

Reading Journal

CSC261 - Artificial Intelligence - Weinman

One of the major activities of this course will be keeping a reading journal in which you will interact with our text, exploring your responses to several questions about concepts and methods from the reading. While improving your writing skills may be a beneficial side-effect, the main purpose of the journal is to stimulate your thinking about fundamental questions, problems, and issues raised by your study of artificial intelligence. Thus, you will be rewarded—in terms of the knowledge you acquire and the evaluation you receive—more for the *process* of thinking than for written the end product. This delightfully self-serving writing is called “exploratory” writing because it allows you to explore your thoughts by “thinking out loud,” rather than being concerned with the effectiveness of your writing for other readers. Features of formal writing, such as organization, will be less important in your journal.

Such journal writing helps many students focus their thinking and become more productive in their learning. By engaging in the process of journal writing, you should become more accustomed to the view that academic study is an arena for inquiry and wonder rather than a passive, tentative, and often ephemeral acquisition of information. Such a view can make college much more exciting, and it is very high among the reasons I continue to love academic exploration. As you ask more questions and question more answers you will truly be thinking like a computer scientist.

I loved the reading journal and I love reading the entries now. It was honestly one of the most valuable exercises I did at Grinnell. It really should be mandatory in nearly every class.

— CSC 261 Student (Fall 2009)

The sneaky thing that I've realized ... is that I usually end up solving my own query. Without this question, I may have glossed over something that I wasn't totally sure about, but whenever I have to write about it I end up figuring it out! Then I go back to find something else, because I can't just leave the question blank, and so on, and eventually the reading gets a lot more clear. So that's a really good thing.

— CSC 261 Student (Fall 2011)

What do I write in my journal? You will be given a short set of questions (3-5) to answer. They will usually require you to process the day's reading, looking for cues to important concepts or relations among ideas. Most of the time, you will be given clear instructions on what exactly it will mean elaborate or explore your thinking for a particular question. When you are quoting material from the textbook, please reference page numbers and page location cues such as “top,” “middle,” or “bottom.”

How long do my answers have to be? Like most real-life situations, the answer is “it depends.” Sometimes you will be asked to justify an answer in 3-5 sentences. Other times you will be asked to explain a concept as you would to your kid sister. Just how long do you think she is going to wait for your description of the fundamental computational principle behind ...? Your answer length should thus be targeted appropriately.

How long do I have to spend on each journal entry? Once again, the answer is “it depends.” If you have faithfully read and studied the assigned material (see the section on reading preparation in the syllabus), exploring your thoughts on it will likely take between 15-30 minutes. Some questions will take you longer than others, and some sets of questions will take longer than others. One main reason for the variance may include your need to react to, process, and interact with some new and perhaps challenging concepts.

Do I get automatic credit for answering the questions? While I have explained above that your main focus will not be formal effective writing, I will be looking for evidence that you are thinking seriously about the topics in the reading. Your responses should clearly exhibit your wrangling with concepts, leaving no doubt that you have studied the text before attempting to answer the questions.

Your reading journal gives you the freedom to err. Writing helps you to internalize new concepts; sometimes you may get them mixed up and that is okay. A journal entry that shows a mind struggling with an idea is often the most interesting for someone else (including yourself later) to read.

So, how formal is this whole enterprise? As described above, this is exploratory writing. While gorgeously architected paragraphs are not required, I do expect responses composed of complete sentences obeying the usual rules of grammar and proper spelling.

How should I write my journal entries? Log on to PioneerWeb and navigate to the page for this course. The side menu has an entry entitled “Reading Journal.” Navigate there and you will be able to add new entries. You should create one entry for each day’s questions. The assignment for each day’s questions will have a title at the top (e.g., *Philosophical Foundations*) that you will use as your entry title, so the instructor knows which day’s questions you are answering. You should separate your answers with numbers indicating the particular question being addressed.

In addition, so that you are not at the whim of the network or your computer browser, you should compose your response in a separate text processing program first (which allows you to use a spellchecker), and paste your response into the new post text box when you are finished and ready.

Adapted from “Engaging Ideas,” John C. Bean, Josey-Bass (2001).

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