

## Week Five: Developing a Position

### Introduction: Moving beyond acceptance or rejection

As discussed in Responding to the Assignment (Week 2), the goal of your writing is to contribute an idea to the conversation created by the essays you read. This idea is your *position*—a response to the essays that brings a new perspective to the conversation.

You will, undoubtedly, have an initial response to what you've read: you may feel that you agree with the argument in the assigned reading; you may feel that the argument is completely incorrect; or you may feel that the argument is irrelevant to you and to those who share your concerns. These initial responses are just that: *initial*. Your writing should move beyond what you first thought or felt on encountering the assigned reading and should seek to provide a meaningful contribution to the discussion of the assigned topic. How do you do that?

### Three approaches to building a position

As discussed in Making Connections (Week 4), you will be asked to make connections between readings based on your evaluation of consequences of the writers' ideas that are not explicitly expressed in their essays. Once you've made some preliminary connections, you can start to build your position. Below are three effective strategies for developing your position.

The first strategy is for writers who run out of things to say after they've agreed or disagreed with the assigned readings

The second strategy is for writers who need to have a specific focus or position first and then seek out connections among the essays to support that argument.

The third strategy is for writers who first make connections between the essays and then develop their arguments out of those connections.

Most writers use all of these strategies at different times as they write and rewrite their essays.

### 1. Investigating your own initial response

Developing a position comes about through a process of asking questions about your initial response to the reading. Ultimately, you want to be able to answer the following questions:

- What does your response add to the discussion?
- What consequences follow from your response?
- Are the solutions you propose practical?

As you can see, answering these questions requires that you do more than say, "I've used my writing to show why Author A is absolutely correct." What follows from agreeing, or disagreeing, with Author A? Why does it matter that you've been able to connect Author A with Author B? When you can begin to answer questions about the significance and importance of your response, you will be well on your way to developing your position.

To begin answering these questions, we recommend a very straightforward approach: we ask you to think about why anyone would find the argument in the assigned reading *reasonable*. And we ask you to think about *reasonable* objections to the argument in the assigned reading.

For example, if you are working with “Playing God in the Garden,” you might ask yourself: do Michael Pollan’s concerns about genetically-modified foods seem reasonable to you? If so, what are the consequences of sharing in these concerns? If not, can you explain why Pollan’s concerns seem reasonable to him and to those who share his concerns?

By focusing on the reasonableness of the arguments you are responding to, you will find that you have to go beyond agreeing or disagreeing: you will have to stake out a position that explains why, given a range of reasonable responses to the issue under discussion, it is important to pay particular attention to the issues, questions, or concerns you would like to raise.

## **2. Freewriting your way to a position**

“Freewriting” is writing that is done to explore your responses to what you’ve read. It is “free” because it is writing that is not intended to be handed in or graded; you can use as much of it as you like to find the connections that have shaped your initial response to the assignment question. Here’s how to begin:

After you receive your assignment question, re-read the essays and take additional notes as you read. Set aside your books and notes and freewrite an initial response to the assignment question. To freewrite, do the following:

- A. Set an amount of time (usually 15-20 minutes) to write your response.
- B. Take out a sheet of paper and begin writing whatever comes into your head about the essays and the assignment.
- C. Once you’ve begun to write, do not pause or stop until you’ve met your set amount of time (though you may go over your time limit if you still have ideas you want to address).
- D. Re-read your freewrite. Did you end up writing about a connection you hadn’t thought of when you began? Did you discover an angle or take on the reading that stands out for you in some way? Locate what seems to you to be the best part of what you’ve written and use this as a “working” version of your position statement. This version is a “working” version because you might change it based on the connections you find.
- E. Use your position statement as a guide to find key passages in the essays related to your concerns. Make connections between the passages and explain how they are related to your position.

## **3. Moving from connections to a position**

If you find yourself with plenty of connections between the assigned readings, but you can't find a way for them to add up to a compelling point or argument, try this:

- A. Make a list of all the connections you see between the essays. Be as detailed as possible when you describe the connections.
- B. What concepts or ideas appear frequently in your descriptions? Keep generating more and more specific versions of the concepts or ideas that link together your connections.
- C. You may find that some of your connections don't fit with the concept you've developed: you may need to set these connections aside for the moment or you may need to keep working till you find a concept that brings all your connections together.
- D. Once you've found the concept or concepts that unify the connections you've made, write a sentence or series of sentences that the relationship between your unifying concept and the connections you've made. This is your "working" position statement. This version is a "working" version because you might change it based on subsequent work you do will revising.
- E. Use this position statement as the opening for your paper. Explain in each of your following paragraphs how the connection you've made is related to your overall position.

### **Summary**

Developing a position comes after you've figured out what your initial response to the assigned reading is. A position reflects your further thought and consideration of the issues that have been raised by the assigned reading. It is to be expected that your ideas will change as you write your paper, so you shouldn't be surprised if you end up revising and refining your position a number of times over the course of the drafting process.

READER