

## THE POSITION PAPER — FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*The following was written with the help of Dr. Paul Roe in order to introduce this genre to you. However, the views expressed may not be those of your professors; you should always ask them about their expectations regarding position papers.*

### **What is a position paper?**

A position paper is a critical examination of texts by one or more authors.

### **What is the purpose of a position paper?**

To introduce, analyse and reflect on important issues, problems and debates in your discipline. In other words, to examine and respond to *the positions* authors take.

### **Is it like a critique?**

In some ways, yes; in others, no. Both genres are based on your critical reading process. Like a critique, a position paper is a reaction in writing to something you have read. Unlike a critique, position papers are not written in isolation. Most focus on more than one essay, research article, or book chapter. These texts may be by the same author, but more often will be written by different ones. In addition, you will frequently be expected to discuss the texts in the context of a course; that is, to relate them to the other texts you have been reading.

### **What features should I include in a position paper?**

You should consider including summary, contextualisation, analysis/evaluation and reflection. You may also want to include a few questions for further discussion.

### **How much summary should I include?**

A brief summary is all that is necessary. You do not need to spend a lot of space re-articulating the major issues. Remember that the primary audience – your professor – knows the texts; she certainly wants to see that you understood the main points, but is more likely to be concerned with how you analyse the texts, as well as relate them to each other and to the larger issues in your field.

### **Should I include my own opinion?**

Certainly. When you analyse, evaluate and reflect on the texts you will be giving your opinion. But do not confuse a position paper with an argumentative essay. Your purpose here is to analyse the positions of others, not to persuade an audience that your position is correct.

### **How many quotations can I include?**

We recommend you summarise and paraphrase as far as possible, and use quotations sparingly. For example, if you are going to evaluate an author's language (his style, perhaps, or use of jargon) then it is crucial you include a quotation as an example. When you are analysing concepts or evidence, however, use your own words. If you do include quotations, we believe you should also keep them short. In our experience, the long, block quotations you find in research papers are not appropriate here.

### **How should it be structured?**

There is no secret formula or recipe for writing a position paper. However, many writers first introduce the topic and summarise the major points in the debate before going on to contextualise, analyse/evaluate, and reflect on them. If you are going to include questions, these are usually located at the end.

### **Can I write about one author/text first, and then the other?**

As we believe the purpose of the paper is to focus on the issues, problems, and debates in your discipline, we recommend you organise the paper thematically rather than by author. However, you will find examples where each author is examined in turn.

**I have two very long texts to examine, but my word limit is short. What should I do?**

First, ask yourself why you are reading these particular texts, and why are doing it at this time in your course. They probably were not chosen randomly, nor placed out of sequence. Think of your task as discovering the relevance of the texts, in addition to understanding them. Your insights here may even provide a framework around which you can write your paper. In addition, try to always stay focussed on the larger issues, and avoid getting bogged down in details. Finally, you will save words by organising the paper thematically; we often see a lot of repetition in papers which look at the authors separately.

**Do I need to include references?**

Yes. We think the best place to do this is at the top of page one, below your title and before your first paragraph. Put a full reference to the texts (first name, last name, title, journal, publication information, and page numbers). If you quote an author in the body, you should put the page number in parentheses. However, you probably do not need to include page numbers every time you paraphrase or summarise something from the texts. Ask your professor for clarification. See the examples on the Self-Access Page on position papers for more.

**Can I mention other writers/theorists in my position paper?**

Where relevant, certainly, but keep in mind the primary purpose of the position paper is to focus on the texts which have been assigned. Do not spend more time on a third author than the two you should be discussing. And if you do bring in other writers, be sure to include a full reference to the source (either in a footnote or endnote).

**Does anyone else write position papers besides CEU students?**

Yes, but they may not be called position papers. In journals, review articles do more than simply review books; they are longer essays which relate the texts under review to wider issues. Many times a journal will include an essay reacting to a piece from a previous issue; this too is a kind of position paper, and is often followed by a response from the author of the original article. It is not uncommon for a debate to carry on for many issues. Finally, the letters sections of journals often include longer responses to previous articles. Look through the key journals in your field for these and other examples of "real" position papers.

**Can I see a model of the perfect position paper?**

It is simply impossible to hold up one text as a model. We believe you should look at a range of position papers, and then make your own decisions about how best to write them. With this in mind, we will examine some in class in light of what you have read here. In addition, you can see some other position papers recently written by IRES students on the Self-Access Page.

**I have to give a presentation on my position paper. What should I include?**

This will depend on your critical reading of the text, your audience, where you are in the course and the amount of time you have. A brief introduction to the issue/debate is crucial in any presentation. After this, it is hard to give concrete advice. Early on in a course, you may want to spend more time on articulating the debate itself, and asking general questions for discussion. The more experience your audience has, however, the less time you should spend on the texts and the more you should tie them into what has gone on before in the course. For more general advice on giving presentations see the Presentations section on our Self-Access Page.

**Where can I get more advice on position papers?**

See your professors and departmental writing instructors. You can also sign up for a consultation at any time with a Writing Center instructor.