

Step 1: Identify a Binary Opposition

1.A> Notice what a particular text or school of thought takes to be *natural, normal, self-evident, originary, immediately apparent, or worthy of pursuit or emulation*:

- group *x* (whites, middle class, Americans, etc.) is “inherently virtuous”
- group *x* (darker skinned people, youths, etc.) is “natural and spontaneous”
- men are naturally *x* (rational, aggressive, desirous of women, etc.)
- women are naturally *x* (nurturing, connected to the earth, etc.)
- “everybody knows that” *x* is true
- everybody wants *x*, it is natural to want *x*, *x* is an inherent trait of human nature

1.B> Notice those places where a text is most *insistent that there is a firm and fast distinction between two things*:

- men and women, black and white, straight and gay, subject and object
- *x* precedes *y* (text: interpretation, Adam: Eve, heterosexuality: homosexuality)
- *x* is more natural than *y* (female: male, heterosexuality: homosexuality)
- *y* is derivative of *x* or a perversion of *x* (Milton’s Satan: Christ, “normal” sex: fetishes, criticism: fiction)
- *y* has a parasitic relation to *x* (fiction: truth, criticism: fiction, interpretation: text)
- *x* is original and *y* is imitative (the book: the movie, life: heaven)
- *y* is a manifestation or effect of *x* (culture: economics, surface: deep structure, gender: anatomy, practice: theory).
- *y* is an exception or special case and *x* is the rule

Part 2: Deconstruct The Opposition

2.A > Show how something represented as primary, complete & originary is derived, composite, and/or an effect of something else.

- Because writers always write in relation to prior writers they learn about in school, fiction is a result of criticism. It depends on criticism, and is derived from criticism.
- Our sense of Winnie the Pooh when we read books about him is shaped by our memories of the movies. The voices we hear when we read are the movie voices, and the “original” text is partially an effect of the movie.
- Because consciousness is actually “self-consciousness,” (i.e. a self and a consciousness) consciousness is always already divided, never simply present to itself.

and/or 2.B> Show how something represented as completely different from something else only exists by virtue of defining itself against that something else. In other words, show how it depends on that thing. For example:

- Mulder and Scully do not so much pursue “the Truth” as uncover errors. If they ever find the whole truth, the show will end.
- Heterosexual only makes sense when opposed to homosexual. Without homosexuals, there would be no heterosexuals.
- Truth depends on error. Without the concept of error, truth does not exist.

Using Deconstruction to Astonish Your Friends & Confound Your Enemies (In Two Easy Steps!)
and/or 2.C> Show how something represented as normal is a special case.

- “Truth” is a story that people find especially convincing.
- “Normal” sexual reproduction is the result of several components that, taken alone, would be called perversions. Thus normal sex is in fact a specialized perversion.
- Whiteness is an ethnicity that disguises the fact it’s an ethnicity.

The General Way It Works

In general, as Jonathan Culler puts it, deconstruction works “within an opposition,” but “upsets [its] hierarchy by producing an exchange of properties.” This disrupts not only the hierarchy, but the opposition itself.

Note how this is different than simply *reversing* an opposition. For example consider these reversals of a culturally prevalent opposition:

- The Pooh movies are better than the books (reverses the usual assumption that the book is better & more original than the movie).
- the Joker is cooler than Batman (reverses notion of the hero).
- women are smarter than men (reverses chauvinistic “common knowledge”).
- Native Americans are more heroic than cowboys (reverses the Western).

Reversal is a valuable move, but deconstruction is after bigger game, because it “deconstructs” the underlying hierarchy. For example:

- Our sense of Pooh books *is derived* from the movies,
- *Batman is a special kind of villain* called a vigilante
- Men’s sense of their intelligence *is dependent* on a belief that women are bimbos
- “Cowboy heroism” *cannot exist* without “bad Indians.”

Notice how these statements cripple the underlying hierarchy by “deconstructing” the opposition that it depends on. Deconstruction doesn’t simply *reverse* the opposition, nor does it *destroy* it. Instead it demonstrates its inherent instability. It takes it apart from within, and without putting some new, more stable opposition in its place. If you want to really mess with something, deconstruct it.

A Note On Practicalities

In Stanley’s Fish’s words, we can deconstruct anything in theory, but not in everyday practice. The fact that in principle we can deconstruct anything doesn’t mean that we can deconstruct everything, all the time, and still communicate. We can, however, deconstruct things that annoy us, point out where a text already deconstructs an opposition, focus on oppositions authors and poets try (often with difficulty) to keep intact, and gain insight into how our own sense of ourselves (as well as the way the culture tries to interpret *us*) depends on oppositions that can be deconstructed.