**Reader Responses**

**American Literature**

**Miss Sloan**

When you write a reader’s response, I am looking for interaction with the text. My assumption is that you have read the text – you would not be responding to it if you hadn’t, after all. Therefore, it is imperative that you do NOT summarize the text. Assume that I have read it (I have.), and that I know you have read it. You are to *reference* the text, explain aspects that support what you are asserting, and use it directly when appropriate, but please do not fall into the trap of retelling the story.

Use the following categories as you write your response. You may separate your response into these categories, if it is helpful. Right now, I am not looking for any real “flow” in your paper; rather, I am looking for analytical insight and support. **Within each category, I am asking that you frame your response in complete sentences/paragraphs.**

**Plot:**

There are several important parts of plot, as most of you learned in middle school. Identify the following parts of the plot, USING the terminology as you do so:

1. Exposition – this is the background information that the reader needs in order for the story to make sense. Sometimes this appears immediately in the beginning of a story; sometimes the author withholds important information until the end or somewhere in the middle. Try to examine why an author makes this choice, and identify what the exposition is and where it occurs.
2. Conflict – there is generally more than one conflict in a story. You should identify a few different ones, and include an opinion on which is the most believable, important, etc. Feel free to use the designation man vs. man, man vs. himself or society, etc.
3. Climax – which point in the action of the book is the peak of the action? This can be subject to opinion, so support yours. (you do not need to identify rising or falling action – it is assumed that everything prior to the climax is rising action, everything subsequent is falling action. This holds true UNLESS there is a specific point you wish to make about the rising or falling action…if so, feel free).
4. Resolution – this is where everything in the book is “tied up” or resolved. Typically it is at the end of the book, but there are exceptions to this, as with everything. You should identify the resolution, and then ANALYZE it and form an opinion. Is it believable? Satisfying? Does it cover all bases, or are there unanswered questions? If so, is this purposeful…?

**Characters:**

Identify the most important characters/main characters. You should use literary terms to discuss them: are they round characters (fully developed) or flat characters (one-sided, caricaturish)? Static (they don’t change) or non-static (they do)? Believable? Likeable? Utilize the text to support your opinions of how we “know” these people; authors manipulate us into forming opinions on characters, so always be watching for how they do that.

If you are dealing with a laundry list of characters, look for patterns (all people who hold the protagonist back…all people who are ‘too good to be true’…all people who represent aspects of society…etc. Use your imagination in grouping them) and discuss those patterns rather than every single character.

**Setting:**

Do NOT fall into the easy trap of “London, 1818.” This doesn’t tell me much. You want to analyze WHY an author has chosen a particular place or time period. Additionally, look for specific settings within a book and why the author has placed action or people there. Authors tend to give us “dangerous” or “sacred” places, and you should be on the lookout for these. For example, a young child’s closet might illustrate either a terrifying or a very safe place, depending on how it is included/described. Always be aware of WHERE things are happening.

**Narration:**

Is the story in 1st person? 3rd person? If 3rd, limited or omniscient? What effect on the story does this choice have? This will be VERY important in some stories, not so important in others. Be aware of why the author would choose this particular perspective. If you don’t know what 1st or 3rd person means, you MUST come see me for an explanation!! You will need this all year!

**Writing Style:**

Does this author use long, challenging sentences? Short, simple, easy-to-read sentences? Is the vocabulary challenging, or rather easy? Is this someone who relied on figurative language a lot, or was the text quite straightforward? Was there a lot of dialogue, or hardly any? Is the diction formal, informal, colloquial?

Writers have a stylistic “fingerprint” – try your best to identify the author’s style.

This would be where you include things like symbols, also – some writers use LOTS of them, others not so much.

**Theme:**

Essentially, this boils down to *why* the author wrote the book. You should NEVER reduce a great work of literature down to a single, simplistic, formulaic theme. For instance, To Kill a Mockingbird is a book that addresses the theme of racism…but it is not accurate to say “The Theme of To Kill a Mockingbird is racism.” Harper Lee wrote a complex book that has messages about the justice system, class systems, the educational system, single-parent households, siblings who grow apart, and judging people without enough knowledge…oh, yeah, *and* racism. ☺

Try to identify **two or three** important messages or ideas that a careful reader of this book should be thinking about after reading it, and discuss those ideas. We are driven to write because we want to convey a message – respect the author’s purpose by thoughtfully discussing his ideas.

**Your Reaction:**

This one’s easy. ☺ It is last for a reason…while your reaction is interesting to me, it is ultimately not important in light of what we are doing this year. I will always want to know how you feel about a book, but you must realize that a failure to appreciate great literature says more about you than about the work itself. My inability to really love Moby Dick is a shortcoming on my end, not on Herman Melville’s. You should share why you did or didn’t like the work; an explanation is always appreciated.