

## **Week Eight: Working With Two or More Essays**

### **Introduction: Increasing the opportunities to think creatively**

Why write about more than one essay at a time? It's a reasonable question and our answer to it is quite straightforward: we think requiring you to write about more than one essay at a time produces more opportunities for you to think creatively. As we stressed in the previous two tutorials, citation provides an opportunity for you to show what you can *do* with what you've read. By providing you with writing situations that involves more than one essay and more than one perspective, we're giving you more material to work with and that means we're giving you more chances to show what you can do with what you've read.

When we explain this to students in our own classes, invariably someone will say something like this: "But, that sounds just like a game. You could choose any three essays and write about them, even though the essays have nothing to do with each other at all." While there can be a game-like or playful aspect to making connections across more than one essay, a more productive way to think about work of this kind as "theory building." That is, after you've written about text A, you have an opportunity to test out your ideas and insights—your "theory"—when texts A and B are considered together. And then, after you've taken a position with respect to texts A and B, you have an opportunity to see what happens to your "theory" when text C is introduced. That, in essence, is our approach to teaching writing: we want to provide you with multiple opportunities to generate ideas and to test out the consequences of your ideas in many different contexts.

All of the techniques suggested in our earlier tutorial for making connections between two essays (see Week Four) apply for making connections between three essays as well: you will want to think about how to bring the texts together through using AND, BUT, and OR and you'll want to continue to seek out those moments where connective thinking is evident in the assigned readings. What we offer here are two additional strategies for making connections when working with more than one essay.

### **Finding an organizing pattern amidst all the possible connections**

One of the main challenges of working with more than one essay is finding a pattern among all the possible connections that could be made between the assigned readings. The following two strategies provide you with ways to visualize the possible patterns that links together the connections that you've begun to make. Both help you find an organizing pattern to your thoughts when you are unsure what the central focus of your paper will be.

#### **Strategy 1: Creating a Conversation**

To get started, you will need to generate a question to which you feel all the assigned readings respond. (The assignment question will usually point you in a promising direction to begin.)

1. Turn a blank 8 ½" x 11" sheet of paper on its side and draw five columns. Make the last column wider than each of the others. Label the first column "Questions" and then label

the next three columns with the names of each of the authors you've read for your assignment. Label the final column "Connections."

2. In the first column, write down a question that can be addressed by all three readings. It can be a question from your assignment sheet or one that you've developed on your own.
3. For each reading, write a preliminary answer to the question and a quote that supports your answer.
4. Look at the three quotes you've identified. Underline the parts of the quotes that may correspond to or challenge the ideas in another quote. Can you use these connections to generate a new question to place in the "Questions" column? That is, do the connections you've made move the conversation in a given direction?
5. In the last column, write several sentences to explain the connections you've identified in your first series of quotes. Remember that these sentences may not lead you to take a single position. Pay attention to how the quotes raise new issues or complicate each other's assertions. How would you respond to those complications?
6. Repeat.

Note: we end with the request that you repeat the process so that you see your writing as a way of keeping the investigation you've begun going. After making your first series of connections, you can return and consider the significance of your connections: if you've shown in your work with texts A, B, and C that there's a difference between the way text A defines the problem and the way the problem is defined in texts B and C, then return to A to see whether or not the difference you've detected is significant. Does A see something that B and C don't? What makes it possible for B and C to see what A can't see?

### **Strategy 2: The Connection Triangle**

1. Take out a blank 8 ½" x 11" sheet of paper and turn it on its side. In the top left and right corners, write the name of two of the authors. Write the name of the third author at the center of the bottom of the page.
2. For each author, list three or four central ideas from his or her argument. Use the assignment question to help focus your ideas.
3. In the blank space left, begin making connections among the three authors. Start by drawing an arrow between two ideas from different authors. Use the blank space in between your lists to explain how those ideas are connected: do they support, challenge, or contradict each other?
4. Draw an arrow from the third author's idea and use the blank space next to your first connection to explain how that idea supports or changes the conclusion you've made.

5. Return to the text and find quotes that concern the connections and clashes that you've discovered.

### **After the pictures are drawn: developing paragraphs**

Once you've made your preliminary connections among all three essays and uncovered an organizing pattern, it's time to develop paragraphs that communicate your insights. Don't worry if the paragraphs you write seem extra-long; you may want to write a good bit about the connections you've begun to see before you're ready to boil your insight down to a clear and concise statement of your position and its significance.

Here are some tips for building paragraphs that can support work with three texts:

1. Begin each paragraph by introducing the specific concept you want to address and how it relates to your overall position.
2. Quote only the part of the passage you need to make your point. Don't quote long blocks of text. (Long quotations and wide margins are always obvious signs that the writer's primary concern is with meeting a page requirement and not the ostensible topic of the paper!) Include only the part of the passage that defines a concept, provides an example, or raises a complication. Fill in the context of the quote by introducing it with a brief explanation of the author's idea in your own words. (For more on working with quotes, see the tutorial for week seven.)
3. Provide transitional sentences between the sections of your paragraph that address different essays. You might think of these sentences as directing traffic: they signal which way your argument is turning and where it is going. Here are some transitional words that can help change the direction of your argument: however, nevertheless, furthermore, even so, possibly, unfortunately, on the other hand.

### **Putting it all together: a chain of ideas**

As your ideas become more complex, it is more difficult to develop a coherent organization for your whole paper. For your first two papers, you may have organized your paper by taking a position in your introduction and then using each following paragraph to support your position. At this point in the semester, though, it should be clear that you'll need a more supple approach to organizing your papers.

An alternative way to organize your paper is to develop a "chain of ideas." With this approach, you open with an hypothesis and test it out in subsequent paragraphs, with the possible outcome that your original hypothesis is changed by the end of your paper. In a paper of this kind, one essential is that you organize it in such a way that it details the changing in your thinking.

1. You might begin your paper by focusing on a question has been raised for you by the three assigned readings and suggest your own response to the question.

2. In the next paragraph, you might introduce a concept from one of the essays that challenges this position. Explain how your thinking is (or is not) changed by the evidence you've cited.
3. In the next paragraph, bring in the other readings to comment on the issues raised by the preceding paragraph. Would the authors of the other readings accept the evidence cited in the preceding paragraph? Would they interpret its significance differently?
4. In the next paragraph, establish the significance of the exchange you've put forth in the preceding two paragraphs. Given what you've discussed in paragraphs two and three, where does/should the discussion go next?
5. Follow this process until you feel the discussion has moved towards as much of a conclusion as is possible. Explain how and why your position has (or has not) changed over the course of the paper.

### **Summary**

Working productively with three essays involves finding an organizing pattern within all of the possible connections that might be made between the assigned readings. Stepping back from the texts and making the connections visible through generating charts and diagrams is one way to make the process of discerning an organizational pattern more manageable. Once you've found the pattern you want to work with, you will need to develop a structure that can handle the more complex and nuanced thoughts that you're trying to put into writing; you will need, in other words, to construct paragraphs that are long enough and detailed enough to convey your insights; you will also need to develop new ways of organizing your essays so that your essay's structure itself makes clear how your thoughts have changed over the course of completing the assignment.