Writing about others’ writing is one of the great pastimes of college. This is so because, despite its seeming antiquity, printed text is still one of the primary ways in which ideas are conveyed from person to person. And in college, instructors always want to know that (1) you are reading the texts for the course and (2) you are actively thinking about them. Thus springs the essay that responds to an author’s writing. Such an essay is a happy collision of a reader’s prior knowledge and experience brought to bear on an author’s particular ideas.

For our class, you’ll be writing an essay about your choice of story, essay, or poem in the Writing on the Edge of the Earth (WEE) reader, or you can choose to write about an idea in Ishmael or Affluenza. In either case, pick something that grabbed your attention—whether you liked it or disliked it. Then follow these guidelines:

Your essay will consist of two parts: (1) a summary of the reading’s main ideas, and (2) your response to the reading. In this second part, you will analyze, evaluate, or compare the author’s ideas to yours, expressing your own viewpoint about the topic; or compare two authors’ ideas to one another. (More about this later.)

Part 1, your summary, will be no longer than one page. A summary is a restatement in your own words, of a text’s meaning, so do not quote the text. Because it is in your own words, it forces you to understand the author’s meaning. A summary provides a brief, objective overview of the text.

To write a summary, read and reread the text you’ve chosen. Then write out its main point, or thesis. To do this, ask yourself, “What is this reading about?” and “What is it the author thinks is significant about this topic?” This main point forms an umbrella for all of the ideas in the reading.

Then, with this essential idea in mind, reread the text to identify just the most important ideas which support it. Because your summary is limited in length, you’ll need to decide which are the author’s most important ideas and which are of lesser importance. Include only the former—the major details which directly support the main idea—in your summary.

Then write your summary, making sure it is in your own words, NOT the author’s. You’ve already written the main point (thesis). Now write out the most important points that you’ve selected in support of the thesis. Make sure you fill in all the connections among these ideas, so your writing is coherent and readable. Again, make sure the summary is complete but no longer than one double-spaced, typed page, and that it is in your own words.

Part 2, your response to the text, should be three pages. It will combine your own ideas about the text with the author’s. Or it will compare two authors’ ideas. It is your choice about how to respond. Here are some possibilities (or you’re welcome to come up with your own topic):

From the WEE reader:
E.O. Wilson in “The Little Things That Run the World” reveals a surprising concept about what kinds of lives are crucial to the planet. If this did surprise you, write about it: What assumptions about humans’ role in the world did his article make you question? Why do you suppose our culture (or our species) puts such investment in the image of humans as the most important organism on Earth?

Thomas Berry in “Returning to Our Native Place” says we are “coming home” to the Earth in so many ways, once again appreciating nature. If you agree with him, take quotes from his writing and show various ways that you see us returning to Earth these days. Use your own experience as well as those you’ve read or heard or watched.

Compare the communicating but fictional gorilla Ishmael with the communicating and real-life chimpanzee Washoe.

Compare your experiences as an immigrant to the U.S. with Ho Tran’s in “The Boat has Crossed the Ocean.”

Discuss your reaction to Lars Eighner in “My Daily Dives in the Dumpster”: What experience have you had with homeless people? What concepts had you held about homeless people before you read this article? Did Eighner’s writing change your mind? How?

Compare your family’s viewpoint about marriage to Gary Soto’s in “Like Mexicans.”

Thoroughly explicate Michael Lassell’s “How to Watch Your Brother Die.” That is, go through it and analyze the images of each stanza, pulling it all together. What is the effect of imposing a “how-to” approach on such a somber subject? Does the surviving brother achieve insight or not?

Or explicate one of the other poems: Mary Oliver’s “Five a.m. in the Pinewoods” or “The Summer Day” or Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Story from Bear Country.” You might choose to compare/contrast two of these. Notice the themes that run through them, a sense of reverence or deep appreciation for nature, all the way to a sense of transformation by nature.

Compare your experience with family alcoholism with Susan Cheever’s in “Eating, Breathing, Drinking.”

Write your own personal version of “Girl” and compare your upbringing to Jamaica Kincaid’s.

Compare your experiences, whether as bilingual speaker or monolingual listener, to Myriam Marquez’s in “Why and When We Speak Spanish in Public.”

Ishmael holds a wealth of possibilities for writing. Rather than trying to tackle the entire book, narrow down a thesis to write about. Here are some possibilities:

Is the author’s intent to spur us to action to save the environment? Or is it something else—for example, to show humans our proper place in the world?

Contrast the characters of the human and the gorilla.

Agree or disagree with the narrator’s story of “how things came to be this way.” Show how you agree or disagree, and explain why.

Interpret the last two signs of the book—“With man gone, will there be hope for gorilla?” and “With gorilla gone, will there be hope for man?”— and explain your interpretations, applying them to the current state of Earth’s environment.
Apply some of the ideas of WEE’s environmental readings to ideas in Ishmael; for example,

Compare Daniel Quinn’s implied environmental ethic with E.O. Wilson’s “The Environmental Ethic” (starting on Page 43 in the WEE reader): What points do they agree on? disagree on?

Compare Daniel Quinn’s implied environmental ethic with Donella Meadows’ “The Limits to Growth” (starting on Page 143 in WEE).

Similarly, possibilities for writing abound in Affluenza. One approach is to take a chapter or two from it that “dialogue” with Ishmael. For example, compare the depiction of Takers in Ishmael with the description of our affluenza-afflicted society in Affluenza. Or use the solutions offered in Affluenza to suggest how to revise the story we tell ourselves, that Ishmael talks about.

You can also choose to connect a chapter or two in Affluenza to your own life or to what you know about or have observed in our society. For example, compare Chapter 1 on shopping, or Chapter 6 on the family, to what you have observed or experienced.

All of the above are just possibilities, as stated, so feel free to decide for yourself what to write about in the WEE reader, Ishmael, or Affluenza. When you do find a connection between the reading and your own ideas or experience, do a substantial freewrite about this. Write for at least two pages.

Now you should have two texts: your own and the reading that you have chosen. Re-read the author’s text and mark passages that strike you as important or meaningful. Then formulate a thesis that serves as your focal point, linking your text to the author’s. Remember that a thesis says something about the work that its author does not state explicitly; it does not simply retell the story or main idea. (You’ve already done that in your summary.) To come up with a thesis, you have to form an opinion or assertion about the work, one that is supportable by evidence taken from the work, as well as by your own experience or observations about life. (Statements that wouldn’t make a good thesis are, for example, “Gary Soto’s ‘Like Mexicans’ is about a guy who grows up and gets married,” or “Affluenza is about our society’s addiction to material stuff.”) Rather than truly asserting an interesting idea worth proving about the readings, these statements might not take us further than a limp semi-summary.

After focusing your thesis, assemble apt evidence from the work—quotes, incidents, details of character or images—that backs up your thesis. To compose a rough draft, work back and forth between your freewriting about the text and the evidence you’ve taken from the text, connecting them. In other words, include enough details, ideas, and recollections from the author’s text and from your own life observations and experiences to show the readers how all of these connect to your thesis.

*Word to the wise: Quotes in your paper should never take up more than 20% of the paper! The focus of the paper is on YOUR response to the reading.

Remember that your summary precedes your response. A good way to segue from your summary into your response is to explain why your thesis is important. This should lead to your support. Support from the text means you can refer indirectly to
specific evidence from the text, or you can quote it directly. When you include a quotation, first set a context for it, introducing why you’re bringing it up. Right after the quote, include in parentheses the author’s last name and the page number on which it appeared, e.g., (Quinn 148) or (Soto 109). Then make sure you explain the significance of the quote to the point you are making. So...

Set a context for the quote.
Quote it and cite author’s last name and the page number.
Explain the quote’s significance.

Your paper’s conclusion should include an overall wrap-up that ties together the text, your ideas about it, and your thesis. You could also go beyond this, showing further or future ramifications of these ideas.

Also make sure at the end of your paper to cite the text you’re writing about. This is how it works...

for Ishmael:

for Affluenza:

for a work from the WEE reader:

To sum up:
Write a one-page summary of the text in your own words.
Think of an interesting, provable thesis of your own about the text, relating to your own observations and experiences of life.
Support your thesis with evidence from the work and from your own observations.
Quote and cite sources appropriately.