

# Reading Response

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**Context:** In class, English 1102

**Keywords:** ethics, reading

**Student Activity Time:** 1-2 hours outside of class; one class session

*Students read an article and reflected on their reading by writing a reading response.*

## Introducing the Reflection Activity

In a first-year seminar course, students were required to read approximately 30 pages of fiction written at a college level, then students wrote a reading response. In class, students discussed the article and their reading responses. The purpose of this reflection activity was for students to better understand the protagonist and also to start thinking about what kinds of assumptions they bring to ethical decisions, which was an entrée into a conversation about ethics.

In the third week of the course, after the goals of the course had been established and students had gotten to know one another, the educator asked students to read a work of literature that had a strong protagonist and also had ethical implications and then write a paragraph reflection essay. In the reflection essay, students were encouraged to (1) think about the choices made by the protagonist in the reading (i.e. were the choices made by this person ethical or unethical and why do you think that's the case?), and (2) speculate on those actions.

In the following class session about the reflection reading responses, the educator first commented on the overall purpose of the reflection reading responses and the role of the discussion and encouraged students to exercise imagination and to imagine different scenarios. The purpose of this discussion was to help students be open-minded about the discussions they were about to engage in. Then in small groups (2-3 students) the students read and discussed their reading responses. While the small groups discussed, the educator listened to each group's discussion to understand the assumptions behind the decisions about ethics. The educator also actively pushed students to imagine the position of another, and attempt to see the rationale behind another perspective. This information helped him in guiding the groups' conversations, as well as helped him wrap-up the entire reflection activity. To wrap up these group discussions, the educator moderated a class discussion about the topic, asking questions like did the student's position change or become more nuanced? These reading responses and in-class discussions were graded using a credit/no credit approach—if students wrote the response and participated in the discussion, they received credit.

This reflection reading response was also part of a larger piece of reflection in the course—a course portfolio. There was a reflection section of their course portfolio in which students thought about these reading responses. In this reflection, students were asked to consider how the variety of perspectives emerged in the small and

large group discussions. The portfolio was another opportunity to reflect on the assigned reading, the reading response, and the reading response in-class discussion.

In terms of outcomes, when students engage in this reflection activity, there is potential for them to take a position and defend that position. Through such engagement, they may learn how to better build an argument. In addition, through the discussion part of the reflection activity, students may better understand how to engage with their peers on topics they disagree.

### Recreating the Reflection Activity


	Description
1	Assign a reading and reading response.
2	Facilitate small group discussions.
3	Wrap-up small group discussions by facilitating a whole class discussion.

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D I G I T A L  
L I B R A R Y  
C O N T E N T

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 5.1 Conversation Starters

 5.2 Participation Guidelines

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### In the words of the Educator: Tips and Inspiration

*Give quick feedback.* I've been using similar reading response variations in my teaching for a while now. Over the years, the format of the reading responses had changed because I realized that students need quick feedback of their reading responses. In previous courses, students would submit their reading responses and I would give individual feedback. This approach took more time and students wouldn't receive quick feedback. The new format with discussion groups allows them to receive quick feedback in class.

*Develop a simple prompt.* Make a prompt that is very, very simple but not so generic that it doesn't provide them with some anchor. A question like "what is your core reading response" is too broad. On the other hand, a question like "explain this change in the character's behavior" is something that they can probably lean on a little bit more so that the character becomes an anchor or a concept or how it explains or something. So the prompt itself has to provide enough scaffolding.

*Have a clear goal for the reflection activity.* It is important to steer the conversation with an end-point in mind.

*What was the inspiration for the reflection activity?* My teaching is driven by the desire to enable and empower students to think critically about assumptions that they have, that they know about, or don't even realize that they have. I want them to have some tools that they will be able to address their assumptions. I think reflection is a really powerful tool that they can use whenever they are encountering a difficult decision that they make and to show them that it's a very practical one that they can use.

I learned about this specific reflection activity from other teachers that do this. The inspiring pedagogy had to do with an instructor allowing students to reflect individually, in silence, before jumping into small and large group discussions. It was important to see how every learner profits from first collecting her thoughts, that is, spending some time on her own before conversing with others.