

Reading Responses

In her book *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg tells us, “If you read good books, when you write, good books will come out of you.” Well, maybe it’s not quite that simple, but reading—in an engaged way—is definitely crucial to learning how to write well. Good writing shows us possibilities for our own writing, inspires us, and encourages us to take risks and try new things. So, while we’re mainly writing this semester, we’ll also be reading, mostly essays that serve as models for your own work.

One of the best ways to develop an active engagement with what you read is to write an informal response. As you write, try not to spend too much time summarizing the text. You can identify what you are writing about as you begin with something like, “When I started reading so-and-so’s story about her dog....” But the main thing is to quickly enter into conversation with what you’ve read, exploring what the writer is trying to say and how he or she does it, and giving back your own reactions and thoughts.

I urge you to read these mostly short assigned essays more than once. On a first read, just listen. On a second, jot down responses, ideally on a hard copy of the text—noting spots that interest you or seem important. Note your own questions or reactions. Then, when you write your response, try writing in close to your natural voice as you would speak to a friend. Ground your writing in the particular by referring to or including specific passages or phrases from each essay as example or to clarify what you’re saying. If there is more than one text, you may choose to include all your responses in one longer piece or address them separately in three shorter ones. In either case, your response should incorporate and comment on specific passages from each essay along with more general response.

Ten Questions to Help Generate Engaged Reading Responses

You do not have to answer all these questions in your reading responses. They’re simply prompts that may help you start writing and focus your thoughts. And some may apply more or less to a particular text.

1. What’s the title? How does it help us understand what’s important in the text?
2. What is the writer’s central focus or question? What issue or experience or situation or contradiction is the writer exploring?
3. What point of view does the writer bring to this piece? What kind of person does he or she seem to be? What clues do you find in the writer’s voice?
4. Who, do you think, is the writer’s intended audience? How does that influence her or his voice and what he or she writes about?
5. What particularly caught your attention or surprised you?
6. What phrases or passages seem particularly significant?
7. What do you think of the writer’s style—strategy of presentation and use of language? Here, again, be specific—quote a telling phrase or two.
8. What insight(s) does the writer come to? How?
9. Did this reading remind you of experiences from your own life, general observations you’ve had, other writing (or movie or music, etc) you know? How do they relate?
10. What did you find most interesting or provocative in this piece?

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21W.021 Writing and Experience: MIT: Inside, Live
Fall 2013

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