

Guidelines for Reaction Papers

In most courses, you have probably been expected to read scholarly papers with careful attention and a critical mind and to offer questions or comments about those papers. In this course, we expect you to engage in an even more rigorous way.

You are asked to write a “reaction paper,” *as if you were a peer or colleague of the author*. You will be expected to offer not only criticisms, but also suggestions of how those criticisms relate to the overall project and how they may be corrected (or why they cannot be corrected). In other words, we expect you to not only to act like students, but to act like colleagues or collaborators in scholarship.

Some of the assigned reading will have not been published. This means that some papers may be unpolished, incomplete, and may not even make perfect sense. That makes reading the papers harder work than normal. However, it allows you the opportunity to offer constructive criticisms of the works in progress.

Because most of you have not done this before, here are some tips on how to be a great colleague when writing a reaction paper:

- 1) Remember that the biggest compliment you can give a scholar is to seriously (and critically) engage with their work. Of course, everyone loves to hear that their work is great. But for serious scholars, it is better to hear how it succeeds, how it does not, and how it might be improved. As a former colleague of mine said, “Friends don’t let friends write bad papers.” Help them write good papers.
- 2) Your stance should be one of helpful criticism. Don’t simply say that some aspect of the paper doesn’t work. Explain **how** it doesn’t work, and how it might be fixed.
- 3) Try to give detailed and specific feedback, rather than general criticisms that can be made of any paper. A statement like “I do not think that these negative results on the effect of the policy XX in organization YY are generalizable because most organizations are different” is always true, and would not generate a good discussion. Phrasing your criticism slightly differently, for example, by stating “I do not think that these negative results on XX are generalizable. This is because the study was conducted with data on people working in YY. There might be a selection of people selecting into this job because of characteristic ZZ. This characteristic however affects how one react to policy XX because of...” shows greater insight and would lead to a more fruitful discussion. It is fine to express a personal opinion, but make sure that you substantiate your position by explaining the reasoning that led you to draw

these conclusions. Also, be specific: Imagine the author(s) are going to read your discussion paper. Ideally, they should be able to take away some insights into how they could improve the paper, which aspects they should stress as being really compelling or what to improve if they had the possibility to re-do everything or write a follow-up paper.

- 4) It is generally a good idea to start with a short summary of about **one** paragraph of the paper so that a reader of your reaction is (re-)introduced to the target paper. In order to be concise, you have to leave some details out. Writing this paragraph will help you to emphasize the most important points from the paper for your reaction. It lays the **foundation** for the criticisms or suggestions that you will make.
- 5) There are many different types of critiques that can be applied to papers. Here are some of the most common and helpful types:
 - *Critiques focusing on a paper's premises.* What are the necessary premises? Are they valid? Are the premises valid, but unnecessary? Do the steps in the paper flow from the premises?
 - *Additional arguments, tests, or research that would support the paper's conclusion.* Is there a missing step that could be resolved by answering a particular question? Would a different specification close off an alternative explanation?
 - *Critiques of the conclusion's generalizability.* For empirical papers, especially experimental ones: It is (almost) always right to question the generalizability of results. Try to be constructive: What are the specific factors you think do not necessarily generalize to other settings and which are important? If you had the chance to make one or two follow-up papers, what would you investigate if you could only change one or two things at a time? How would you do so and why would you choose these aspects?
 - *Assessing the mechanism.* Many empirical papers want to demonstrate a particular causal effect, or lack thereof (e.g. state regulations have no effect on the rate of prescription of a drug). If your paper is one of those, examine whether the findings which the authors present in favor of that causal mechanism can be really attributed to it or whether there are alternative, competing explanations.
 - *Elaboration of the paper's success.* If you think the authors solved a critical issue very well, that is definitely something that should be addressed in the discussion paper. Again, make sure that you substantiate such a claim by saying why it is a crucial issue they successfully address and why it is not trivial to do so. It is important to avoid merely summarizing the target paper; if you think the paper's argument is

right, try to elaborate some way in which the conclusions could extend even further, or defend how a plausible counterargument or critique is not actually successful.

- *Next steps.* Your reaction paper can go further and suggest what should be done next. What data should be collected as a next step? How would a follow-up experiment, which examines a specific channel in more detail look like? How should a theory be expanded in order to account for hitherto unaccounted or neglected findings? Again, speculation is fine as long as there as one can see the reasoning behind it.
- *Legal implications.* If you are a law student, your paper can, e.g., work out implications for legal doctrine or legal theory, discuss a related court case, and challenge the analysis.

6) Some do's and don'ts

- Don't
 - write, "I found this interesting, can you say more about it?"
 - ask for enormous expansions of the paper.
 - repeat your point multiple times to fill space
 - use extraneous examples that take up all your space
 - provide *only* summary of the paper
- Do
 - Write clearly
 - Be creative
 - Try to comment on the central claims of the paper rather than fussing around the edges. It is ok to ask for another sensitivity test or one more proof, but please don't make your whole reaction paper into a list of minor extras that you would like to see incorporated into the paper
 - Feel free to bring in any special knowledge you have
 - Feel free to make suggestions for addressing papers that have not been cited by the author
 - Show original thinking: It is better to mention a few (or even just one) points and provide some carefully considered reasoning than just collecting an array of loose ideas.
 - If you do not have ideas or feel unsure: Ask a fellow student (either from this or another course). If you start a conversation about the paper, you will be forced to articulate your thoughts and to summarize the paper clearly and concisely, and in return you will get some immediate feedback from

the person that you are talking to. All of this can be very helpful in writing a good discussion paper.

- 7) Finally, a note about the tone of the reaction paper. Be direct and clear. Do not be rude. It is not rude to be direct and clear, but it is rude to be sarcastic, make personal attacks, or assume a tone of superiority. We know you won't do that.