

## Preparing to Write the Summary and Response Essay

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If you've listened to the Prewriting and the Writing Process lecture in this learning unit, you know that when you write an essay responding to a source, you won't be able to begin writing a draft until you've done some extensive prewriting. And, particularly in the case of response essays like the one you'll be writing over the next few weeks, the quality of your essay's ideas will depend largely upon the quality of your prewriting process. It's difficult to develop insights into or respond adequately to an essay unless you've first spent some time thinking about and analyzing the essay to which you're responding.

To help you prewrite effectively for this essay, I'd like to take you through some steps to writing the Summary and Response. If you haven't done so yet, be sure to read the "Summary and Response Assignment Sheet" and perhaps even look over the sample student essays so that you understand the assignment guidelines before you begin thinking about how to prewrite for this essay. Once you understand the basic essay requirements, you should be ready to follow these steps.

1. To begin, **read and annotate the text**. During this first read-through, I recommend marking ideas that stand out to you and perhaps even beginning to write questions in the margins. Doing so will help you engage with the text and help you begin responding even as you read the essay for the first time. At this point, though, do not worry about understanding every argument and point the text puts forward. Just read for basic content and enjoyment.
2. Next, **jot down your initial responses**. After you've read the text once and have begun annotating, I recommend taking a few minutes to jot down your initial responses. Which points do you agree with? Which points do you disagree with? What stands out to you in the essay? What questions do you have? Did you have any sort of emotional response to the essay? These initial responses will force you to begin thinking about the essay and may even come in handy later in the writing process.
3. After reading and providing an initial reaction, you will need to **analyze the text's rhetoric**. This is one of the most important steps in preparing to write a summary and response essay. Your textbook recommends considering the following as you analyze rhetorical choices: situation, audience, purpose, and claims.
  - a. In thinking about **situation**, we usually ask, "What is the larger conversation, problem, or reality to which this essay is responding?"
  - b. In thinking about **audience**, we ask, "To or for whom is this essay written?" and consider ways in which tone, vocabulary, examples, and discussion point to a particular assumed or intended audience.
  - c. In considering **purpose**, we ask, "What is the author trying to accomplish?" For instance, an author might be trying to persuade us, inform us, raise doubts, raise awareness, or even entertain.

- d. Finally, in evaluating **claims**, we ask, “What is the main argument being put forward in this essay, and what claims and evidence does the author use to back up his point?” Figuring out the author’s claims is absolutely crucial to responding well to the author’s essay, because if you don’t understand what the author is saying, you can’t summarize what the author is saying, nor can you adequately respond to the essay’s content.
4. Next, **brainstorm more complex responses**. Now that you have carefully considered the essay’s basic rhetoric, you should be ready to develop a more insightful response to your essay. To do so, you should make a list of **points you agree with**, points you **disagree with**, and points you think the author might have **ignored or overlooked**. The “Summary and Response Brainstorming Worksheet” in this learning unit should help you organize your ideas.
5. Now you should be ready to **develop a working thesis statement**. If you’ve completed your reading assignment for this week, you know that a working thesis statement is simply a **draft of the main argument** you would like to make. At this point, you don’t have to worry about carefully polishing and perfecting your thesis, but you do need to develop a basic argument to focus your essay.

For guidance in writing a good thesis, I strongly recommend completing the reading assignments on thesis statements as well as looking carefully at the “Developing a Thesis Statement Handout” in this learning unit. The reading will help you understand thesis statements and the handout will give you specific examples and instruction after which to model your own finalized thesis statement for the Summary and Response Essay.

6. After you’ve got a working thesis, **develop main points to support your thesis**. That is, come up with major reasons to explain, support, or prove your thesis. Depending upon how much you have to say about each of your main points, a three to five page paper would probably include about two to four main points to develop the thesis. Each main point should be developed using at least one body paragraph, but of course, you could write more than one paragraph to support and develop each main point. For more instruction on developing main points, please see the “Developing Main Points Handout.”
7. Next, **brainstorm information to support each main point**. Now that you have your two to four main points, you need to be sure you have something to say about each main point and enough information to write at least one paragraph for each main point. To help you prepare to develop each main point, you will probably want to think about the following:
  - a. First, what does the **author say in relationship to your point**? Since your essay responds to the author’s ideas, it would be good to briefly mention the author’s point on a specific issue to set up your response to that issue.
  - b. Second, what **personal experiences** do you have that might help you illustrate or prove your point?

- c. Third, **what have you observed** in culture and life around you that logically illustrates or supports your point?
  - d. Fourth, what (if any) **hypothetical examples** might you use to help illustrate or support your point?
8. After you've brainstormed content, **create an outline**. If you have followed steps five through seven, you should have all of the material needed for your outline. Developing an outline helps you map out where your essay is headed, think through the connections among your main points, and visualize the amount of support you have for each main point. The outlining stage is a good opportunity to polish your thesis statement and main points, and if necessary, rethink organization.
  9. Finally, **draft the essay**. After completing all of these prewriting steps, you should finally be ready to draft your essay. As you draft, consider starting with the sections of the essay you are most comfortable writing, and then moving to the trickier parts. For instance, a lot of students start by writing the thesis statement and body paragraphs, and then go back to write the introduction and the conclusion once they've worked out all of their main ideas.

Looking at steps one through eight, you probably recognize that the prewriting phase of the writing process for the Summary and Response Essay is quite time-consuming. And you're right, but if you take the time to prewrite, actually drafting the essay should be much less stressful than if you had merely read the professional essay and sat down to write the response essay. Considering how time-consuming this process is, you'll want to be sure to get started analyzing, brainstorming, and outlining this week so that next week you'll have time to focus on drafting and revision.