

Response Papers (or Explication Papers) Novels

Response papers are short, highly focused discussions of some aspect of a novel, typically a short passage. A response paper should be roughly one page, single-spaced, and should absolutely not be more than 2 pages. (Aside from the single-spaced bit, response papers should conform to MLA guidelines.) They are due at the beginning of class when we discuss the text on which you're writing.

Response papers always have the same format. The introduction is quite short, typically three or four sentences. The first declares what the novel at hand is about (not "what is the story," but rather, "what is the point" of this reading). Ex: Like *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and *Great Expectations* (1860-61), Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) investigates whether it is possible to become a gentleman, as well as the potential costs of social mobility. The next sentence (or two) announces some striking, enigmatic, or otherwise interesting aspect of the novel's treatment of that point. Ex: In the first half of *Our Mutual Friend*, this investigation takes the form of impersonation and fraud: What does it mean to live in a society that permits anyone, and not just the well-born, to call himself a gentleman? The last sentence of your introduction should tie this point of enigma or interest to a specific passage in the novel. Ex: Dickens focuses our attention on this problem when he introduces that model *arriviste* couple, the Veneerings. (For help coming up with interesting questions, see the links from the course website, especially "How to Read a Victorian Novel" and "Some Heuristics for Reading 19thC Fiction.")

Then follows one, or maybe two, body paragraphs in which you discuss the specific passage. You must have quotations, which of course have to be correctly formatted and cited. Your discussion of the quotations must go beyond what, in the syllabus, I called the "plain sense" of the text—that is, you can't just paraphrase the text. You'll want to consider the following things (NB: This is a partial list, and of course you wouldn't write about all of these things in every response paper, and some wouldn't be relevant at all for the passage you've picked. In other words, the list is for inspiration. It's not a recipe.): Figurative language (everything from allegory to zeugma), diction, grammar (perhaps especially voice), point of view, emotional tenor, tone, irony, humor, etc.

Your conclusion explains what this all adds up to. That is, you should think about the relationship of this specific instance to the general theme (does it exemplify/demonstrate it? complicate it? undermine it?), what the instance tells us about the novel's procedure or interests in general, etc. Ex: Dickens equates class ambition with impersonation to signal his contempt for the depersonalized, even anonymous, cash transactions that increasingly drive England's economy.

One final note: Rigorously avoid the language of reviews. Don't say that a particular novel's interesting or brilliant or dry; don't say whether or not you liked it, etc. All of the novels we're reading this semester are, as it were, beyond that sort of criticism, and it's a bit self-involved to presume to judge them. Indeed, precisely because they are classics, expressing the judgment that they are boring, dry, or otherwise uninteresting discloses an unpleasant truth about the critic, not the novel.