8.3 Reading Responses Redux

Holly Ordway, Letters

If you assign reading to your students, do they complete it? If they complete the reading, do they understand it? I have found that using Reading Responses as an assignment is an effective way to encourage students to complete their reading assignments and help them to understand what they read. In an earlier GIFT (5.2), my Letters colleague Arlie Zolynas described how to use reading responses effectively in the classroom. Inspired by her example and by John Kirwan’s use of reading responses for his literature classes, I developed a reading response sheet that has been a versatile and effective tool for instruction. In this GIFT, I’ll share a few tips for constructing and using reading responses.

My reading response sheet is a blank “form” for students to fill out with information from an assigned reading, due on the day that the reading will be discussed in class. Depending on the course, the sections in the reading response sheet can vary, but the common element is that students must read actively and write down ideas or information from the reading before coming to class.

I have found that having students complete reading response sheets consistently throughout the semester significantly improved their engagement with and understanding of the readings. Students became more self-directed in answering their own questions (for instance, looking up vocabulary words on their own, since there was a section on the sheet for vocabulary) and appeared to have a greater investment in the topic before coming to class.

Reading responses are versatile and can be used as:

- discussion starters for small-group or whole-class discussion
- diagnostics for comprehension of the reading
- study guides for exams or quizzes
- a means of instructor-student dialogue about the reading (especially if there is a section on the sheet for “questions for the instructor” or “unanswered questions”)
- a vocabulary building activity

An important element in my use of the reading response sheets is a quick turn-around in grading, so that students get their responses back in time to use them as study guides or idea-generation sheets for an assignment. To facilitate quick grading, I use a simple check/check-minus system: full completion of the sheet earned full credit, while an incomplete or sketchily completed sheet earned half credit, as did late responses. (Since part of the objective of the reading response was to prepare students for in-class discussion, I felt that it was pedagogically appropriate to reduce the grade on a late response sheet.) In the future, I plan to experiment with a slightly fuller rubric for grading, but even this very simple approach worked fine. To keep the students’ workload balanced, I eliminated a journal assignment from previous semesters, and gave the reading responses a substantial weighting in their overall grade.

Practical tips:

- Using a consistent form throughout the semester is easier for the instructor (you
do not need to tailor each sheet for the particular reading) and provides a sense of consistency for the students.

- Having a section focused on gathering information from the reading (content-based) encourages students to read carefully and take the assignment seriously.

- Students can practice critical thinking in reading responses in a variety of ways, which you can delineate in the reading response sheet, such as drawing conclusions from the reading, identifying key ideas and evaluating their relative importance, or coming up with questions for discussion. I observed far better results in terms of critical thinking from the reading responses than from open-ended/response-oriented journal assignments for the same material.

- If you use Blackboard, you can make a PDF or Word document version of the response sheet for students to download and print on their own.

- I strongly encourage requiring students to hand-write their responses. Writing a definition or quote by hand ensures that the student has actually read and processed the words that he or she is writing; if the response sheet is done on the computer, it is possible to copy and paste a definition from Dictionary.com or the like without actually reading it or thinking about it. Writing by hand also adds a kinesthetic-learning dimension to the activity.

Name: ____________________________

READING RESPONSE SHEET

Title: ____________________________ Author: ____________________________ Act/Chapt. ______

Vocabulary:

Interesting Images or Lines:

Themes or Important Ideas:

Questions:

A sample reading response sheet for English.