Book Response Paper Guidelines

Specific Guidelines

1. Your paper should be turned in by sending it to dga11@psu.edu as an e-mail attachment. Please name the attachment xxx##.doc, where xxx## are your Penn State User ID (your user ID is usually your initials followed by a 1- to 3-digit number such as xyz101). Use "HIST 486 Paper #" in the subject heading of the e-mail message containing the attachment.

2. All papers are due by the start of class (11:15 a.m.) on the day indicated on the syllabus. Late papers will be graded down one full grade for each day it is delayed (this includes weekends). Any paper that arrives after 11:15 a.m. (this includes 11:16) will be considered late. NO papers may be handed in as 'hard copies.'

3. It is your responsibility to make sure that the attached file you send is readable by me. I have a wide array of software, so the main thing you need to do is make sure the file is not corrupt, especially if you have converted it. If in doubt send it to yourself first as a test.

4. All critiques must:
   - be double-spaced
   - have 1" margins
   - use 12 pt font (preferably Arial, Helvetica or Times New Roman, NEVER Courier).
   - 4 - 6 pages in length
   - all pages MUST be numbered
   - have a cover/title page with your name on it (and title if you feel so moved).
   - any quote longer than two lines of text should use "block quotes" (single spaced, and indented)

5. If you are quoting from the book (or the textbook) you may simply include the page number (e.g. Spence, 84). Any and ALL outside sources should be fully cited (this includes the use of websites) either in a footnote or endnote. If you are unclear about how to cite a source correctly there are innumerable style guides (one of my personal favorites is the University of Wisconsin's Writing Center's website on documentation). Prof. Smits has posted a list of common problems he has encountered in student papers that are equally appropriate for this class.

6. You should always feel free to contact me in class or via e-mail to "bounce" potential ideas or questions about the paper. I often check my e-mail until at least 9 p.m. at night, so feel free to pitch ideas any time up until then (if you want a relatively immediate response). I am even open to looking over introductory paragraphs (but not entire drafts).

Stylistic Advice

1. The best book response papers take up a theme or idea that is central to the book, use the book to support a specific idea, or critiques the book along a specific line of analysis. Be forewarned however, I do NOT want you to simply summarize the book. Nor do I want you to say "I liked it because . . . . " Rather I want you to take some element or theme of analysis around which you build a critique or interpretation of the events described in the book.

2. The content of the review is, of course, very important, but the quality of the writing is equally important. Good writing, spelling, and neatness while not all important, a sloppy paper with many typos and run-on sentences does not dispose me to view your work favorably. To put this another way, when writing for an exam writing matters very little because you are under time pressure. The book response paper, by contrast, should be the well-crafted result of multiple drafts. It should be well organized and free of errors in spelling, diction, mechanics, and grammar. It should conform to all the usual rules of formal writing.
3. The length of the papers should be determined by how much you have to say but in general they should be about 3-5 pages long. If you have a bit more to say 'slopping' over on to the sixth page is acceptable, but anything less than three pages is an indication that you have not adequately understood the book or effectively managed your time.

4. Throughout the paper, prove that you have identified the author's main argument by providing numerous specific examples (in your own words, not as quotations from the book) from the various chapters and by explaining how the author constructs his/her argument(s). While analyzing the author's arguments and the evidence s/he presents to support them, point out links with material from the course whenever possible (you do NOT need to footnote information gained in the classroom). The paper should contain few if any quotations or close paraphrases from the book (and those should always be clearly identified by page number references in parentheses).

5. You may criticize the author if you think you can do so reasonably, but doing so is optional. Criticizing the book as a cop out to avoid discussing it seriously is not acceptable. Be sure that when all is said and done, your paper indicates a thorough understanding of the book.

6. You may approach these critiques any way you wish but the better papers will include:

   a) A brief introduction of stating what your paper is about (no more than a paragraph or two). I place great value on the introduction so take some care in how you craft it. It should address several factors some of which might be 1) identifying the author's main argument -- be aware that all academic books advance arguments, 2) offer an indication of how you intend to proceed with the rest of the paper. The first paragraph, therefore, should be a roadmap for the entire paper.

   b) The body of your paper should follow the themes identified in your introduction. As a result, when you are done writing your paper, re-read your introduction in order to ensure that it still accurately represents the ideas contained in your paper.

   c) Most students find it useful to focus their papers on some central theme whether or not that is the author's intended theme. Some examples of such themes might be Confucianism, women, ideology, or revolution. Do NOT try to cover too much. The best papers use the book as a platform to comment on a single issue or idea.

   d) Never, never, use the paper to tell me what the book was about. You can confidently assume that I have read the book and thus am an informed reader. [I realize some professors suggest you always write assuming your reader knows nothing about the topic; I am not one of them]

7. The university also maintains a Writing Center (219 Boucke Building, 865-1841) with a staff that can assist you (University Learning Centers).

8. It is acceptable (even encouraged) to discuss papers with other students or with the Writing Center personnel, but note well that the paper you turn in must be your own work in your own words. Collaboration to the point of using another's words crosses the line into academic dishonesty and is easy for the instructor to recognize.

Feedback

1. I take considerable time and effort to offer feedback on your papers, you should take the time to understand and reflect on my comments. The comments will seek to show both what you have done correctly and incorrectly. I keep a record of my comments. If you continue to make the same mistake a second (or third) time in the subsequent papers I will grade the repeated errors more harshly. So please take the time to read over my comments both after I return them and again while writing your next paper.

2. When I first receive your paper, I will send a confirmation message to that effect. I will return papers via e-mail with comments provided.

3. If you ever should desire to talk about your paper with me in person -- or if my comments are too opaque or unclear -- do not hesitate to contact me and we can set up a time to go over the paper in person.
In a Perfect World . . .

1. No one does their best work the first time around or at 2 a.m. in the morning (though you may think so at the time). Try and get the book read well in advance in order to give yourself time to reflect and write. Good writing takes time and multiple drafts. I have found in my own writing that it is often useful even while reading the book to type up (or write down) my thoughts. In this way, when you sit down to write out the full draft you already have something to work off of.

2. Computers do have problems. The internet does have viruses. The Penn State e-mail server can have unscheduled (and scheduled) repairs. [Insert any internet company] is an unreliable internet provider. Alarm clocks fail. Family/friend crises arise at the most inopportune times. None of these are acceptable excuses for your paper to be late. As my contractor once said to me "expect the worst, and you'll never be disappointed."

3. Finally, a word about the books. They are all academic monographs and thus not easy reading. This is especially true for HIST 486 since the pool of possible books in English is quite limited. The topics we cover in class should be of some help to you in understanding each book. But I have selected books that should push your understanding of China and this is will not always be an easy task. Keep asking yourself "why is the author telling me this" (or why in the heck did Prof. Atwill assign this?). If you get really frustrated bring your question(s) to class or e-mail me.