

# Practical Advice for Supporting Learning through the Use of Summary/Reaction Journals

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**Abstract:** The authors of this essay regularly require students to engage in informal writing as a means to promote learning. One form of informal writing is the summary/reaction journal. In summary/reaction journals, students read a chapter or article, write a summary of that reading, and then react by offering their own insights and responses to the reading. The authors provide a theoretical rationale supporting the use of summary/reaction journals. Then, the authors describe how they introduce summary/reaction journals to students, support students as they journal throughout the semester, and assess journals once students submit them. This description can provide guidance for other faculty members in all disciplines who might consider using summary/reaction journals.

For college professors and secondary teachers alike, questions regarding the efficacy of assessments abound: "Are my students truly learning, or are they merely regurgitating basic ideas back to me on quizzes and exams?" To clearly answer such a question, "truly learning" must be carefully defined, as different definitions would prompt the need for different types of assessments (Anderson, 1998; Knowlton & Sharp, 2002). If the definition of learning includes the idea of students developing a personal understanding of course content by making direct connections between that content and their lives, then the writing across the curriculum movement can serve as a starting point for helping students not only to document what they have learned, but also to create and document their learning process. Specifically, we use (and encourage others to use) summary/reaction journals as a learning tool. As the name implies, a summary/reaction journal requires students to respond to a course reading by writing a summary of that reading (which may simply be a short list of key points) and react to that reading by making connections from that reading to their own ideas, views, and experiences.

The three of us have used summary/reaction journals, and importantly to the theme underlying this journal, we have used them across numerous disciplines, including courses in business, psychology, literature, statistics, economics, and teacher education. We also have used them both at the undergraduate and graduate levels; one of us has used them in a developmental reading course for students who were identified as not being ready for college-level coursework. We believe that our approach to implementing summary/reaction journals has educational merit, and the purpose of this article is to offer practical advice towards the goal of that implementation. Though our main purpose is to focus on practical application, we would be remiss not to offer a brief theoretical justification for the use of summary/reaction journals. Most of this article, though, is focused on practical approaches for helping students get the most out of their journaling experiences. These practical approaches

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support the processes of introducing summary/reaction journals to students, supporting their use throughout the semester, and assessing journals when they are submitted.

## Theory Supporting Summary/Reaction Journals

Superficially, summary/reaction journals hold students accountable for reading assigned texts. More substantively, though, summary/reaction journals can lead to feelings of empowerment and a new sense of control within the learning process. We believe both the notion of "writing to learn" and the theory of generative learning can help explain these feelings of empowerment and control. We discuss each briefly.

### Writing to Learn

Newspaper advice columnist Ann Landers once received a letter of desperation from a betrothed young woman. She began by asking, "[S]hould I marry the guy or not?" After giving some detail of the negative characteristics of her fiancé, including his irresponsibility with finances, his past failed marriage, and his general immaturity, this letter writer ended with a surprise: "Do not bother to answer this," she wrote to the advice columnist. "You have helped me more than you will ever know" (quoted in Lindemann, 1995, p. 6). What happened for this woman as she wrote? Quite simply, she learned from her own writing. This example illustrates the point clearly: To write is to learn. While this learning did not come from a summary/reaction journal, our experiences suggest that the idea of writing to learn supports the use of summary/reaction journals. Connections between summary/reaction journals and writing to learn are offered in the already-existing literature (cf., Knowlton, Eschmann, Fish, Heffren, & Voss, 2004).

### Generative Learning Theory

Building on the work of Wittrock (1974, 1990, 1992), Jonassen (1998) identified four categories of generative learning strategies. Three of these categories support the use of summary/reaction journals. The first category is an organizational generative strategy. Obviously, when students are writing summaries, they are imposing an organization on a reading that is more personally relevant to them than the organization of that original reading. In practical terms, this sometimes simply means that students selectively organize the salient ideas (as they see them) more carefully than other ideas within the article that did not appeal to that student. Sometimes, though, the organization itself may be completely original. Consider, for example, a student who summarizes a text-heavy article using PowerPoint slides or a table created in a word processor. To the extent that students are using their own words in writing the summary, they are integrating the text with their own language. This notion of integration is the second of Jonassen's categories of generative strategies.

Reactions can also evidence integration. As students are connecting a reading to their own ideas they certainly are using their own words to express the connections. But they also are integrating the reading itself with their own experiences and ideas. The third category of generative strategies, an elaboration strategy, can be connected to writing reactions. For example, a student who offers an example of a concept in a reading can be said to be elaborating on the reading.

In short, summary/reaction journals allow students to manipulate the ideas in a reading through organizing, integrating, and elaborating. These three types of manipulation are likely to be useful to students as they read a text. Strategies of these types promote a stronger likelihood that students will better understand the content with which they are dealing (Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2000).

## Introducing Summary/Reaction Journals to Students

To maximize the theoretical benefits of summary/reaction journals, we find that the journal assignment must be introduced in ways that will set the tone for their productive use throughout a semester. Sometimes, we do this by sharing an example of "writing to learn" with our students. We have read to students the letter to Ann Landers. We also have brought in particularly difficult articles that we have waded through and shown students our own efforts with summarizing and reacting (albeit sometimes informally in the margins). We share with them that, like them, we do not necessarily "enjoy" the process, but the process is an important part of coming to understand and make meaning of various readings.

Beyond setting the tone for their productive use orally, we find it important to use written assignment guidelines as a means of productively introducing summary/reaction journals to our students. The exact nature of these guidelines may vary depending on whether the course is graduate or undergraduate and the discipline in which we are teaching. Regardless of these variations, we find that a number of characteristics make for good assignment guidelines. First, to support our oral introduction of journals, we find that an outright statement about the purpose of journals is useful. Such a statement looks something like this: "Writing is a learning activity. By committing your ideas to paper and making connections between a reading and your own ideas, you will come to understand your own beliefs and ideas." We find that students appreciate being told the point of these exercises, and it does cut down on complaints that we hear about writing being "busy work."

Second, we, in general, try to communicate the informality of journals. We have noted in our assignment guidelines that students should not edit journals, and we assure them in the assignment guidelines that we will "read right over grammatical and mechanical injudiciousness." The need for emphasizing informality in the assignment guidelines is substantive if students are to focus on their ideas, not the ways that those ideas are presented. Indeed, if students are spending time correcting spelling or grammar errors, then they are not focusing on their emerging understanding of course content as presented in a reading. We also communicate the informality of summary/reaction journals by using words within the assignment guidelines like "rough draft," "non-polished," or "free writing."

Third, the assignment guidelines should, in our view, help students see the wide reaching possibilities for creating a good summary and reaction. For example, we note that students should feel comfortable representing their summary in whatever way they see fit. This could be a traditional paragraph approach to writing (and we find that writing paragraphs is what students most often do), but it also could be a bulleted list, a concept map, flow chart, or even a series of PowerPoint slides. To help students see the wide variety in which reactions might be useful, we provide students with writing prompts or questions to scaffold their ability to write a reaction. We are careful to note, though, that they should not feel enslaved by the writing prompts, and they should feel free to ignore the prompts if they have a direction that they would like to follow in their reactions. Examples of the writing prompts follow:

- Why do you agree (or not agree) with the ideas that you have read?
- In what ways have you witnessed the ideas in the article "in action"?
- How do ideas in the current article create congruence or contradiction to other articles?
- What practical application does the article have for your professional work?

## Supporting Summary/Reaction Journals throughout the Semester

To some extent, we "go with the flow" in terms of supporting the use of summary/reaction journals throughout the semester. In some courses, they have come up almost weekly as a topic for discussion itself. In other courses, they fade into the background and rarely arise as a topic for discussion. We do think that certain strategies can be useful in helping students come to understand summary/reaction journals.

Sometimes we initiate a class discussion about the process of writing summary/reaction journals. We find that such a discussion is helpful after students have written two or three journals. Such a discussion broadens students' understanding of the ways they might approach a summary/reaction journal. We facilitate such a discussion by initially polling the class where they vote simply by a raise of their hands:

- How many of you read the entire article prior to beginning to write your summary?
- How many of you read some of the article then summarize before continuing to read?
- How many of you take notes in the margins of a reading to help you identify key points worthy of summary?
- How many of you have a marking system so that you can note in the margins items that you want to react to?
- Do you word process your journals right away or do you write them out by hand first?

We find that such polling of close-ended questions leads to a fruitful open discussion about the students' processes for creating a summary/reaction journal. We have had students share with us that they have changed their process as a result of such discussions. Beyond discussions about process, though, we sometimes facilitate in-class activities designed to "get at" the impact of journals on students' learning process. A directive question about how journaling influenced (or undermined) their learning sometimes will lead to such a discussion. Furthermore, questions about the relative virtue of summary and reaction as two distinct processes sometimes are useful within such a discussion.

Sometimes early in the semester, we also will support students' use of summary/reaction journals by providing them with an example journal. Using the example journal, students become the "teacher" and comment on the journal in ways that they think are productive. When asked to view summary/reaction journals from the point of view of the teacher who is assessing a journal and judging its relative worth, students sometimes develop a different understanding of the journal. While providing students with examples can be useful, it also has a drawback that professors across disciplines must consider. Our experiences suggest that when we give students examples, their own journals tend to conform to the example. The example, after all, comes from the teacher; and students have been conditioned to provide teachers with "what they want." One way to combat this is to ask for volunteers to bring multiple copies of their own journals as an object for discussion and review. In this case, the example is not coming down from on high; rather, the example comes from a classmate and students are more likely to understand that such an example is not necessarily a *primo* example as defined by the professor.

## Assessing Summary/Reaction Journals in Meaningful Ways

It is no secret that grades are the currency of students. Unfortunately, in fact, students often consider grades to the exclusion of all other characteristics of a returned assignment. Thus, our first piece of

advice regarding assessing journals is to not use traditional "grades" or percentages. Do you need a summary marking at all? From an educational perspective, we suspect that the answer is that you do not. We find, though, that students are appreciative of some indication as to our summary judgment of their efforts in writing each summary/reaction journal. One system that we have found useful is to mark superior journals with a plus sign, journals that met our expectations with a check mark, and journals that seem to miss the "intended purpose" of journaling with a minus sign. While the nebulousness of the indicator makes students uncomfortable initially—they are, after all, accustomed to receiving a "grade"—we urge them to trust us that we will be more than generous in converting these markings into a "number" at the end of the semester. A point of warning here: If you ask students to trust you that their grade will take care of itself, it is imperative that you are more than generous when assigning grades. The approach of pluses, checks, and minuses that we describe shifts the focus away from grading and towards commenting and providing feedback. This shift begs a question: What types of comments should we offer to students?

Commenting can become a dialogue between professor and student (Knowlton & Knowlton, 2001). To some extent, the personalities of the professor and individual student on which the comments are being written shapes that dialogue. On average, though, we think comments can fall into one of two categories. First, some comments can be designed to offer feedback on the journal itself, as opposed to the content of the reading. This type of feedback should not be dismissed; its purpose is to help students better understand how to use summary/reaction journals as a useful learning tool. Consider the following comments:

- "You did a good job of capturing the big idea of the article. Were there no specifics worthy of mentioning?"
- "Your summary is extremely thorough. What if you had forced yourself to write a shorter summary by being more selective with details? Do you think you would have gotten just as much out of the reading?"
- "It's interesting to me that you chose to use a concept map in your summary. Why do you think this representation was more useful to you than a paragraph would have been?"

Second, feedback should help students constantly consider the course content from a variety of perspectives. Sometimes such comments are designed to help students reconnect their ideas to a larger course framework. For example, consider the following comments:

- "I'm struck by your idea here. Should I view you as advocating behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, or something else entirely?"
- "This is an interesting reaction. Is it a reaction more likely to be accepted by a Keynesian or a neoclassical?"

The first example above might be from an educational psychology course. The second would be from an economics course. Such comments help students constantly stay aware of their ideas in light of the large framing issues of an entire course. Beyond helping students see the relationship between their reactions and the framework of a course, comments from the teacher can help students focus on course content in other ways. If, for example, you think that students have written a reaction that does not evidence a clear understanding of content, you can redirect them: "From your example here, I infer that you view 'relativism' and 'existentialism' as the same thing. Would the author of the article agree? Check out pages 37 and 38. Doesn't the author offer two distinctive definitions?" Even more

blatantly, we find that sometimes we need to help students, particularly those who offer over-confident (or even vitriolic) reactions, remember that most issues can be seen from a variety of perspectives: "Consider those who disagree with you on this point. What might be their chief argument to support their disagreement?"

Certainly our comments on students' journals do not always fall into one of these two categories. As we have pointed out, commenting can become very individualized and should be shaped by the professor's consideration of students' needs. We would like to suggest that some key phrases are best *not* used in commenting on summary/reaction journals:

- "I disagree with you . . . ."
- "Wouldn't you agree with me when I say that . . . ?"
- "Do you see that . . . ?"

Comments that begin with such phrases are likely not to be guiding in nature; rather, they are likely to be dictatorial, suggesting to students that professors have a monopoly on acceptable and unacceptable views. However enticing it may be to head students towards the "right" views, at least as you see them, it is more important for students to develop skills in free thinking and towards the pursuit of their own ideas. All comments and feedback should support such pursuit.

## So, How's it all Working for Us?

In this essay, we have suggested that summary/reaction journals are useful, and we have offered advice for implementing journals in useful ways. The advice is based on our experiences. A fair question from readers of this article, then, would be how our implementation has seemed to support strong principles of learning in our classrooms. Overall, we are pleased. For readers who plan on implementing summary/reaction journals per our advice, our experiences suggest several potential drawbacks. For example, at least initially, students are a bit skeptical about the virtues of summary/reaction journals. Furthermore, we note that the workload of professors becomes much heavier as you spend more time commenting and providing feedback (as opposed to grading) students' journals. It is not too uncommon for us to spend fifteen plus hours per week providing students with written comments.

We also note the high level of rewards in terms of student learning as a result of our particular approach to implementation. To illustrate this, we close this article with verbatim (mechanical injudiciousness in tact) excerpts from two students' journals. (We use these excerpts with their permission.). Each excerpt evidences a strong example of the ways that our approach leads students to learning from their journal (writing to learn) by connecting course content to their own ideas and experiences (generative learning). As one of our students was grappling with ways of making her own elementary school classroom more "real world" for her students, she had a revelation and was able to answer her own question:

[M]ost [of my] students have no idea what they want to do when they grow-up, so how do [I] make the [educational] experience authentic? I also work in a district where the poverty level is 50% of our school population, so students don't have much prior knowledge about things or places outside their environment. *Never mind what I was saying, I just answered my own question.* I will design problems that are centered around them or in their prior knowledge like Wal-Mart, Fun Spot (skating rink), or McDonald's.



We added italics in the above quotation to highlight how her own writing lead to a revelation. Similarly, another one of our students was contemplating an article about the use of multimedia in the corporate world, as opposed to the public school setting in which he currently worked. He was intrigued by the possibility of a corporate job until he saw his own ideas in the reaction to his journal:

Even after listing a few major cons [of having a multimedia-based job in the corporate world], I am still fascinated by the thought of having a job where I could create, help people communicate and learn new stuff all the time. I couldn't help thinking how cool that would be. . . . I just had a major realization after looking back at what I just typed. I DO HAVE THAT JOB!!! Teaching [in K-12 schools] allows me to create, help people communicate, and I learn new stuff everyday because of my job!!!!!! What am I thinking??? This helps answer the question of would [a multimedia job] fulfill me. The answer: no.

We offer a final excerpt from a student writing as evidence of the viability of our implementation of summary/reaction journals. Interestingly, this final excerpt did not come from a journal. Rather, it was a comment written on the end-of-course evaluation form: "[The professor] added nothing to this class. Everything that I learned, I either came to understand by writing my [summary/reaction] journal or I learned as I talked to classmates about their [journals]." As the authors of this essay reflect on such a comment, we cannot imagine a higher testimonial towards the usefulness of summary/reaction journals as a tool to foster learning.

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