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Zachary Schrag's Guidelines for History Students

How to Write a Reading Response

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Professors who wish to force students to not only read assigned texts but to think about them as well may assign reading responses. A reading response is an essay about a book, and like any essay, it must argue a thesis. The thesis should not be the thesis of the author under review. Rather, it is your own argument about the book.

Most published book reviews are poor models for reading responses, since they emphasize summary over analysis, but occasionally a review fits the response form. A good example is Professor Michael S. Sherry's essay, "[The Triumph of Democratic Capitalism-Without the Democracy and the Capitalism](#)" (review of John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), *Reviews in American History* 25 (December 1997) 531-536. Gaddis argues that Cold War American policy-makers "were projecting abroad a tradition they had long taken for granted at home: that civility made sense; that spontaneity . . . was the path to political and economic robustness; that to intimidate or to overmanage was to stifle." Sherry replies that "although defensible, such claims are maddeningly unexamined." Sherry does not simply wish that Gaddis had written a different book, for it is Gaddis, not Sherry, who first links domestic politics and foreign policy. In lamenting the lack of evidence for Gaddis's assertions, Sherry takes Gaddis on his own terms and shows that more work must be done. One of my students aptly termed this a "yes, but" approach. Yes, Gaddis makes good points about strategy, but he has failed to prove that American statesmen were committed to democratic values. This thesis applauds what is good in Gaddis's work, and points out a silence that is relevant to Gaddis's argument. Your goal is to craft a comparable argument, one that is both respectful and critical.

To prove your thesis, you need evidence. Your general impression of a work is not enough; you must cite specific facts, with page numbers. Focusing on a specific fact or event lets you show how the author's thesis does or does not explain that fact or event, or how another argument might explain it better. Direct quotation is also helpful, also with page numbers. It is especially important to quote when you disagree with an author, as Sherry does when he wants to show that Gaddis, not he, introduces the themes of civility and spontaneity. In addition to supporting your thesis, you are letting your instructor know how carefully you read. And you are getting ready for class discussion. If you write in your essay that you are unconvinced by an author's assertions about the civility of American politics, you should be ready to raise your hand in class to point to the relevant passage and to ask if your classmates had the same reaction.

While evidence from the assigned book is essential, it is often helpful to include evidence from outside the book as well. In the example, Sherry wants to prove that Gaddis should have paid more attention to race and gender.

To make this point, he cites books by Loren Baritz and Michael Hunt. Using one book from a course to understand a later book in the course makes the course into something more than a collection of discrete texts. And applying what you have learned in one course to another course makes your education more than a collection of unrelated topics.

Like evidence, structure is important. A reading response is not like the commentary track on a DVD, in which a director watches the film and says whatever pops into his mind. If anything, it is more like a trailer for the film, in which short clips are presented in a new order, for another result. In Sherry's case, a simple check of page references shows how he has reordered Gaddis's facts and words to suit his purpose.

Writing an essay means knowing what to leave out. Unless a book's format is important to your argument, you need not comment on its typography, the choice of footnotes vs. endnotes, or the presence of a bibliography. Comments on writing style and the use of illustrations may be important, but only if they support your thesis. And even arguments and facts that are very important to the book's author may not be important to your essay. A good response should address one or more issues that are central to understanding the book, but it need not address all such issues. You are approaching the book from one angle, perhaps emphasizing just one theme.

Finally, remember the context. I generally assign reading responses to prepare students for discussion classes. Since the whole class has read the same book, summary is unnecessary. Rather, the response is a chance for you to work out your thoughts about a book on paper, before the discussion itself. Once the discussion begins, you should be prepared to tell your classmates something they do not already know.