

Responding to Literature (page 1 of 2)

By Dr. Karen Petit

1. A paper that responds to literature usually includes some summary; however, a writer's own views about the literature are also needed, as well as analysis, evaluation, and/or interpretation.
2. A paper about literature should have a clear structure, including an introduction, a thesis statement, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
3. A thesis should state an author's opinion about a work of literature, so the thesis should not be a quotation, a paraphrase, or a summary of someone else's ideas.
4. A thesis in a response paper should be supported with quotations from the work of literature, details from the literature, and quotations/summaries/paraphrases from critical sources.
5. When borrowing ideas or words from critics, from Internet sources, and even from one's friends, a writer must use correct documentation, including a citation and a Works Cited entry.
6. Wherever possible, present tense verbs should be used.

Questions for Analysis of Literature

Reader Response

1. Did you like or dislike the story/poem/play? Why or why not?
2. As a reader, how did you initially respond to the work of literature?
3. Did your response to the literature change after reading it a second time, analyzing the parts, and/or discussing it in class?

Plot and Structure

1. What happens in the story, play, or poem?
2. What kind(s) of conflict do you see in the work of literature?
3. What do the different parts of the literature contribute to the whole structure?

Setting

1. When and where did the story take place?
2. Are there historical or cultural events that happened at the same time or place as the story?
3. Is the author of the literature making connections between the literary work and real-life?

Tone

1. What is the author's attitude toward the subject area?
2. How does the tone affect the meaning of the literature?

Character

1. Which character does the reader most closely identify with? This character is the protagonist. Is there an antagonist (someone in conflict with the protagonist)?
2. Character evaluation might include the use of adjectives, such as "flat," "stale," "round," and "stereotypical."
3. What are the motives for one or more of the characters' actions?
4. How are the characters interacting with each other and with their environment?
5. Do you see any changes in the characters' actions, motivations, and/or interactions?

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Point of View

1. If the words “I,” “me,” or “my” appear outside of the dialogue in a story, then the first person point of view is being used.
2. Is the narrator biased or unreliable?
3. The third person point of view tells the story entirely by making references to the other characters in the story—there will be no instances of “I” or “you” outside of the dialogue.
4. An omniscient narrator knows the thoughts and ideas of one or more of the characters.
5. A stream-of-consciousness point of view shows a stream of thoughts from one or more characters’ minds.
6. An objective narrator may record everything with the objectivity of a news reporter.

Theme

1. What is the thesis or main point of the literature?
2. What is the work of literature saying about humanity, the world, and/or some event?
3. What is the meaning of the literature? How do the other parts (plot, setting, characters, diction, etc.) connect to the meaning?
4. To discover a theme, a writer can begin by stating one of the subject areas that the literature is commenting on (for example: freedom); then, the writer can explain what the work of literature is saying about that subject area (for example: all people should be free.).
5. Is there a moral or a lesson that the author communicates through the work of literature?
6. What does the title suggest about the theme of the story, poem, or play?

Diction and Style

1. What kinds of words are being used? (for example: formal, informal, slang, or childish)
2. What kinds of words might a different author use?

Images and Symbols

1. What pictures does a reader create while reading the work of literature?
2. Where in the literature does a reader create these pictures?
3. What characters or objects are symbolic (stand for other things)? For example, a rose may stand for love, and a thorn may stand for a painful aspect of love.
4. What do the images in the work of literature suggest to a reader?

Sound Effects

1. Rhyme and rhythm are most often associated with poetry, but this type of analysis can also work with many stories and plays.
2. To discover sound effects, a reader can try reading the work of literature aloud, listening carefully to the sounds, and analyzing how the sounds affect the meaning.

Dramatic Performance of Literature

1. What verbal and nonverbal cues do the characters convey?
2. Do you agree or disagree with any parts of the director’s interpretation of the literary work?
3. How does a performance compare with a written version of the literature?