

A Brief Guide for Writing Reaction/Position Papers[†]**The Purpose of a Reaction Paper**

A reaction paper is an essay that is designed to respond specifically to ideas, arguments, claims, or theories, advanced in a particular text or by a specific author. Reaction papers are not mere summaries of what the author wrote—the assumption being that the reader (of the reaction paper) is familiar with the text you are responding to and so a summary is unnecessary. Quotes, however, are essential, to support your points/claims. Reaction papers should take a position in regard to the text and move beyond the ideas/claims of the text's author. In a reaction paper, unlike a position paper, it is not necessary to develop your own unique thesis, however, it is necessary to thoughtfully engage the ideas of the author and explicate how they relate to, or inform, your own scholarly interests. Reaction papers are not written in “stream of consciousness,” nor are they opportunities to “write-about-whatever-you-feel”; reaction papers should respond to the text.

The Purpose of a Position Paper

A position paper refers to an essay in which you build a theoretically grounded case for a position or problem. The position must be your own, based on your own study, and not simply a (artful) rehash of others' ideas to which you've contributed little more than structure. The goal of a position paper is to develop a thesis from which some new, or potentially useful, line of thought regarding some body of research or knowledge might emerge.

Using Sources

In general, you should rely on primary rather than secondary sources in your papers. For example a reaction or position paper on some aspects of Burke's theories should make reference to what Burke himself actually wrote. Do not rely on second-hand sources and never use a second-hand source's quote of an original source. Instead, go to the original source and verify the accuracy of the quotation, and make sure that the quotation was not taken out of context. Note, however, that some sources, because of their unique application of concepts from Burke, Aristotle, Gadamer, etc., are considered original sources.

Using your notes to reconstruct what some author said based on what I said in lecture does not even count as a secondary source. Presumably, I have some theoretical justification for the claims that I make in lecture; if you want to use those claims in your papers then you must trace them to their original source.

Finally, a dictionary never counts as a source. Rarely, dictionaries are used as foils to say something like “the common understanding of term X is . . . (OED), however . . .” Since authors are so careful to define the terms that are used in our field, you are also expected to know how they are used and cite them appropriately.

[†] Substantial portions of this discussion—indeed, I have “borrowed” liberally—come from W.L. Nothstine's, “Winter 1992, Contemporary Rhetorical Theory” syllabus, University of Oregon.

Evaluation of Position Papers

The uniqueness and originality of an idea are often one of the prime features of its value and utility. Judgments of uniqueness and originality are based on the standards of the current research in the area. Thus, in order to be confident that your essay is not simply some reinvention of some long known wheel, a sound essay must be based on informed, accepted, and current research from the area in question. A strong position paper demonstrates originality, depth of understanding, and breadth of study.

Since a position paper is essentially an argument, you must also have a clear claim, thesis, or position, support for your claims, careful and thoughtful use of evidence and reasoning, and a sound organizational structure.

Thus, position papers are usually evaluated based on the following three criteria (assuming that college level writing standards have first been met):

1. How interesting, useful, or consequential, is the information advanced by the author?
2. How effectively does the author display a grasp of the relevant research in the specific topic area?
3. How carefully and persuasively does the author argue in support of his/her central thesis or claim?

What Forms can the Arguments in a Position Paper take?

Arguments may take any of a number of elementary forms. Below are three; the list is not exhaustive.

Form 1: The Apparent Inconsistency Within a Theoretical Position

General Logical Form: Identifying and exploring a potential issue of consistency or coherency within a single theorist's work and explaining the importance of the issue.

Example: Author X makes the following claims regarding the role of symmetry in public relations. . . .

Three pages later, author X seems to contradict him/herself when s/he claims . . .

This contradiction is important for the following reasons . . . ; Or, this contradiction suggests the following important consideration, or insight, into author A's position . . .

Form 2: Reconciling Two Different Theoretical Explanations

General Logical Form: Identifying and exploring a potential issue of consistency or coherency between two (or more) theorists' discussion of the same concept and explaining the importance of the issue.

Example: Author X makes the following claims regarding the role of dialogue in public relations . . .

Author Y, meanwhile, argues that dialogue serves a seemingly different function and reaches a significantly different conclusion than X . . .

The difference between these two positions is important because . . . ; or, the difference between these two positions suggests the following useful insight into the practice of public relations . . . ; or, the apparent contradiction is not a contradiction at all . . .

Form 3: Clarifying the Relationship Between Theory and Practice

General Logical Form: Identifying and exploring a potential issue of consistency, coherency, scope, or application, raised between the application of public relations (rhetorical, communication, etc.) theory and application of that theory in practice, and explaining the importance of the issue.

Example: Author X (and perhaps Y and Z) argues that public relations practitioners' Web sites should do the following . . .

However, an examination of 10 organizational Web sites indicates that Author X's suggestions are not being followed because . . . ; or, after examining 10 Web sites it is discovered that the X's theory actually describes a different phenomenon than originally suggested by X . . .

As a result of this analysis, it is discovered that X's theory has the following limitations (or extensions) . . .