

How to Keep a Good Journal

Your journal should serve primarily as a place for recording your *critical reactions* to the assigned readings for this course. A journal is not a diary. A journal is not a collection of random thoughts on sundry topics. The idea is to help you become an active, rather than a passive reader. But what does this mean?

A good reader is an actively engaged reader. A good reader is one who carries on a silent (and sometimes perhaps not so silent) dialogue with the text, almost as if the author were there in the room with you reading aloud, so that you could interrupt from time to time and ask the author “What did you mean by that?” or “Are you really sure that’s true?” Your journal should be the record of your side of that conversation.

An active reader asks questions: “Does this sentence really make sense?” “What does this technical term mean?” “Is this a clear, coherent explanation?” “How does this compare with what the author wrote in the last chapter?” “How does this account differ from what I have learned in my physics course?” “Don’t I remember that this issue was discussed from a very different point of view in the lecture?”

An active reader is a *skeptical reader*, ready to doubt: “Is the author giving me the whole story?” “Does this author have a personal, political, or theological bias?” “Am I being fed a simplified story because the author thinks I’m too stupid to understand the real story?”

An active reader is an *imaginative reader*: “How could I develop this idea further?” “Gee, this would make for a wonderful piece of science fiction!” “If you can explain one phenomenon this way, here’s how you could adapt the model to explain another phenomenon.”

An active reader *goes looking for other material*: “I was so interested in this discussion that I looked up one of the articles in the bibliography, and here’s what that author said.” “In an old book we have at home, there’s a reproduction of an old illustration that conveys the same idea.”

An active reader *responds to form as well as content*: “This author is a terrible writer, his sentences are far too complicated.” “Is that really how you spell that word? Or is that just the British spelling?” “Wait a minute, that was an offensively sexist remark.”

The one thing that I absolutely don’t want is complaints about a text being hard to read and comprehend. But I would be delighted with an analysis from you of *why* you found a text hard to understand.

In addition to using the journal to respond to the readings, you might also consider using it to respond to the lecture, or to report on interesting discussions with friends, classmates, or other instructors, or to share what you learned from a recent “Nova” program.

You should be spontaneous in your journal entries, but that doesn’t mean being sloppy. You are not expected to write a polished essay every day in your journal, but your entries still should be well structured, written in whole sentences, with some concern for the mechanics of your writing (spelling, grammar, punctuation, diction, style). Remember, a journal is not a diary, it’s not a place for true confessions. Nor is it a place to record only your personal reactions. You are writing for an audience. Your reactions are important, but it’s also important to try, from time to time, for a more distanced, objective approach to the material. Ask not only what you think about the readings, but what any engaged, intelligent reader would think.

What I will mainly be evaluating when I grade journal entries is the *quality of thinking* that they reveal. They should be well-written, not just dashed off in a hurry (although I will not grade them for mechanics). They should be focused and clear. If you are going to disagree with an author, don’t just say that you disagree, give us *reasons* for your position.

Your journal must contain at least one entry for every day’s reading assignment. Entries must be at least one page (300 words) in length. Exactly how much you write depends on the particular text in question and the nature of your critical reaction to it. Please don’t fall into the habit of always settling for the minimum. Push yourself to do more.

Please keep the journal in a loose-leaf binder, so that you can remove individual pages without tearing them out.

Be sure to bring the journal with you to class every day, since I will be collecting journal entries on a random basis, without any prior notice, eight times during the semester. I will also collect the entire journal twice—at mid-term and at the end of the semester—in order to make sure that all of the required entries are there.