

### **Writing Reaction Papers**

Reaction papers should focus primarily on your reaction to the main points raised in each of the readings rather than on summarizing the readings. Here's why: summarizing is a useful skill, but I expect that you are all reasonably practiced at it by the time you've reached grad school. Our task is to go beyond summary to interact with the material, digest it, figure out what parts ring true, what parts do not, and precisely why they ring true or false. Our task is to critically analyze the material, to look at it from the perspective of our personal experience, to avoid sweeping over-generalizations, to try to piece together the various readings into a unified understanding. Diamond and Redmond try to draw connections for us, but ultimately, the connections that stick in human brains are only those connections that we ourselves make. So wrestle with the material, engage with it, see if you buy the author's points, and justify your position either way. Further, the points you raise in your reaction papers prime you for discussion in class. For those of you having trouble speaking up regularly in class, this will make it easier for you to fully participate (3+ comments per class). For everyone this should raise the level of discourse.

What is your personal reaction to the key points of the reading? What did you find surprising or new? What questions did the reading raise for you? How have other societies dealt with the sustainability challenges raised here? How might different societies today deal with them? What are the problems and promise of any remedies suggested in the reading or elsewhere? Again: less summary, more reaction.

### **Leading Discussion**

When leading discussion, you need not summarize a reading for us, as we all have (presumably) read it. The key is to have a series of questions prepared to prompt discussion (see below).

Having a list of such questions ready (partially from those in your reaction paper) will make discussions much more interesting and useful. You may not use all the questions, so hit the larger questions first. It's fine to let discussion wander to a degree, but when it wanders far from the main topics, it's the discussion leader's job to get us back on track by asking another focused question.

### **Presenting Papers for Discussion**

To prepare for presenting your self-selected articles, start by getting your selection to me AT LEAST one week before you present. That way I can help if I think the article may not work well. I want you to have a success experience. Once you are settled on the article, start preparing questions. A strategy that usually works well is to present one of the main points (in 1-3 minutes) followed by a series of discussion questions for the class (one question at a time). Then present the next main point (1-3 minutes) followed by questions, etc. When presenting material to the class, DO **NOT READ** IT TO US. Instead, **SPEAK** TO US while referring to BRIEF notes. Only the most gifted orators can ever read material aloud to an audience without inducing sleep. Alas, none of us is that gifted.

When selecting a paper, you can pick an article about one of the societies covered by the readings, or more generally about one of the environmental problems raised, etc. When you send it to me, please include a few sentences on which main points you will present and how you will tie them into course themes and how you think they will contribute to the discussion.

### **Writing Discussion Questions**

For instance, one might say "At one point, the author seems to be saying fill-in-the-blank. This surprised me because of x-y-z. Did anyone else find that surprising / contradictory / unsupported by evidence / confusing / similar to a-b-c / etc. ?" A general strategy to help draw people into discussion is to set up two (or more) sides to an issue and ask people which side is more compelling. Start by asking yourself the same types of questions listed above for reaction papers.