

Thinking It Through: A Guide to Writing Think Pieces, Reflection Papers, and Reaction Papers

No. 55 in the Writing Center Handout Series

These assignments are short papers with an informal tone that convey critical thought about a reading or series of readings (sometimes instructors may ask for think pieces about films, lectures, or other kinds of texts). More than just an emotional response to an assignment, think pieces, reflection papers, and reaction papers should evaluate and question. Think pieces should ultimately bring forth new ideas and concepts about the text and show clear, critical, and independent thought. All three types of assignments require the same steps—reading, thinking, and of course, writing.

Reading the text: How you read the text is just as important as how you write about the text. There are many things to consider as you read.

- Keep the assignment in mind. Does the assignment ask for a response to a specific issue within the text, or does it ask for a more general and open response targeting the text as a whole?
- Underline or mark passages that “speak” to you. This will save time during the writing stage.
- Write down ideas that are sparked by the text, so you won’t forget your immediate reactions. These ideas might lead to the topic of your think piece (and they might prove useful for class discussions).
- Note the smaller themes in the text as well as the larger ones. They may turn out to be pivotal to the direction of your paper.

Thinking about the Text: How you think about the text provides a segue way into writing about the text. Here are a few questions to ponder while you think.

- How do you react to the text? Does anything strike you as particularly interesting, bothersome, worthy of further thought? Answering these questions will help you come up with ideas for topics.
- Where are the holes in the text? Does the author cover the topic thoroughly? What has the author left out that you feel is integral? Are there any questionable assumptions made by the author? These can be points to elaborate on during writing.
- What path do you want your reflections to take? After exploring your initial reaction, consider what direction to pursue. Short outlines, diagrams, or lists of ideas to cover can be useful at this point.

Writing about the Text: How you write about the text is a reflection of what you thought while reading. Consider these tips as you write.

- Though your think piece need not follow a formal essay structure, some sense of organization, content, and clarity is still important.
- Lead your reader somewhere beyond the simple observation; in other words, make a point or several points and examine them in depth.
- Use examples and quotations from the assigned text to support what you say. Effective quotations make the piece more convincing and stronger.
- Don’t merely summarize. Develop your own thoughts and reflections in connection to the text.
- Use the assignment to express more than how you “feel” about the text or problem. Whether you liked the text or not is relevant but should not be the central focus of your think piece.
- Make connections between the assigned text and the course content (lecture or discussion topics, other readings, films, guest lectures, student presentations). Show that you are thinking holistically.
- Above all, explore your own ideas and thoughts about the assigned text; after all, that is the point of the assignment. Think pieces are designed to make you, the writer, think!

For more information on writing think pieces, reflection papers, and reaction papers, see

The Responsive Writer, Jocelyn Siler

The Student Writer, Barbara Fine Clause. 364-392



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