

Reading Response Assignment Description

Why write these papers? These responses are designed to help you work through the class material. I want you to feel free to explore ideas in these responses. Though we are separated from these authors by time, they were discussing ideas about the ethical use of political speech that remain relevant today. Regardless, the material demands the type of active engagement and thinking that response papers offer.

When/where are the responses due? You'll need to read the assigned reading, complete the reading response, and post it to the class catalyst dropbox. All reading responses must be posted to the class catalyst dropbox no later than 1:30 on the day it is due. The link to the dropbox is on the class webpage. You should also bring a copy of your response to class for others to read (a digital copy is fine if you have a laptop).

What do I write about? Your reading responses can address some problematic or puzzling aspect of the text, argue for a particular interpretation or application of a concept in the reading, relate the reading to previous thinkers or course readings, or simply refute the theory or theorist. I can provide some ideas in class for what you might write on, but these responses are open-ended so that you can write about what you want or need to. If two readings are assigned for the day your reading response is due, you can choose to focus on one, or talk about the similarities/differences between the two readings.

If you are struggling to come up with some ideas on what to address in your response, here are some broad prompts that might be able to help:

- How would the author respond to a modern event, person, or speech?
- How does this author differ from another author we have read?
- How does this author fit within their historical context?
- Are there any discrepancies in the text?
- Where would the theory work/not work?
- Where do you disagree with an author's interpretation of the text?

Who is the audience? Your audience is the class. We will share these reading responses in class sometimes. As a writer, you can assume that we have read the material so you need not summarize the work for us (or provide unnecessary definitions). While the audience knows the material, we don't know your take on it. So, one of your chief responsibilities is to explain your thinking to us clearly (i.e. use examples), concisely (i.e. this paper should have gone through a draft or so), and convincingly (i.e. you should draw on the readings to strengthen/clarify your position).

What is the genre/format? These should be polished think pieces. You are writing for an educated audience in a professional manner. In terms of content, you should adhere closely to the assigned text. That is, you should make multiple references to the text as a way of supporting/clarifying your thinking (please see the sample assignment below). You are in conversation with these readings and we should hear both voices (though yours should be slightly louder). Unless stated otherwise, the length is 300-600 words.

How will you grade these responses? All reading responses will be graded on a +/√/- system.

A response will receive a "+", if it:

- demonstrates a deep understanding of the assigned text.
- engages the assigned text (referencing the appropriate ideas and portions of the text) in a manner that clarifies it and the writer's interpretation.
- is between 300-600 words.
- is free of major typos, having undergone a proof read.
- is well written. The author's main idea is clearly developed over multiple paragraphs.

A response will receive a "√", if it:

- demonstrates a grasp of the assigned text.
- addresses the assigned reading for that day, referencing some of the key ideas and citing some of the key passages.
- is between 300-600 words.
- is free of major typos, having undergone a proof read.
- is competently written. The author's main idea is clearly developed over multiple paragraphs.

A response will receive a “-”, if it:

- does not demonstrate a grasp of the assigned text.
- does not respond to the assigned readings. A close reading of the text was not necessary in order to write this response.
- is too long or too short.
- appears hurriedly put together, including typos and grammar errors.
- is unclear. The author’s main idea is not evident. The paragraphs are disjointed.

Sample Reading Response (This would receive a +)

Leff makes a strong argument that Cicero’s *Pro Murena* is a strong case for rhetoric, however there are a couple of contentious points he draws that beg clarification.

First, Leff’s strong conception of rhetoric rests upon the concept that “the rhetorical text [is] an instance of ethics in action and [that] political ethics [is] constituted, in some part, through rhetorical action,” which sounds valid here (p. 83). He argues that Cicero is not “inconsistent,” “insincere,” and “manipulative,” as many of his critics would argue, but that instead he is simply practicing prudence, which is in line with the ethics of his day, and that the ethics of his day is a part of what made him present his speech the way that he did in this case. Yet, this argument almost feels like he is reaching for something that is not there, with the *Pro Murena* in particular. Throughout his speech, Cicero is surely prudent: he praises the virtues of Murena and harps on the failings of others (e.g. Sulpicius and Cato). This might evince the notion that he is merely propounding an ethic here that was already present in society. But the fact that he glosses over the bribery and failings of the candidate he backs, while failing to expound on the virtues of the other candidates, hardly make the text seem like an instance of ethics in action, unless the sole ethic propounded here is that of prudence.

Second, Leff adds on to the persuasive process model the idea that speech “can be read as the embodiment of a kind of political judgment...where rhetorical skills are seen not just as instruments of persuasion but as equipment for living,” which in light of what Cicero does in the *Pro Murena* (i.e. pick and choose which virtues to extol, and which to downplay) appeals only to a construed sense of values in any judgment (p. 82).

Ultimately, what is irksome about Leff’s argument is that he tries to inject Cicero’s rhetoric with an ethic, and he tries to find an ethic behind Cicero’s rhetorical actions. If that ethic is prudence, then his argument makes sense... but only in an obscure, intangible way. The problem is that the argument sounds like a cop-out for Cicero. Cicero is only prudent in this speech because it is a means to an end. Bribery is shined over for his own political purposes, and the ethics he propounds here are only there for his own devices. Also, what Leff considers as “prudence” is far too easily interchangeable with the words that Cicero’s critics would use to describe his actions: “inconsistent,” “insincere” and “manipulative.”

Maybe it’s because I find that I happen to agree more with Aristotle’s “weak” defense of rhetoric, that it is just a neutral rhetorical tool, that Leff’s argument falls flat. Or maybe it’s because Cicero reminds me of a prime example of Plato’s idea that a speaker can use whatever persuasive means he wants to lead the swayable masses, even if those means are untrue. Or maybe I just read Leff’s argument wrong, or we just have a different sense of what counts as ethics.