that may be to admit!!” (Eng. 297, Fall 2003)

A Few Other Details

At the beginning of every entry in your journal, please be sure to write four pieces of information:

1. Your last name,
2. The date on which you are writing,
3. The number of this entry (e.g., "Journal Entry #7),
4. The topic of this entry (your idea, the name of the thing to which you are responding, or both), and
5. A title for this entry (you can be creative).

References

- Dunn, Patricia A. *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook (Heinemann), 2001.
 - Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.
 - Fulwiler, Toby. *The Journal Book*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook (Heinemann), 1988.
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