

Deconstructive Analysis

Basic Assignment. Choose one of the theoretical texts from this semester's schedule (one on which you have not previously written) and write a five-page paper that deconstructs the selected text's argument or performs a "deconstructive reading" of the text.

Basic Reminders and Advice. Your paper should have a clear and interesting major claim or thesis that organizes or focuses your analysis. This paper is primarily an *analysis*—a breaking down of a complex text into its various elements and a close examination of those elements, especially the elements that most need examination because of the difficulties, ambiguities, or problems that they pose. Analysis is the process of breaking down the text to understand how its various parts contribute to the text (or effect of the text) as a whole. You might also think about analysis as a kind of "reverse engineering," pulling something apart to see how it works. "Deconstruction" in some respects is simply a synonym for "analysis," which means that the title of this assignment is a tautology. "Deconstruction" is not a synonym for "destruction."

Thus, you'll need to use careful examination and citation of parts of your selected text to defend and illustrate your analysis. Your paper, perhaps in the conclusion or elsewhere, should also identify the significance or value of your analysis. What, for example, has your analysis shown that would not be obvious to most readers? What's interesting or useful or important about what you've revealed through your analysis?

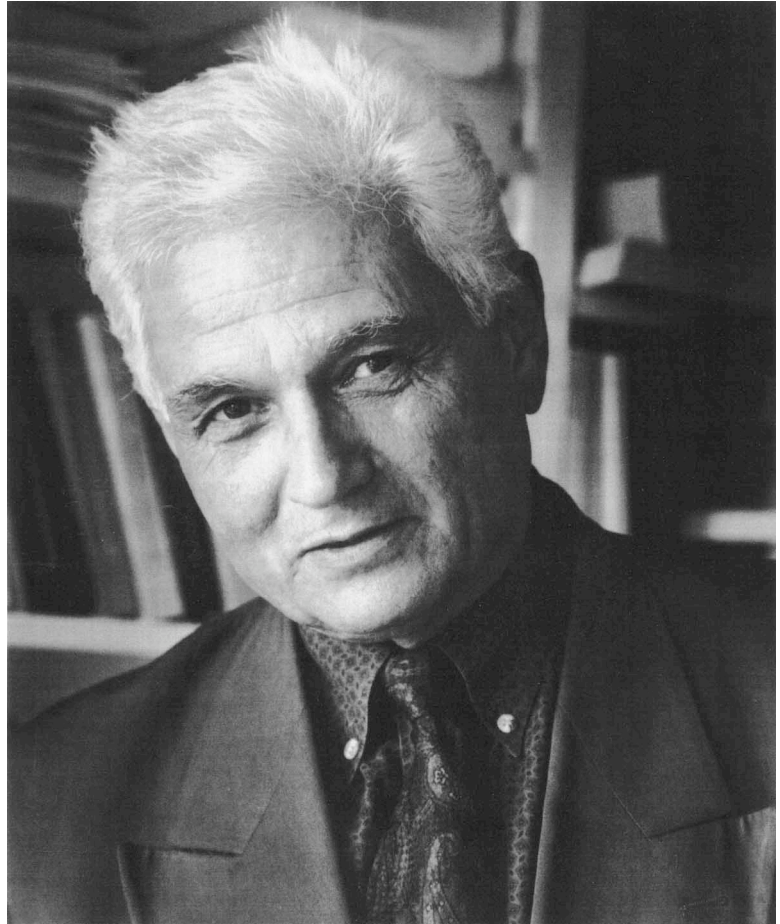
See the reverse for some ideas about how to start or generate a specifically "deconstructive" analysis of a text. In class, we will be discussing deconstruction, practicing deconstructive reading and thinking, and talking about the process of writing a deconstructive analysis.

Finally, the paper should have a good title and page numbers. It should be typed and double-spaced. And it should be proofread carefully for clarity, consistency, and correctness. Please use MLA style to cite texts and provide information on your text (and other sources, if you use other sources, which is not a requirement of this assignment).

Paper Conferences. There is no paper proposal requirement for this paper, but I will be sending around a sign-up sheet for (optional) paper conferences with me in mid-April before the paper is due.

Due Date. Thursday, April 20.

Length. 5 pages.



Photograph above: Jacques Derrida.

Some Thoughts About How-To-Do a Deconstructive Reading of a Text

While analyzing a text, a deconstructive reader might:

- Look for binary oppositions and hierarchies that inform a text. The deconstructive critic is looking for hierarchies in which one term is privileged at the expense of the other: such as speech/writing, nature/culture, art/popular culture, depth/surface, teacher/student, center/margin, etc. The subordinate term can usually be shown to define, constitute, or precede the first. This is not simply an injunction to reverse the current or present binary opposition, which would just create another hierarchy ready for dismantling. Texts, like identities, include what they try to exclude. Opposites are already united (that's why they can be opposite). So, read to discover the correspondence between the opposites: what is the thing that unites these binary terms?
- Study the marginal: the discarded, the denigrated, the unessential, the fragment, the subordinate term, the mistake, the frame, the absence or omission, the footnote, the supplement. How does this marginalia enable or call into being what is supposed to be central?
- Search for points of condensation, where a word or concept brings together different even contradictory ideas, values, and arguments. Think back to Freud's discussion of the "uncanny." Some example from Derrida:

- *hantologie*: ontology [study of Being] & hauntology [study of ghosts, not being]
- *différance*: difference & deferral
- *pharmakon*: medicine & poison, wisdom of Socrates & falsehoods of the Sophists
- *supplement*: an add-on & a completion

Deconstructive critics love etymologies.

- Examine a text for the ways it undoes or undermines itself. Deconstructive readers like to read against the grain, to read a text against itself. Deconstructive readers are interested in errors, gaps, ironies, aporias, silences, paradoxes, shifts or breaks, contradictions, conflicts, fissures, digressions, ambiguities, puns, multiple meanings, linguistic quirks, intertextuality, repetitions, corruptions. Deconstructive readers look at the ways a text says something different from what it intends to mean or the ways texts don't always mean what they say. "The reader's task is to read what is written rather than simply attempt to intuit what might have been meant" (Barbara Johnson).
- Devote incredibly close, intense attention to texts and the language of texts. Once again: "The reader's task is to read what is written rather than simply attempt to intuit what might have been meant" (Barbara Johnson). In this respect, deconstruction is an analog of New Criticism and other formalisms (and structuralisms) and not the enemy or opposite.
- Look for texts or the moments in a text when the text refers to itself. Here is where you'll see texts start to unravel, to deconstruct themselves.
- Ask questions about relations, contexts, and contingencies: How does difference or a trace of the other or some type of limit define, constitute, or call into being the text or object that I'm analyzing? How does this text or object assume meaning from its context, from its (always shifting) position in relation to other meanings, texts, or objects? How does this text or artifact gather meaning from the field of other signs or other texts that it is a part of? How does this text or object assume meaning from what is temporally before it, which is historically defined by what is before it, which is ... [and so on forever]? What are the historical, cultural, social, and political processes that have brought this text into being?
- Look for conflicting interpretations of a text and analyze them in relation to the text itself. Deconstructive readers might see these contradictory readings as a re-enactment of conflicts within the text itself.