

# Response Activities

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## Purpose of Response Activities

Responding to a novel is as important as reading the novel. When readers express their personal responses to literature freely, they demonstrate their growth as literate learners. They can talk about a novel, read dialogue aloud, illustrate scenes from the novel, or construct models of settings in a novel. They can role-play characters and events. They can also write their own material based on ideas sparked by a novel. Additionally, they can read other novels in the same genre or by the same author. With the teacher's guidance, collaborative responses can extend each reader's personal response and help generate a wider and more thoughtful understanding of the story.

Usually, response activities involve *doing* something based on what has been read. Response activities can take the form of discussion, writing, drama, or art. When we engage in response activities, whether on our own or with others, we are invited to go beyond the text. Response activities encourage readers to relate concepts in the novel to their own experiences, and to tap into memories and insights elicited by the intensity of the reading experience.

Response activities allow readers to "open up" the text for discussion. By responding in a format that suits their learning style, students can reflect on the whole experience of reading the novel and they can expand or modify their understanding. Response activities encourage readers to voice their viewpoints and opinions. They become aware that opinions that are relevant to but not necessarily identical with those in the novel are equally valid. As readers articulate their interpretations of a

novel and learn from exposure to differing viewpoints, knowledge, and experience, they begin to appreciate the complexities of a well-written novel. They begin to pay attention to the appropriateness and effectiveness of choice of words, ideas, style, and other features of writing. When readers respond to the novels they have read, they begin to explore in greater depth the traditional elements of literature – plot, characterization, setting, theme, and style.

### Critical Literacy

Reflective readers also learn to look beyond the surface message, to read between the lines, and to recognize that no text is neutral. They learn to question the authority of texts and to examine issues of bias and perspective. By reading widely, they see how novels reflect the choices, positions, and beliefs of the authors who created them. They come to understand that authors construct their texts with the goal of influencing the reader in some way. Put another way, readers develop and practice critical literacy skills.

Response activities extend and enrich each reader's interaction with the text. Ideally, response activities:

- invite a careful, analytical reading of a novel through the lens of critical literacy;
- expand the reader's knowledge of a topic or topics;
- clarify initial understandings of a novel;
- help readers discover new patterns of thinking; and
- promote interaction and collaboration with others.

## Types of Responses

### Responding Orally

Book talks can be as informal as two or three friends meeting to discuss a novel that one or both readers have read. They can be as formal as a whole class discussion in which everyone discusses a novel they have read or heard the teacher read aloud. Some discussions can be tape-recorded and shared with others. Sharing thoughts and feelings with classmates who have read the same novels can lead to more sophisticated literary generalizations and deeper understanding.

### The Importance of Talk

In small groups, discussion is often spontaneous. Group members offer their comments, concerns, and criticisms in response to what they have read. Before reading, group members can gather to predict, anticipate, and set the stage for the novel's narrative. During and after reading, they can engage in purposeful talk to construct both personal and collective meaning.

Talk can also be the starting point for a variety of response activities. Such activities might include research, role-playing, storytelling, brainstorming, questioning, writing, and reading aloud. As we dig inside a novel's narrative, we can revise our understanding and create our own stories in light of what others reveal as they attempt to make meaning as well.

### Ten Contexts for Book Talks

1. A student interviews another student about a novel he or she has read.
2. Pairs or small groups share opinions or enthusiasms about parts of a novel, or the novel as a whole.
3. Students consult with others to plan and prepare a response activity.
4. Students form small groups to discuss a novel that all group members have read. (Students may need the teacher's help in devising a framework for their discussion.)
5. In a small group, in which the teacher is a member, students discuss a novel that everyone has read.
6. The teacher leads a large group discussion about a novel that has been read aloud to the class.
7. A student and teacher can share reactions, ask and answer questions, and make connections during a reading conference.
8. Students tell stories that come to mind as they read the novel. These stories can focus on events that have happened in their own lives or in the lives of others, or they can reflect events in the media.
9. Students meet with others who have not read the same novel to retell events and share reactions.
10. Students meet in literature circles, taking on a role to discuss what they've read.

## Responding in Writing

Well-written novels provide readers with the best possible models of narrative writing – real books written with real intent for real audiences. When reading a novel, we learn a great deal about the craft of writing. The author of the novel can often serve as an excellent writing teacher, and students can:

- observe how writers represent experience
- borrow vocabulary for their own writing
- learn how to describe characters and setting
- understand how to emphasize what is significant in terms of plot
- learn to present factual information and to inform readers of the main idea

## Reading Response Journals

A reading response journal (also called a dialogue journal or a literature log) is a convenient and flexible tool to help readers reflect on their reading. Keeping a journal permits readers to communicate and explore the ideas and feelings that a novel evokes, and to relate what they read to their own lives.

It's fun and informative to share journals with others. A teacher, friend, or family member who reads selected entries can begin a dialogue with the reader by offering comments on their responses, pointing out connections with their thinking, and expressing their viewpoints.

When a trusted audience responds to the journal in a conversation, readers can clarify their thinking about the story, raise questions to explore further, or make connections with their own lives. A reading response journal fosters a connection between reading and writing.

Reading response journals place readers at the centre of their learning. These journals can serve as a record of the reader's thinking about literature and of his or her reactions as readers. They prompt learners to reflect on, interact with, and find personal meaning in works of literature. They encourage storytelling, questioning, imagining, and speculating.

A journal provides ongoing information about readers' thinking and learning – for students as readers and for teachers as audience and guide. A reading response journal is a powerful way to stimulate interaction among teacher, text, and learner.

## Ten Ways to Write About Our Reading

1. **Jot reactions** to a novel on sticky notes, in response journals, or on personal copies of the book.
2. **Add entries** to a cumulative class response chart (e.g., to showcase new vocabulary or key questions that were raised).
3. **Write a letter** to a teacher, friend, or family member about a book.
4. **List questions** that come to mind for further discussion.
5. **Record book-talk** conversations.
6. **Describe** a novel's events, characters, settings, and conflicts.
7. **Retell** the story as newspaper articles, fictitious letters, or diary entries.
8. **Create a Readers Theatre script** that focuses on one section or chapter of a novel.
9. **Write in role** as a character that appears in the novel (e.g., create a character's diary entry, a letter to a relative, or a fictitious autobiography).
10. **Share opinions** of the novel in a book review that others can read.

## Journal Prompts

The following sample journal prompts can help students reflect on their reading as they record their responses:

1. What are you enjoying/not enjoying about the novel?
2. What, if anything, puzzles you as you read the novel?
3. Is the novel easy or hard to read? Do you sometimes reread parts?
4. During your reading, do you "see" the story in your mind?
5. What problems emerge in the novel? How do you think these problems will be resolved?
6. What words, phrases, or sentences made an impression on you?
7. What interests you about the character(s) in the novel?
8. What advice would you give to one of the characters in the novel?
9. What advice would you give to the author of the novel?
10. How do you feel about the way the author told the story?
11. Have you or someone you know experienced events similar to the ones that took place in the novel?
12. What did the novel make you wonder about?
13. What is the author's overall message?
14. Do you think the novel's title is appropriate?
15. What will you tell your friends about this novel?

## Responding Through Art

Many readers enjoy representing their responses visually. By drawing, painting, making models, or constructing collages, students – especially visual learners – can convey their thoughts and feelings about a novel they’ve read.

For various reasons, including anxiety or difficulties with language, some readers are unable to respond orally or in writing. For these students, visual arts can offer a non-threatening opportunity to express their understanding and appreciation of a novel and its elements. Illustrations and other art projects can serve as artifacts for group discussion and can help others understand what a reader is “saying” about the novel through the details, style, and emotions represented in the piece of art. Try some of the following ideas.

**Design a character’s room** showing furniture, books, souvenirs, and posters that represent the character’s personality, interests, hobbies, and possessions.

Imagine you have been hired as an artist to **create illustrations** for a novel you have read. Which scenes painted a vivid picture in your mind? Which medium will you use to communicate your ideas?

**Create a portrait mask** for a character from a novel you’ve read. If you wish, cut out pictures from magazines or newspapers to represent events or symbols that reveal something about the character.

Film producers commission storyboards to help them structure the scenes in a film before it is shot. **Create a storyboard** showing a series of sketches representing plot highlights of one chapter or section of a novel. Your sketches could represent the most powerful images that you would see if this novel were made into a film.

Imagine that a novel you have read is going to be made into a play or a film. The director has hired you to construct a set representing rooms or places described in the novel.

**Construct a model set** for a scene in your novel.

## Responding Through Drama

Drama provides opportunities to step into the shoes of a character and to gain a better understanding of the character’s dilemmas. By responding to literature through drama, readers can express a character’s innermost thoughts and explore a story from a variety of viewpoints, both orally and in writing.

The conflicts that arise in a novel can provide meaningful opportunities to work with others – in role and out of role – to solve problems, make decisions, and re-enact significant events. Even if the context is remote from the readers’ experience in time or place, students can respond through drama to examine a character’s actions, relationships, and predicaments. By improvising a situation portrayed in a novel, we respond as if the events created by the author are real and we step inside the author’s fictitious world.

The text of the novel can also provide sources for dramatic interpretation. Readers can use narration and dialogue to develop scripts, monologues, or Readers Theatre presentations.

Imagine that you can talk on the phone with a character from a novel. What questions might you ask? What advice would you give? Work with a partner to **improvise a conversation** between the character and a friend, relative, or another character from the novel.

With a small group of peers who have read and enjoyed the same novel, choose a scene to dramatize. Decide on how the text will be narrated and how members of the group will role-play the characters in order to **create a dramatic presentation** of the scene from the novel.

Imagine that the characters in the novel you have read keep a journal. Pretend that you are one of the characters and **write a fictitious journal entry** (or series of entries) that would reveal the character’s thoughts and attitudes to events or relationships depicted in the novel.

Choose an interesting section of the novel that features dialogue (minimum one-half page). Working in a group, **transform this dialogue into a written script** to be performed by others. How many characters will you need? How will you handle narration?

Imagine that a character in a novel you’ve read is having dreams about a problem he or she is facing or about a past event (either troubling or pleasing). Work in a group to **create a dream** that reveals something important about the character and the story’s conflict. You can use music, movement (including slow motion), dance, sound effects, still images, or props.

### *Thinking About... Responding to Novels*

- Describe the most innovative way in which you’ve responded to a novel. What made the activity especially creative?
- What might be a unique way to respond to a novel when working in a small group? In a large group?