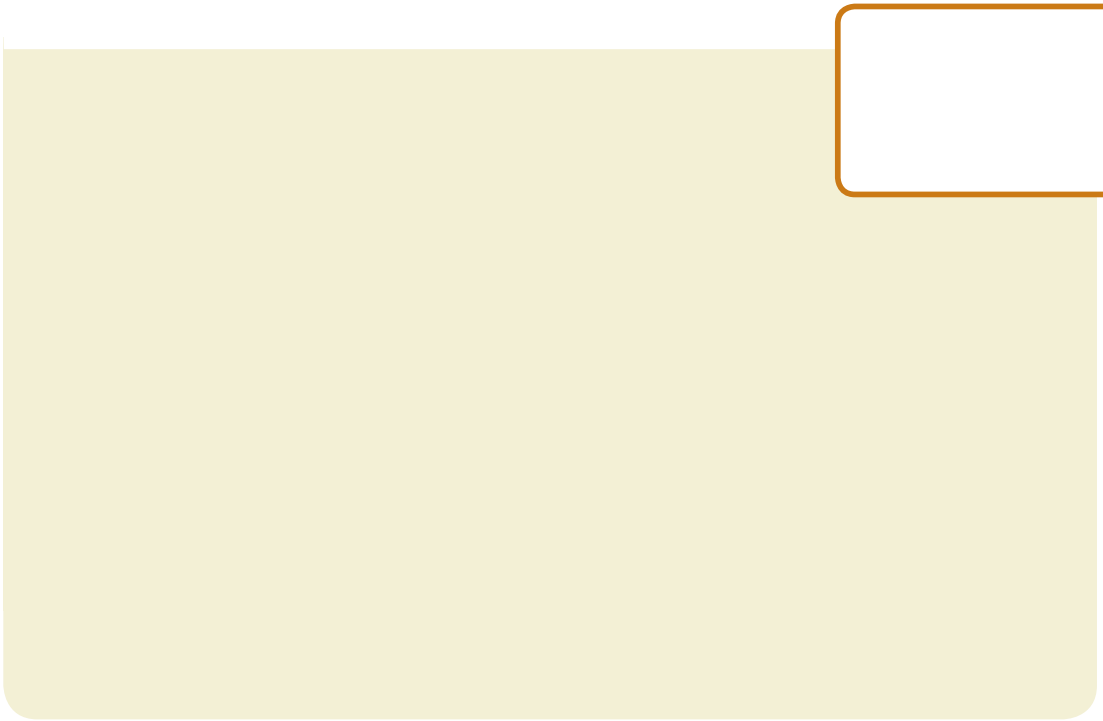


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Writing the Summary-and-Response Essay

The "summary-and-response essay" is such a common assignment today that it merits additional discussion and illustration. As noted earlier in this chapter, this kind of assignment frequently asks students to read a professional article,* summarize its thesis and main points, and write a response expressing agreement or disagreement with the article's ideas.

You may have had experience with some form of this assignment before now. Many college entrance examinations have adopted this kind of essay to evaluate both reading

*To avoid confusion in this discussion between the professional essay used as a prompt and the student's response essay, the word "article" will be used to refer to the professional reading.

comprehension and writing skills. Many colleges also use this format as their composition placement exam, to direct students into the appropriate writing class. Still other schools employ this kind of essay as a final exam or exit test for their composition requirement. And although this format is often assigned as in-class writing, it certainly is not limited to this use. Many composition classes and other academic courses include this type of essay as an out-of-class paper.

Though the format of this assignment may vary slightly depending on its purpose and occasion, throughout your college and professional life you will almost certainly be asked on more than one occasion to read information, summarize it for others, and then present your reaction to its ideas. To help you prepare for this kind of thinking and writing activity, here are a few suggestions, divided into three sections for clarity:

Reading the Assignment and the Article

1. Read your assignment's directions carefully to discover exactly what you are being asked to do. For example, are you being asked to present a one-paragraph summary of a professional article first and then write a personal response? Or are you being asked to respond to the professional article's major points one at a time? Perhaps you are being asked to critique the author's style as well as ideas. Because formats vary, be sure you understand your complete assignment—all its required parts—before you begin writing.
2. Before you can intelligently respond to any reading you need to thoroughly understand its ideas. ◆ To review suggestions for close reading, take the time now to review Chapter 8, "The Reading-Writing Connection," in this text. This chapter will help you identify and evaluate an article's thesis, main points, supporting evidence, and other rhetorical techniques.
3. If you are given an article to read out of class, study it carefully, annotating it as outlined in Chapter 8. If reading the article is part of the in-class activity, you may have only enough time to read it carefully once, underlining and annotating as you move through each paragraph. Minimally, you should mark the thesis and the main ideas of the body paragraphs. Underline or star important claims or supporting evidence. Are the claims logical and well supported, or does the author rely on generalizations or other faulty reasoning? Overall, do you agree or disagree with the article? Would you call it a weak or strong piece of writing? Why? (◆ For help evaluating claims and supporting evidence, review the discussion of logical fallacies in Chapter 10, pages 296–299.)

Writing the Summary Section

If you are to begin with a brief summary of the article, follow the guidelines listed under "Writing a Summary" on pages 185–186 of Chapter 8. Remember that a good summary presents the author's name and full title of the article in the first sentence, which also frequently presents the article's thesis (In his article "Free Speech on Campus," author Clarence Page argues that . . .). The next sentences of your summary should present the article's main ideas, found in the article's body paragraphs. Unless you need to quote a

word or phrase for clarity or emphasis, use your own words to present a concise version of the article. Normally, your summary will be an objective treatment of the article's ideas, so save your opinions for the "response" section.

Writing the Response Section

1. Before you begin writing the "response" part of your essay, look at the underlining and any marginal notes you made on the article. What was your general assessment of the article? Do you agree or disagree with the author? Perhaps you only agree with some points and disagree with others? Or perhaps you agree with the main ideas but think that this particular essay is a weak defense of those ideas? After looking over the article and your notes, decide on your overall reaction to this article. This assessment will become your thesis in the "response" portion of your essay.
2. Once you have a working thesis in mind, plan the rest of your essay. For example, if you disagree with the article, you might want to note two or three reasons you reject the author's opinion; these reasons may become the basis for your own body paragraphs. Important: be sure you have evidence of your own to support your positions. Responding with personal examples is perhaps the most common kind of support for essays written in class, but if you know facts, statistics, testimony, or other information that would support your position, you may certainly include them.
3. If you have begun your essay with a summary, start the next paragraph with a sentence that clearly indicates the "response" section is now beginning. Present a smooth transition to your thesis and consider using an "essay map" to indicate to your readers the points you will discuss.

   Example Although in his article "Test!" Paul Perez correctly identifies a growing drug problem in our public schools, his plan to drug-test all students involved in campus activities should be rejected. Such a test could not be implemented fairly and is an unreasonable invasion of students' privacy.

4. In each of your own body paragraphs make clear which of the author's claims or ideas you are refuting or supporting by using "tag lines" to remind the reader.

   Example Although Foxcroft argues that the proposed tuition increase will not discourage prospective students, she fails to understand the economic situation of most IBC applicants, who are sacrificing income to return to school. In a recent survey. . . .

5. Once you have signaled the point in question and stated your position, develop each body paragraph with enough specific supporting evidence to make your claim convincing. If you disagree with a point, you must show why and present your position logically (◆ you may wish to review Chapter 10 on argument). If you agree with the article, beware a tendency to simply restate the positions with which you are in agreement ("I think Brower is right when she says housing is too expensive on campus. She is also right about the lack of housing choices . . ."). Find examples, reasons, or information that lend support to the points that you and the author think are valid.

6. Many assignments call for a straightforward personal opinion or "agree-disagree" response. In other assignments, you may be given the option of criticizing or praising an author's logic, style, or even tone. You might, for example, show that a particular argument is ineffective because it is based on a mass of overstated generalities, or you might show why the author's sarcastic tone alienates the reader. On the other hand, an author might deserve credit for a particularly effective supporting example or a brilliantly clever turn of phrase that captures the essence of an idea. Always check your assignment to see if this sort of critique is welcome or even required in your response.
7. Don't forget to write a brief concluding paragraph. If appropriate, you might emphasize the value of the article in question, or call for action for or against its ideas, or project its effects into the future (◆ other suggestions for conclusions appear in Chapter 4). However you end your essay, your conclusion should always be consistent with your overall assessment of the article and its ideas.

Sample Student Essay

The essay that follows was written by a student who was assigned the article "Our Youth Should Serve" by Steven Muller (pages 183–185 in Chapter 8) and then asked to write a one-paragraph summary and a response essay, expressing her opinion of the article's proposal. Although the student thought the article itself could have been stronger, she liked Muller's suggestion for a volunteer youth service. Her approval of his proposal became her essay's thesis, which she then developed through use of her own experience.

After you read Muller's article and the student's summary-and-response essay, what suggestions for revision might you offer her?

Youth Service: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

1 In "Our Youth Should Serve," former university president Steven Muller proposes a national volunteer youth service. This program would perform some of our country's public service tasks and also help high school graduates who have to choose between low-paying jobs or starting college with no clear direction. Although the pay would be low, volunteers would benefit through job training and by earning federal grants for college. Muller also argues that youth service would motivate volunteers to become better students and perhaps help them find a career. The greatest benefit, according to Muller, would

Summary

be the self-esteem volunteers would gain from earning these benefits themselves.

Response begins

2 Although Muller's article might have been more persuasive with some specific examples supporting its claims, Muller's national volunteer youth service is still a good idea, especially for students who have no money for college and no work experience. I was one of those students, and because of the year I spent after high school graduation working in a boring, dead-end job, I believe the Youth Service should be started as soon as possible.

Thesis

3 After I graduated from high school, I didn't go to college because I didn't have any money saved and I was tired of school. I decided to work for a while to save up, but I didn't have any training for anything so I took a minimum-wage sales job in a mall clothing store. I had to look good for work, but since my wardrobe consisted of jeans and T-shirts, I had to buy new clothes. With clothes and transportation to work and other bills, I was barely breaking even. If I had been in Muller's program, my pay would also have been low but at least I would have been earning grant money for college at the same time.

Response to the benefit of earning grant money

4 Muller also makes a good point about people needing to feel that what they are doing is important or meaningful. My job at the store wasn't meaningful or challenging; it was, in fact, repetitive and boring. For example, a typical day during the summer months consisted of cleaning out dressing rooms and hanging up two-piece swim suits thrown all over the floor. It took forever to match up the right size tops and bottoms and then hang them back up on these crazy little double hangers so that everything was facing the right way with all the straps untwisted. In the winter it was pants and sweaters. Unlike Muller's volunteers who would be helping society while getting some valuable training themselves, I wasn't contributing to anything meaningful, and I sure wasn't learning any skills for a better future.

Response to the benefits of meaningful work, skills

5 It didn't take me long to figure out that I wanted more out of life than a low-paying, boring, going-nowhere job. So I talked to a counselor here at Logan [Community College] who helped me explore some of my interests, and now I am enrolled in the pre-nursing program. In Muller's program I might have discovered this career earlier by volunteering at a hospital or nursing home, plus getting some on-the-job experience. I would have tuition grant money instead of going into major debt from student loans like I am now. I might also have worked for someone who might even hire me later. And I'm absolutely positive I would have felt more useful and had better self-esteem than I did hanging up clothes for eight months!

Response to career benefits

and increased self-esteem

6 Although this program wasn't there to help me, my sister is getting ready to graduate and she is in the same situation I was two years ago—no money, no skills, no solid future goals. If Muller's program existed today, I'd tell her to look into it. The benefits of college money, job training, and better self-esteem are just too good to pass up.

Conclusion emphasizes benefits to a future volunteer

PRACTICING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED



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A. After reading Steven Muller's article "Our Youth Should Serve" (pages 183–185), write your own summary-and-response essay, drawing on your own knowledge and experience to support or reject his proposed program. In your opinion, would this be a worthwhile, feasible program? Why or why not?

B. *Collaborative Activity:* Review Muller's "Our Youth Should Serve" and practice your analytical skills by composing a short list of the essay's major strengths and weaknesses. What are the essay's most effective points? How might Muller have improved his arguments and supporting evidence? Pair with a classmate and compare lists. Pretend Muller is a partner in a peer revision workshop who has asked you two for help; give him feedback that includes at least one compliment on something well done and one specific suggestion for an effective change. How does your advice to Muller compare to the recommendations of the other students in the class?



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ASSIGNMENT

Read and annotate the selection "So What's So Bad about Being So-So?" on pages 205–207 of this textbook and then write your own summary-and-response essay, agreeing or disagreeing (wholly or in part) with the writer's view of competition today. Remember to support your position with logical reasons, persuasive examples, or relevant facts. (If you prefer, you may select some other professional essay from this textbook or from another source, such as a newspaper or magazine, but be sure to obtain your instructor's approval of your selection in advance.)