

# Following Up Your Response

## Analyze, Interpret, Synthesize, and Evaluate

Are other people's opinions always useful to us? (No, they're not. Sometimes we can completely ignore other peoples' opinions and be none the worse for it.) When do other peoples' opinions seem unhelpful?

When a commentary is purely subjective, purely opinionated with no supporting analysis, interpretation, synthesis, or evaluation is can seem pretty useless. For example, consider the commentator whose disembodied, enlarged head appears on the screen following a presidential debate to say things like, "Well, it was obvious to everyone who watched the debate that the President looked very Presidential this evening" and from that you're supposed to be persuaded that he performed successfully in the debate. There's no supporting analysis of what Presidential "qualities" he's referring to, no specific interpretation of his language other than his body language (as if to be "Presidential" you merely have to stand in a certain posture and use a particular tone of voice). There's nothing to help you understand anything but that one person seems convinced that the President appeared presidential.

If people's opinions can be useless, in what sense can they also be useful?

Consider the example of a movie review. How can one person's opinion about a movie become useful to you? Suppose there's a movie reviewer who gives the latest flick a thumbs down. She says, don't bother seeing this movie because the plot was predictable, the acting was forced, and the camera shots were really dull. The action sequences were full of stunts that have been done a thousand times before. You have a pretty clear idea *why* this reviewer didn't like this film, and even if you don't agree with her conclusion, you know why you probably would or wouldn't like the film yourself. Even reviews we disagree with can be useful to us if the reviewer has included that kind of evaluative commentary. Maybe you don't care about the plot as long as your favorite star is on the screen for 120 minutes; maybe the acting is less important to you than the posing; and maybe originality is not something you expect when you go to the movies. You're a gun fight fan regardless of how many you've seen. You decide that even if this reviewer hated this film, you may like it a lot—the review was *useful to you*.

Your personal response becomes useful and interesting and provocative to other people when you include some kind of objective analysis, interpretation, synthesis, or evaluation. If you do this, your readers can determine whether they agree or disagree with you *and why*. They gain a better understanding of your subject by understanding your perspective on it and how their own perspective may be the same or different.

Let's use an example to demonstrate how you can follow up your response. Suppose your topic is to observe the "cell phone trend."

**Analyze:** break into parts, examine each part closely, and make inferences

- Who, what, where, and when are people using cell phones?
- Do teenagers use them differently than adults?
- What kinds of cell phones are available today? Who's attracted to which kind?
- What kinds of services are available through cell phones that people never used to associate with phones?

**Interpret:** explore the possible meanings of what you've observed, or settle on one meaning you think is correct

- Why do people use cell phones?
- What's the purpose of a cell phone?
- Are cell phones fads or permanent fixtures? If they're permanent, do they change our culture in any way?

**Synthesize:** juxtapose your subject with something outside your subject to give your readers another way of looking at it. Compare/contrast is one common way to synthesize.

- Is this new technology comparable to other leaps in technology? The portable transistor radio of the 70s? The internet of the 90s? Is there something to learn about comparing or contrasting cell phone technology with any past trends, fads, or leaps?

**Evaluate:** establish the worth or value of your subject by identifying and applying a set of justifiable criteria

- Is the cell phone trend a good or a bad thing for our society, as you observe it?
- Was life better before or after everyone had cell phones?
- How could we make cell phones better?