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The What, Why, When and How of Reading Response Journals

**Julia Shinneman Fulps
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Today much student time is spent in preparation for mandated reading and writing tests. Consequently, students rarely get a chance to generate their own meanings as they read and compose from their own thoughts as they write. Ruth (1987) points out the need to present opportunities for students to ask and answer real questions of their own about reading and writing. Reading response journals provide students with an opportunity to respond and interpret their reading personally.

Reading response journals are informal, written communications between two or more people about something one person has read about. These journals can include personal reactions to, questions about, and reflections on what has been read (Parsons, 1990). Students can respond to what they've read, or, to what has been read to them. Even kindergarten and first grade students can respond to a story using illustrations, scribbles, random letters, and invented spellings (Farris, 1989; Hipple, 1985).

Why use reading response journals?

All students can experience success in responding to literature regardless of reading ability. One of the primary

benefits of reading response journals is increased comprehension. Reading response journals enable students to grow as readers and writers by requiring them to use their own background knowledge to construct personal meaning (Wollman-Bonilla, 1989) and by encouraging, in writing, the integration of new experiences with past ones. Besides transforming feelings and thoughts about what they've read into words (Strackbein and Tillman, 1987), responses allow students to make the personal connection to texts (Simpson, 1986). In addition, Kelly (1990) reported that her third grade students displayed increased fluency and greater detail as a result of responding in journals. Besides developing children's understanding of reading strategies, comprehension, knowledge of literature and their ability to communicate and refine ideas, often the most striking development is students' growth in confidence, and motivation to read. Furthermore, reading response journals are an excellent means of recording how students' writing has changed and matured, and a valuable means of catching up on new literature that the students are reading (Strackbein and Tillman, 1987).

Reading response journals are not only for responding to independent reading and reading in the language arts block. They can also be used during shared reading time. In this manner, listening skills are sharpened. However, Parsons (1990) cautions that too much writing can strangle a read aloud program. When used in other content areas, response journals pay off with increased learning (Fulwiler, 1987; Smith, 1988). Smith cites several research studies which have favored written responses over reading alone as a study technique. As readers put what was read into their own words, they take ownership of what was read. The ownership and increased understanding result in better test results.

What do the journals look like?

There is no one physical appearance for reading response journals. Likewise, content can vary, as can the format that these responses take. Below are some suggestions for design, content, and format of reading response journals. Teachers should look to see which of these will best fit their needs and the needs of their students. The suggestions can be adapted in order to make journals fit the needs of the class.

Design. Reading response journals can be as simple as a few pages stapled together. Some teachers choose to fold 8 1/2" x 11" sheets in half and sew it down the middle, while others prefer a spiral notebook. Teachers who have tried both homemade and spiral notebooks report that in addition to saving time and materials, the spiral notebooks make the journals seem more like the "real thing" to students (Harste, Short, and Burke, 1988). For younger students who are responding to their reading through illustrations and writing, blank artist's spirals are an ideal solution. Whatever style of journal is used, students should be encouraged to decorate their reading response journals to make them their own. Brewster (1988) encourages students to use colored ink pens or scented markers when writing their entries. This further encourages students to be creative and frees them from what is usually done in the classroom with standard writing instruments.

Format. Often the format for a response will depend on the response that the teacher is requesting. Reed (1988) suggests that the teacher encourage students to think and write as they read. Besides the traditional paragraph format, some teachers prefer that their student react to their reading in a letter format (Atwell, 1987; Five, 1988). These letters can be addressed to the author, a character in

their reading, or the teacher. Another format is a half-page entry. The students divide their sheets in half (length-wise). On one half they write a sentence or phrase that they liked from the book. Then on the other half they react to what they've written – how they felt when they read the passage, why they like it, or why they decided to write that phrase down. In order to help sustain motivation, the teacher can vary the format every couple of weeks (Brewster, 1988).

There are a variety of formats that readers may choose to use when responding to their reading texts. The list in Figure 1 was compiled from several sources (Atwell, 1990; Tompkins, 1990b; Tschudi and Tschudi, 1983).

Figure 1
Formats for reader responses

| | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| ABC books | ads/commercials | "All About _____" books |
| anecdotes | biographies | book reviews |
| brainstormed list | calendars | cartoons/comics |
| catalogs | charts | diagrams |
| clusters | coloring books | comparisons |
| five senses clusters | five senses poems | games |
| greeting cards | interviews | journals-simulated |
| letters-business | letters-friendly | letters-simulated |
| lifelines/time lines | maps | newspapers |
| newspapers | oral histories | poetry |
| predictions | RAFTs (Dueck, 1986) | raps |
| resumes | riddles | songs |
| telegrams | word searches | wordless picture books |

Content. Regardless of the different types of content within reading response journals, three items should appear on each page: the date, the title, and the author of the book. Title and author are needed so that students and teacher can refer to the book later (Parsons, 1990). The content of a reading response journal can be decided by the teacher

or left up to the students to decide. Initially the teacher might suggest the students react to the reading in a specific way: from a different point-of-view, by altering the time and setting of the story, alternating knowledge and opinion entries, by using drawings instead of words, or relating what they've read to an experience they've had that was similar. After several weeks (and a variety of reactions) teachers should allow the students to decide how they will respond to their reading (Strackbein and Tillman, 1987). As students become more independent and begin to accept their autonomy in the reading process, they should be guided away from a reliance on prompts (Parsons, 1990). It is important for teachers to remember that response journals allow for different interpretations of text depending on what the readers bring to the reading. If the teachers opt to use questions or prompts to direct students' responses, they should be broad and open-ended (Kelly, 1990); thus the questions should encourage students to develop their own meaning rather than teachers' desired interpretation (Wollman-Bonilla, 1989).

What is the teacher's role?

Much of the success (and failure) of reading response journals lies with the teacher and the teacher's responses to what the students have written. Wollman-Bonilla (1989) reports that children invest more interest and energy in journal writing when their teacher writes back to them. When responding to what students have written in their reading response journals, it is best to comment informally as one might comment in dialogue journals (Kelly, 1990). And these should be responses – not a smiley face, a "GREAT!" or an "I agree." Strackbein and Tillman (1987) believe three or four sentences that respond positively and specifically to the writer's content will encourage the students to share their ideas and questions far more than a smiley face will.

Wollman-Bonilla (1989) further suggests that the teacher affirm ideas and feelings, provide information, request information related to students' responses, model elaboration, and guide students to examine their ideas as they discover new insights.

It is important that the teacher's responses be focused on the depth of thinking, rather than the mechanics of writing (Simpson, 1986; Strackbein, 1987). Otherwise there is no real request for reflection, but instead the journal becomes a vehicle to display the student's mechanical knowledge. Ruth (1987) points out that if the teacher's response is only to the mechanics and failures to approximate adult models of writing, then children's real accomplishments in relation to their purposes and intentions may be overlooked. Teachers may model correct usage in their responses, but they should *not* correct the students' actual entries.

Naturally, teachers should also write in a journal (whenever the students are asked to write in class). This shows students that journal writing is valued by teachers. Ideally, journals would be collected and responded to on a daily basis. This is often not practical, however, and teachers should schedule a way to respond on a regular basis. Keeping the reading response journals in a box or in one location makes them easier to manage (Simpson, 1986).

How does one begin?

When beginning to use reading response journals, the first task is to encourage students to go beyond simple retrieval of information, and instead, to take risks when interpreting what they read. This can be accomplished most effectively by beginning with a group entry. Teachers first encourage the students to *respond to* rather than summarize some text that all of the students have experienced through

reading or listening (Tompkins, 1990a). Then, teachers can solicit oral responses. The oral responses allow the students to hear each other's thoughts about the story and also provide the teacher with the opportunity to model that all responses are valid. Predictably, students at first will say what they think the teacher wants to hear. As students become convinced that there are no right or wrong answers, they will begin commenting and predicting because they have the assurance that their *ideas* are important (Simpson, 1986). Finally, this oral presentation provides a framework and practice for future opportunities to respond to literature (Kelly, 1990). Once the class has made the move to written responses, students should still be given the opportunity to share with the class their written responses orally.

Wrapping it all up

Reading response journals provide a teacher with a means of looking inside students' minds to view their understanding of what was read. In addition, these journals foster students' ability to connect literature with their own lives and therefore increase comprehension. With a carefully modeled introduction, management, and thoughtful teacher responses, reading response journals can work in any classroom. The rewards for students will more than make up for the time and effort of their teachers.

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