

Double-Entry Journals

College writing requires students—no matter what the major or discipline—to work with sources—written texts (a newspaper article, a history book, a poem, novel or a chart), or a visual or aural work of art (a painting or a jazz composition), etc. Professors do not want students merely to quote texts and insert them into their papers, but rather they want them to think critically about sources. It means thinking about what the author is trying to say and explaining that to the reader. But it also means presenting your analysis of what the author is saying or expressing. Perhaps you agree with part of the source and disagree with another. All this depends on what you are trying to argue or prove or discuss in your essay. Sources are the “evidence” an academic writer uses to develop a thesis, the main argument of the essay he or she is writing.

Learning to write with sources and to discuss them critically is a complex skill, which takes time to develop, but it also is the main skill all college students need to work on because almost every assignment requires you to assess and criticize sources. Becoming educated in any field of study requires you to acquire the ability to read a source for understanding of what it says and to articulate your perspective on or your analysis of it.

Part of your practice involves keeping a double-entry journal. The following instructions will guide you in keeping your journal:

- On your computer, create a new document with a two column table. In the left hand column, type information about the reading for the day. Try to summarize key points from the readings or make an outline with just notes. If one or two particular quotations from the reading caught your attention, type those in on the right as well with page numbers so you can find them again if needed.
- Feel free to focus on a passage (after your brief summary) from the reading that catches your interest or reminds you of some relevant experience of your own or that seems to connect with another reading from the course or somewhere else. Another approach is to choose a passage that you found confusing or that provoked a strong feeling from you, anger or disagreement or amusement or sadness.
- In the right hand column, next to the passage you copied out, write an extended comment on or response to it. Think through the arguments, respond, find the things to believe in and the things that ought to be challenged. Bring your own experiences in or things you have learned in other classes. If you had a strong emotional response to a passage, try to identify *why* you had that response. If a passage confused you, write about what confused you and why.

Here are some sample quotations pulled from readings for a class, arranged in order from very good to weak:

<p>“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” <i>Walden</i> (Thoreau 43)</p> <p><i>The entry to the right is well done. The writer takes time to develop her observation about the difference between hearing Thoreau’s words and encountering them in the context of Walden. Her discussion is clearly written and well-organized.</i></p>	<p>I have heard these words before, but I did not know they came from Thoreau. When I heard them I sort of knew what they meant. They had something to do with how most people are unhappy but never say or, more importantly, do anything about it. But what’s interesting about reading these words in Thoreau’s book, for me at least, was how hard it was for Thoreau himself to go against this observation. To live the life he wanted, a life that wasn’t about just going with the flow, he had to go into the woods, to live by himself, build his own shelter, grow his own food, etc. It made me think, “How many of us would go that far to find happiness?” Would I be up to the challenge?</p>
<p><i>This writer raises some good questions, but doesn’t focus in on any of them. Elaboration on one or two of these questions would make it a stronger entry.</i></p>	<p>I’m not sure the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Who is this mass? What about women? What makes Thoreau an expert on this subject? When he got thrown in jail (that other essay by him we read) didn’t his friends get him out?</p>
<p><i>This writer stops short of thinking about and commenting on what interested her in this quote.</i></p>	<p>Thoreau went to the woods because he didn’t want to get desperate like the mess of men. I wonder about why he was so unhappy.</p>

Adapted from <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/132929966/Double-entry-Journal>