

Reading responses

Reasoning:

Although the reading responses may seem like a draconian way to check whether you've done the reading, their main purpose is to help you improve your concise critical writing skills. The ability to synthesize and critique large amounts of complex material in one to two pages is one of the most important skills you can learn in college. You will use these skills in your professional life more often than you think: writing policy or business memos, e-mails, blogs, talks.

The purpose of these essays is also to help you absorb the material, to get you to think critically about the principal readings before class, and to set the stage for a thoughtful discussion during seminar time.

Logistics:

Each reading response should be two pages in length or less (double spaced, 1 inch margins, 12 point font in Times New Roman) and posted to our class website (Blackboard) by 3pm the day before class. At 3pm, my assistant will print them and give them to me for marking; I won't check the website after 3pm. Late responses are not accepted.

You will write nine reading responses. That is, three out of the 12 class weeks you will *not* write one: not the first week, nor the week of your take home midterm, and not on a "grace week" of your choice.

Writing Guidance:

Your response should only spend one or two sentences summarizing a take-away from the reading or set of readings. (I will allow you to write only about one paper, but I prefer that you bring more than one paper into play in your response.) Then you should immediately turn to discussing and analyzing the paper or papers' points. "Discussion" can mean comparing or critiquing or exploring implications. You should avoid simply repeating material from the readings, and avoid obvious criticisms if possible. Your critiques may be original or you may include and reference outside critiques (including past readings we covered; it would be good, though it is not a requirement, to bring them into conversation with each other). Comments should be written in concise prose—that is, sentences rather than phrases or bullets.

To receive a strong grade, responses should display knowledge from the majority of the week's readings, or should say something interesting or thoughtful about one in particular. How you organize your response is up to you, but the best strategy is probably to have two to three clear, persuasive points or critiques, backed up with convincing argument or evidence. You will be evaluated on your ability to think and write clearly, creatively, and originally.

Grading:

These responses are a big part (40%) of your grade—other than the reading responses you will only have a brief take home midterm and a final paper.

I will use a number grade: (4+) inspired, (4/4-) thoughtful and interesting, (3) meets expectations, (2) below expectations, and (1) needs serious improvement. Missing reading responses will receive a zero.