

Response Paper Guidelines

You are required to write **three brief response papers** over the course of the semester. The papers should each offer an **analysis** of a primary or secondary source, or some combination thereof. You may choose to submit them when you wish. However, everyone must submit them by the following deadlines at the latest:

- Response Paper #1 by 11:59pm **September 18th (Week 3)**
- Response Paper #2 by 11:59pm **November 6th (Week 9)**
- Response Paper #3 by 11:59pm **December 4th (Week 13)**

Response Paper Requirements:

- (1) **Length: 2-3 pages** (600-900 words), double-spaced. Use a standard font, such as Times New Roman, Garamond, or Arial.
- (2) Use Chicago-style **footnotes**. If you follow Chicago guidelines, which you can find at [this link](#), there will be no need for a bibliography.
- (3) Include **page numbers** at the bottom of each page. [Here are instructions](#) on how to insert page numbers in Google Docs.
- (4) Submit your paper in **.doc or .docx format**. If you use Google Docs, you can export it as a .docx format if you follow [these instructions](#).
- (5) Include your **surname in the file name** when you submit it to Moodle.
- (6) The paper should **make a single argument** that is not obvious from the text or texts themselves.
- (7) The paper must **substantiate its claims with evidence** from the texts and/or the historical context in which they were produced.
- (8) You should **provide sufficient background context** for a reader unfamiliar with the topic or text to understand your argument.
- (9) When you address a source, **briefly introduce it**, attending to its author(s), its audience, and the context of its creation, before diving into its significance.

What the response paper should not be:

- (1) It should not merely summarize the source or sources in question.
- (2) It should not be merely about how you feel about it, or about its quality, or whether it is right or wrong.

Your response papers should have:

- (1) **An introduction** - Introductions should serve to frame your argument. Your introduction may offer some historical context and background information. You should give the reader a sense of what your argument will be and how you will set about making your case. Poor introductions often suffer from one or both of the following faults: they are far too general or they are not clearly relevant to the essay's body or central argument.
- (2) **A clearly articulated thesis statement** – see [this guide on thesis statements and arguments](#).
- (3) **Analysis** - Make sure you get beneath the surface of things. Be critical, and keep in mind that critical thinking is sophisticated, but not necessarily negative—critical minds can, in fact, still agree! Do not parrot your sources; rather take the time to deconstruct them, figure out what they are really about, **why** they say what they do, and **how** they make their case. Always discuss the significance of the points you raise, tell the reader exactly why things are interesting and/or important.
 - a. **Example:** The 1917 Corfu Declaration proclaimed that the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes “constitute[] but one nation.” This notion of uniting disparate groups into a single polity went against the overwhelming current of breaking multinational states apart in the aftermath of the First World War.

- (4) **Use of evidence** to support your argument. Do not simply state that a document proves your point; tell the reader exactly **how** and **why** this piece of evidence applies to the argument you are making.

Bad example: Marx and Engels said that economic forces were the main drivers of history.

Good example: By asserting that the National Assembly “abolished feudal property in favor of bourgeois property,” Marx and Engels reinterpreted the causes and consequences of the French Revolution to emphasize social and economic factors over purely political ones.

- (5) **A conclusion** - Conclusions should be more than a restatement of your argument. You do want to return to your thesis and remind the reader how the essay has supported what you are arguing. The best conclusions, however, always push further. Tell the reader why your argument is interesting or significant—how might it apply in another case? What broader lessons might we draw? In what way does your argument affect an ongoing scholarly debate?

A far from exhaustive list of the types of response papers:

- (1) Conduct a close reading of a primary source, advancing an argument about some aspect of it that is of significance.
- (2) Take two or more sources about the same topic/phenomenon in the same time period and comparatively analyze the differences between their viewpoints or stances. Once you identify differences, you should use historical context or what you know about the author to offer an explanation.

- (3) Compare and contrast some aspect of two primary sources from the same period to arrive at a conclusion that is not immediately obvious.
- (4) Make an argument for why a given primary source contradicts or undermines a secondary source.
- (5) Comparatively analyze the approaches of two different secondary sources. Do they illuminate similar and different phenomena if we consider the differences between them? What types of evidence do they use?

Questions to ask when approaching sources to develop your interpretation:

Below are some of the questions you should ask when approaching and analyzing primary sources. Consider also the guides on analyzing sources that I have posted in Moodle under “Resources.” This is not an exhaustive list. You are also not limited to these questions. If you are interested in other questions, feel free to write on those too. If you are unsure what you would like to write on, I would be happy to brainstorm with you.

PRINT PRIMARY SOURCES:

Phase 1: Observe its Parts:

1. Who made it? Can you tell if one person created it? Or was it a group, like an organization?
 - a. If we do not know who made it, what does their language and text suggest about who they are?
2. When was the source created?
3. What personal or specific information is included about the person or group who made it?

4. Who is the intended audience? Was it meant for one person or for the public more generally? How might this affect how we interpret the source's significance?

Phase 2: Try to make sense of the source.

1. What do you know about this primary source or where it comes from that helps you understand it?
2. What else was happening at the time this was created? How does that context (or background information) help you understand why it was created?
3. What details reveal the creator's perspective. What clues can you find about their background or point of view?
4. What is the author's gender, class, race, occupation, religion, age, region, or political belief? Do any of these matter? How?
5. Why was this primary source created? What does the author hope to achieve or communicate?
6. What message is implicit in what is written or shown?

Phase 3: Use it as historical evidence:

1. This is one piece of a larger story. What questions do you have that this primary source doesn't answer?
2. What evidence does the creator present that you should "fact check" (verify as true)? Do other sources support or contradict this?
3. This primary source shows one perspective on this topic. What other perspectives should you get? Is there disagreement (or agreement) between historical actors? Is there a change from earlier sources? How much does one source represent the individual author's views and how much does it reflect the broader context?

4. What metaphors or symbols does the author use? What can the author's choice of words tell us? What about silences?

Additional Analytical Questions:

1. What or whom does the source seem to view as authoritative?
2. Does the source divide people into groups in any way? If so, what are those groups?
3. Does the source make assumptions about how those groups do or should relate to one another? About how individuals relate to one another?
4. Does the source make moral distinctions? If so, what is viewed as good? As bad? What values does the source seem to assume?
5. What unspoken assumptions does the source make?
6. What is not said in the source? Is the author choosing not to speak about something?
7. How does this text support, challenge, or nuance what we have read or discussed in the course so far?
8. How does a certain word or idea in one source compare to how another source from the same period portrays it? For example, if multiple sources are talking about "freedom," do the authors of each source understand that term to mean the same or different things? Why?
9. If you are looking at a word or idea in multiple sources from different time periods, can any historical developments separating them help explain their differences? E.g. Did feminists of the French Revolution understand their goals, methods, or place in society similarly or differently than feminists in the 1890s? What historical context can you draw on to help explain this transformation?
10. If comparing primary sources from different time periods, do the contrasts in some aspect of these sources reveal larger social, political, and cultural changes? What are they?

11. If the source is trying to convince its reader of something, what types of evidence and language (words, phrases, images, symbols) does the author use to persuade its audience?
12. How might the circumstances and historical context of a source's creation affect the meaning or significance of its content?

Analytic questions:

1. What can't we learn from this source? What questions do you wish the source answered?
2. How strong or convincing is the author's argument? Where are its weaknesses? Could it be stronger in some places than in others? Does the author provide satisfactory evidence for their claims?
3. What else was happening at the time this was created? How does that context (or background information) help you understand why it was created? Where, when, and why did the author produce this text?
4. What metaphors or symbols does the author use? What can the author's choice of words tell us? What about silences?

SECONDARY SOURCES:

Descriptive questions:

- (1) Who is the author? What does the author say? What is the author's central claim or argument?
- (2) Why does the author make this claim? Historians are usually writing in dialogue with other historians. Is the author arguing against a rival interpretation or some accepted wisdom? What is the author's implicit or explicit agenda?
- (3) What types of primary sources does the author use?

Analytic questions:

- (1) How strong or convincing is the author's argument? Where are its weaknesses? Could it be stronger in some places than in others? Does the author provide satisfactory evidence for their claims? How might the author's choice of primary sources have affected their argument or interpretation?
- (2) How should the context of a source's production or consumption shape our reading of it?
- (3) What might the author's biases be?
- (4) How does this author's perspective compare or contrast with other perspectives or arguments we've encountered?

Resources to help you analyze sources:

Guide to "Close Reading" <https://classicswrites.hsites.harvard.edu/close-reading-0>