

Week Four: Making Connections

Introduction: What's to be gained by making connections?

No doubt, by this time in the semester, you've already heard a lot about "making connections." We've mentioned this activity a number of times already in these tutorials; our emphasis on this activity is reflected in the grading criteria discussed in the gradatorium; and your teacher has certainly discussed this in class. Why bother with "making connections"?

It could be argued—indeed, it has been argued in our own classes—that making connections between the essays in *The New Humanities Reader* is an arbitrary activity. There is no *explicit* connection between Susan Faludi's essay on the Citadel's transition to co-education in the 1990s and Jasper Becker's essay exploring the causes of famine in China in the late 1950s and early 1960s, so why devote the time and energy to creating a connection? Why practice a skill that could just as well be called "making things up" or "hallucinating" or "indulging your imagination"?

When we hear objections of this kind, we feel that what we're hearing is the sound of an educational system that has failed to train its students to take their own thoughts seriously. And this is the central project of *The New Humanities Reader*: to provide you with the opportunity to explore what you think about the issues and cultural forces that will shape the world you will graduate into. Anyone can be trained to accurately summarize what they've read: the creative aspect of thinking emerges when connections are made between the texts you've read, between what you've read and your own experience, and between what you've read and thought in the past and what you're coming to think now. By learning how to make connections, you will learn how to make ideas mobile and active and this is the habit of mind that is most highly rewarded both inside and outside the academy.

So, what's to gain from creating a "virtual connection" between Faludi's essay on the Citadel and Becker's essay on the Great Famine? Although the events discussed by these two essays are separated by several decades and thousands of miles, both essays can be seen to be *implicitly* concerned with the same issue: how authoritarian regimes are created and maintained. By making a virtual connection of this kind (there are many more that could be made between these two essays), you create an opportunity to think further about an issue that is not fully covered in either essay: that is, you shift the attention in your writing away from being primarily concerned with repeating what you've read to focusing on your own thoughts about what you've read. This is why learning how to make virtual connections is so important—it puts the activity of developing and advancing your own thoughts at the center of your education.

Making Connections: The power of AND, BUT, and OR

In a very real sense, your brain has been hardwired to make connections: it is the ability to make connections that permits you to navigate the unfamiliar situations that emerge everyday. In fact, this activity is so routine, you don't even notice it: when a road is blocked on the way to school, you find another route to get you to your destination; when you get to class and no one's there, you check the door to see if the class has been moved; when a hand is raised in class, you know,

by recollecting all your previous experiences in class, that this is a standard way of requesting an opportunity to speak. Your mind is always at work saying: X is like Y or X isn't like Y or X is and isn't like Y.

So, when we ask you to make connections within a given reading or between the readings, we're asking you to do the kind of mental work you do everyday—we're just asking you to do this mental work on the ideas and issues raised by *The New Humanities Reader*. It's that simple, really: we want you to make connections between ideas, experiences, and events and then we want you to evaluate the significance of the connections you've made.

Most beginning writers rely on the word “and” when they are making connections. Such connections, obviously, look at what the readings have in common. Returning to the example we discussed above, we can see that this is a promising place to start.

Connecting with AND:

Faludi *and* Becker are concerned with authoritarianism.

There are other ways to make connections, though, and we would encourage you to explore thinking about making qualifying connections (ones that are made through the use of words like “but, nevertheless, however, on the other hand”) and connections that offer alternatives or that lead to speculations (ones that are made through the use of words like “or, if, perhaps, maybe”).

Connecting with BUT:

Faludi *and* Becker are concerned with authoritarianism, *but* they are not concerned with the same kind of authoritarianism, as I will show in the paper that follows.

Connecting with OR:

Either authoritarianism has its roots in political systems, as Faludi and Becker contend, *or* its roots go much deeper—to the aggressive essence of human existence.

As you work on the next exercise, try following your initial “and” connection with a connection that either a “but” connection that qualifies your initial observation or an “or connection” that offers an alternative.

How to find connective thinking in the assigned readings

If you're always making connections, as we've said above, then how do you tell when you've made a “good” connection? The best way to answer this question is to think about the essays we've included in *The New Humanities Reader*: what these essays do well is make connections that have considerable explanatory power. That is, the essays don't simply “make a point”; they seek to understand an idea, issue, or problem in depth and to *open* a discussion about the idea, issue, or problem under consideration. Any two essays can be connected in some way, as can any

two ideas, problems, or issues: the challenge is to make a connection that extends the understanding of the topic being considered or advances the discussion.

So, to make connections of this kind, you need to be able to identify or to argue for what you consider to be the most important or significant ideas covered in the assigned readings. The authors of the essays have, of course, made conscious efforts to steer your attention to the connections that they think are most important. The place to begin, then, is with seeking out those moment when the authors in *The New Humanities Reader* are doing just the kind of connective thinking we're asking you to do.

If you return to your assigned reading with this in mind, you should keep an eye out for opportunities to identify and evaluate the connections that the author of the assigned readings wants you to make. Here's what you should look for:

- *Rhetorical questions*: Rhetorical questions are opportunities for writers to place issues in new and larger contexts; they also reveal the connections the author assumes he or she can count on you making. If rhetorical questions assume a yes answer, what happens if you reply in the negative? What connections can be made by going down a different road than the one the author offers you?
- *Abstract concepts*: Often the most important words in an essay are the ones that seem most familiar—e.g. democracy, identity, evolution, altruism, justice, equity. These familiar words stand in for abstract concepts that always warrant further consideration. When you find an author using a term of this kind, pay particular attention to the connections the author is trying to make between this term and other similarly abstract terms in his or her essay. For example, in de Waal's essay on "Survival of the Kindest," what connection is he trying to establish between "evolution" and "altruism"?
- *Pivotal terms*: What word is most repeated in the assigned essay? Which words has the author chosen to italicize? Which words show up in the section headings of the essay? These are all ways for a writer to draw attention to the pivotal terms in his or her argument—to the terms that help *turn* the argument in one direction or another. In Guinier's essay on voting and democracy, for instance, she introduces the term "reciprocity" into the conversation about majority rule to shift the terms of the debate. *Pivotal* terms work in just this way: they provide a way for the author to make a connection that changes the direction of the discussion.
- *And, But, Or and other connective terms*: Look for moments where the writer uses the connective terms we've discussed above. Almost every essay has a "hinge" moment—a moment when the writer either begins to qualify his or her position or to speculate about the implications of the argument he or she has been developing. More often than not, these moments will be marked by the use of a key connective term, such as: and, but, or, however, nevertheless, perhaps, on the other hand.
- *The use of unexpected sources*: In establishing his or her argument, what sources has the author turned to? What connections has the author made in his or her essay? Whenever the

writer references a source that is outside his or her field, this is always a fruitful place to explore the author's connective thinking. Why, for example, does Lani Guinier open her essay on voting reform with a discussion of a high school prom? Has she trivialized the discussion of voting reform by making this connection or has she shown the broader implications of "majority rule"?

Summary

Connective thinking is what lies at the heart of the writing process: it is how relationships between any two ideas are formed. Connective thinking occurs *between* ideas and is made possible by the use of linking words, but as "and," "but," and "or," which signal the kind of relationship the author is trying to establish. So, to see where connective thinking is occurring in the assigned readings, you need to do two things: 1.) you need to identify what you believe to be the central ideas, concepts, or pivotal terms in the assigned reading and 2.) you need to find those moments where you believe the author is establishing connections between these central ideas, concepts, or pivotal terms.