

Writing in Response to Reading

by Dr. Marilyn Whirry

Taking Reading a Step Further

If we accept and appreciate the idea that the art of reading is an essential part of our lives, then the next logical step is to realize the importance of taking an initial reading and giving it more depth through comprehension and extension. We have often heard that we “need to find some ways of bringing readers and text together, and of forcing upon readers the responsibility for making meaning of text” (Probst, 1998). I would like to suggest that to think seriously about texts, students need to connect ideas, refine beliefs, and relate content to their own lives. They need to express clear thoughts not only in discussion but also through responding to and writing about the literature they read.

Importance of Active Reading

During active reading we connect on many levels with ideas in the text. Strong readers might mark ideas in books by circling words, underlining important ideas, making marginal notes for further reference, or making other notations that have special meaning, marks that we develop as we develop our own personal style as readers. These methods can be transmitted by teachers to students at any grade level, and we can see almost immediately a growth in understanding and of enjoying the text being read. By actively reading, students begin to connect to ideas more fully.

The next step in developing a deeper understanding of the text is to talk about what we have read. Students need to understand how to look for new ideas, how to make interesting observations, and how to find personal importance. Classroom discussion focused on challenging questions helps readers respond to literature and the ideas it contains. Discussions can be developed through the questions of the students and through the work of an insightful

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teacher. Small groups, working collaboratively, can delve deeply and significantly into meaning with great gusto. A whole class can share the rewards of discussion with the help of an adept teacher who brings divergent ideas together, respects the responses of all students, and allows students to develop new insights into the meaning of a text and what significance the meaning has for them.

Reading, in this context, becomes a type of “social interaction” (Bartholomae, 1993) between the text, the readers, and others. To take this interaction a step further and to create a meaning that is deeper and has new levels of understanding, students must begin to write about the piece of literature with which they are working. This allows them to stretch their understanding, to share their points of view, to make new discoveries, and to express what they think or what they come to know as the writing progresses.

Thinking Clearly Through Writing

Writing teaches students of all ages to think clearly. While responses in oral discussions can be general or glib, the act of writing helps us clarify and specify. While some written responses we assign to students can be in the form of journal entries or dialectical journals, serious connection and extension of ideas occurs through longer, more thoughtful, and more organized pieces of writing.

The kinds of responses that a student can be

taught are numerous. Depending on the ages and needs of particular students, a writing task might be a personal response to literature (what this story means to me or how I am like the character). Response to literature can also take a reflective form when students personalize the text and then move their thinking to a more general level (what this means to me and others). Finally, a student can be asked to analyze a theme, how a character changes, or the use of style to build meaning.

Why Didn't You Show Me Sooner?

The process of writing is an essential part of the understanding that all students must have as they begin to move deeply into the examination of a work of literature. The process not only allows them to clarify and more fully discuss their ideas, but also “changes the development and shape of the ideas themselves” (Langer, 1987). This is an amazing thought. There is nothing more thrilling for a teacher than to watch a student undergo this transformation. Certainly, when students also feel this joy, confidence begins to build in their own ability to think and make meaning. Recently, an elated student thanked me for giving her the tools to understand the meaning of a complex work of literature and asked why she had not been taught, earlier in her academic life, to read carefully and find her own meaning through writing. She said that now she could tackle any piece of literature that she is assigned or chooses to read on her own. Her query is a good one since we know that students of any age can be taught to read carefully and to write personally and thoughtfully about what they are reading.

Writing a Prompt

As we plan the tasks for writing responses, we must carefully develop writing prompts that are clear and specific. To develop a workable prompt, we must first pull the students into a “writing situation.” This initial part of the prompt sets up the general idea and helps students focus their thinking. This is followed by the “writing directions,” which tell the students in a clear, straightforward manner exactly what their responses should accomplish.

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Preparing to Respond in Writing

Once students understand the assignment or prompt, we must teach them how to plan their responses. This planning is the very heart of prewriting through webs, clusters, maps, or quickwrites. The strategy that I feel most helps students, an idea which I have used in my classroom and in my workshops for years, is the use of the T-chart. A T-chart is simply a tool for listing reasons and evidence. It helps students go to the text or to personal experiences to find and list specific examples that will help prove the validity of their arguments.

An examination of an elementary school writing prompt and a T-chart will help to illustrate these ideas. Suppose a group of fourth graders has just finished reading a story about the importance of friendship in the lives of the characters. A writing prompt might be developed as follows:

Writing Situation

You have just finished reading a story in which friendship between the main characters was very important. We all have friends in our lives that are important to us. Think about a friend in your life who you have known for some time and is important to you.

Writing Directions

Now write about this person by showing your readers what this person is like, the special things this friend does, and why this friend is important in your life. Let the readers of your essay know why this person is so important to you.

You can use a T-chart to help students approach this multi-layered assignment. The chart could look like this.

Description of My Friend	The Things My Friend Does	Why My Friend Is Important to Me

As students add ideas and details to the T-chart, they are organizing and extending their thinking. Then they are ready to write their rough drafts, go through peer-responses with fellow students, and develop drafts that are filled with ideas exposed or acknowledged in earlier responses and thoughts of the students. To make a more direct connection with the text, students can discuss how the friends help each other in the context of the story; then they can move into their more personal thoughts.

Examining Secondary Writing Prompts

A question that could be assigned for older students might include a response to literature that contains not only a personal response, but also literary analysis. The following prompt asks students to think about an important book that they have read.

Writing Situation

People have suggested that when we read a great work of literature we see more in us than we did before we read the work. Think about the important plays or novels you have read that have made a difference to you.

Writing Directions

Identify one novel or play that you have read that caused you to think about yourself and the way you live your life, and that clearly helped you see and understand more in yourself than you realized before you read the work. Explain clearly what the work helped you see about yourself. Then specify what characters or ideas in the work

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enabled you to reach this understanding.

Generally, students of high school age enjoy this kind of topic because it allows them to incorporate a personal reflection with an analytical response. They can also go through the steps of the writing processing using a T-chart to begin. In fact, when I have my students respond to questions about their best writing, I invariably receive comments similar to this response from a student in my senior class. She says,

. . . for a more complete understanding of my writing it is important to mention that before I wrote this essay I had a vague idea of what I had discovered about myself from reading the book. But when I was forced to put my feelings and learning experiences into words, my ideas became concepts, “thematic statements” of my life, and became words of wisdom for my future. This essay filled me with knowledge and awareness that perhaps was there, but certainly overlooked.

For high school students, it is also important to assign more complex questions that evoke serious thoughts and responses. The following writing prompt asks students to think about a play that they have recently read, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, by the contemporary playwright Tom Stoppard.

Writing Situation

One of the important themes of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is that our lives have no meaning unless we struggle to give them meaning. Without this meaning and the actions that are performed in establishing it, there is nothing.

Writing Directions

Discuss this theme as it is developed in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Note particular scenes and literary devices used by the playwright to develop this idea. Be very specific and explain the significance of the examples you choose to select.

Here students are asked to go back to the text and find specific scenes in which this idea is subtly or blatantly addressed by the characters. Then they must go a step further as they are requested to examine and explain literary devices employed by Stoppard. Some use of prior knowledge is required here, but the question leads the students to specific and clear analysis of a text to make meanings that are deeper than they originally were. This helps the student acquire new understandings that would not have been developed without this approach in responding to literature.

Importance of Writing About Literature

Written responses to literature cannot be allowed to occur sporadically in our curriculum. Thinking and writing about ideas found in works of literature must be a regular part of our classroom activities. We can use effective prompts and good planning to assign writing responses to literature that help our students to read with more enthusiasm and to think more deeply.

Reading literature carefully, thinking about it, discussing it, and finally writing one's extended thoughts about it, opens students' minds to the world of ideas in a text. This process helps them learn to appreciate literature and love to read. The works

become part of their lives. Students who know how to examine a text, think about a text, and write about a text experience the freedom that comes with a new understanding of literature and, even more importantly, a deeper understanding of themselves.



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