

Writing the Reader Response Essay

Because many of SFCC's students move on to programs that require research, but English Composition I is their only writing-intensive prerequisite, their ability to retrieve, process, and accurately present information is essential for the successful completion of the course.

The reader response essay is designed to help students analyze a published article or essay for its meaning, evaluate its credibility, and communicate its value to a specific audience, often drawing in information from other sources to help validate its message. Students learn multiple approaches to writing this essay. They can agree or disagree with author's premise by drawing parallels with their own observation and experience. They can draw from the expertise of other sources to validate or disprove the author's beliefs. Or, students can argue how effectively or ineffectively the author delivers his message, citing key passages from the article and commenting on their logic or structure.

During the process of preparing the essay, students are guided through a series of questions that help them focus their essay on a specific purpose:

- **What is the thesis of the article?** That is, what one controlling idea does the author attempt to communicate?
- **What are the author's assumptions?** That is, what does he or she seem to believe is true in regard to the subject matter of the article? For example, if the topic focuses on the mounting number of Americans who are struggling with credit card debt, where does the author seem to suggest the fault lies? Does he appear to think this problem a result of the typical American consumer's lack of self-discipline? Or, does he seem to suggest the fault lies with the credit card companies? Are their interest rates unreasonable? Are their business practices unscrupulous?
- **What questions does the article raise?** For example, is the supporting evidence the author provides convincing? What information from additional sources confirm or disprove the author's point?
- **After considering the previous questions, what issue can the student address in response to the author's intended message?** A thesis might follow one of these formats:
 - Although (author's name) acknowledges that _____, he overlooks key _____ that compromise his _____.
 - (Author's name) provides compelling evidence that _____.
 - Even though many would disagree with the author's conclusion that _____, there is ample evidence to support her premise that _____.

One Student's Experience with the Reader Response Essay

Assigned the task of responding to an article that deals with a social concern, **Will Blankenship** is drawn to a recent editorial regarding the sky rocketing salaries in the world of professional baseball. After a series of drafts, Will's final revision provides an exemplary balance of summary and response.

Will's first paragraph introduces the article's author Edward McClelland and the general idea he is making about professional baseball players' salaries in a summarizing sentence. This summary is balanced with Will's own interpretation of the issue McClelland addresses. The paragraph concludes with a thesis that challenges the author's claim:

A Response To: "The Other Kind of Moneyball"

In today's world, money has become nearly as important as the air we breathe. Almost everyone accepts this as a fact, and many people try to explain money's importance with various examples. One of these examples is given by Edward McClelland in his article "The Other Kind Of Moneyball." McClelland, a writer for Slate online magazine, (a subsidiary of the Washington Post), discusses how the drastic rise in the salaries of Major League Baseball (MLB) players is an accurate representation of what is wrong with the American economic system. A dichotomy has arisen over the past decade. The income of the average American has not increased in real dollars, while the income of a select few, including the 500 or so players in the MLB, has increased by nearly twenty fold. I agree with McClelland about the fact that this economic inequality is a large problem for America, but comparing MLB salaries with those of average middle class Americans is a bit naïve.

In the paragraph that follows, Will acknowledges McClelland's key point that fans and players of America's favorite pastime seem to be more focused with earnings than the joy of the game.

McClelland contends that baseball is no longer the game it used to be because of the massive amounts of money being thrown at the players. "Comedian Joe E. Lewis once said that rooting for the New York Yankees was like rooting for U.S. Steel. And that was when Mickey Mantle was earning \$60,000 a year—12 times the median household income. Now, rooting for any team is like rooting for U.S. Steel" (McClelland, 1). This is of course factually correct. Not only is baseball not the same, but it never will be. The ability of players to bargain with teams and negotiate raises in salaries is simply an accepted part of the free-market economic system. If the players of the MLB were not allowed to make as much money as they possibly could, then they would be at a disadvantage; they wouldn't have the same basic rights as the rest of us. If this free-market economy will bear the weight of these enormous salaries, by all means, they should be paid.

At this point, Will questions Mr. McClelland's understanding of the free agency process. However, he continues to support the author's claim that the emphasis on salary is often a distraction from the original purpose of the game.

However, it has not always been this way. In fact, for much of baseball's illustrious history, players have been tied to one team. Their bargaining rights have been restricted; therefore many teams were able to have all-star players for a fraction of today's cost. For the game of baseball, this was fortunate turn of events. Baseball is an interesting beast in the fact that while it is a child's game, grown men play it the best. These men must be compensated in some way for their services, so naturally the game could not stay completely pure. McClelland argues that the outrageous salary escalation could have been avoided if the players had not been able to enter into free agency. Although this is a good point, the claim does not hold total merit. The rise in the amount of the salaries paid to players is an inevitability because of our free market style of economy, but the focus on money deludes the game.

Next, Will provides a specific example he has located from an additional source that confirms McClelland's point about the phenomenal increase in salaries.

One prime example is Albert Pujols. In 2011, Pujols was a part of the World Series Champion St. Louis Cardinals. He had a career year, and was one of the keys to the Cardinal's victory over the Texas Rangers in the Fall Classic. However, for much of that year, the coverage of Pujols was devoted not to his play, but to where he would be playing after the year was up. He was in the last year of a deal that many thought grossly underpaid him. Instead of focusing on the incredible statistics that Pujols was manufacturing, including scoring over 100 runs and hitting over 35 homeruns for the fourth year in a row, much of the attention directed to Pujols focused purely on the money. According to Baseball-Reference.com Pujols had his fourth best statistical year in his career in 2011, but all the Washington Post could focus on his salary. "Albert Pujols gets 10-year, \$220 million offer from Cardinals," Matt Brooks noted for the Washington Post, shortly after Pujols made his deal. This is but one example of the way that free agency has begun to make the entire point of baseball revolve around money.

As his essay progresses, Will draws evidence from yet a third source to assist him with his explanation.

The whole concept of free agency was born with the abolishment of the Reserve Clause. This clause is defined by the editors of Baseball-reference.com as "a clause in player contracts that bound a player to a single team for a long period, even if the individual contracts he signed nominally covered only one season" ("Reserve clause"). This meant that even after a player's contract was fulfilled, he still had an obligation to the team

with which he had inked the contract. After the contract was up a player could do one of three things; renegotiate the contract, ask for a trade, or ask for his unconditional release. None of these three options gave the player any real bargaining power, which is why salaries were able to be so low for so long. The clause had been in effect since 1839, the year that baseball's inception. It was ended in 1975. The average salary for players pre-free agency was \$44,676. Today, 38 years after the advent of free-agency, is up to \$3.2 million, a rather large jump to say the least.

Once Will provides a framework for the reader explaining the concept of the Reserve Clause, he continues to reflect on its history and how its abolishment has resulted in the free agency system today.

The first real player to take a stand against the Reserve Clause was St. Louis's own Curt Flood. His personal battle for economic equality started the ball rolling on the abolishment of the Reserve Clause all together, which some feel was a victory for not only the world of baseball but for all professional sports. This is not so. The Reserve Clause allowed professional baseball to stay a pure game and retain its childlike qualities. It made baseball better. However, it was unrealistic to think it could survive. In the words of the greatest baseball statistician ever Bill James, "From 1966 to this moment, the owners have been just behind the curve, always trying to get the players to accept today the offer that would have been acceptable yesterday and generous a couple of weeks ago" (qtd. in Tholey, 1).

And, as he concludes his paper, Will supports Mr. McClelland's annoyance with the astronomical salaries that ball players command:

A less deluded game where money was more of an afterthought--that is what professional baseball used to be. If McClelland had his way, it is what professional baseball would become again. This concept, while inherently good, is just not feasible. While I agree that the older brand of baseball was better, I realize that with the changing times, old systems must give way to new ones. It is impractical to think that one could turn back the hands of time so far as to wipe away free agency. The only place this would be feasible is in the very low minor leagues.

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On a final note, Will returns once more to the focus of his thesis which questions the author's perspective.

In the end, comparing the salaries of those select few players who have the natural ability to grace the ranks of the MLB with a regular middle class American is almost foolish. It is comparing apples to oranges. An MLB player is a person with a special set of skills, not many people can hit a baseball 450 feet or throw it at upwards of 90 miles per hour. Granted, everyone has their own specific set of skills, professional baseball player or not, but because there are so few of the former group, they demand a higher range of salary.

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Not only are those in the MLB a select few, but they in turn become the product they produce. Economic inequality is a problem in today's society no doubt, but the gap between a professional athlete and a normal person's income is not the best way to describe it. The players in the MLB have very special talents, ones that almost no one else has. If the market can bear their enormous salaries, why not give them what they believe they deserve? After all, baseball has changed forever, and there is no use in resisting the changes that have already taken place, or those that are sure to come.

When students submit the final copy of this two -three page reader response essay, their instructors expect to find the following:

- a thesis that makes a judgment about the article—its relevance, its validity, or the structure
- a brief summary of the article to which the student is responding
- ample supporting evidence which may come from the student's observation, the article itself, or additional sources
- Compliance with MLA or APA standards for documentation