Making Connections

What does it mean to make connections?
Successful essays discuss how one reading relates to (confirms, contradicts, complicates) another reading and the student writer's own experience (if the student wishes to include it). Because of this most paragraphs incorporates evidence (key terms, ideas, examples) from two or more readings primarily through direct quotation supplemented by summary, paraphrase, and/or implicit references. Effective paragraphs establish relationships between different readings by testing theories and examples from one reading against theories and examples from another and by drawing conclusions about the significance of those relationships.

But what does this actually mean? And what is the value of connecting readings and other kinds of texts? Perhaps a key to interpreting this goal is to look first at the verbs—discuss, relate, confirm, contradict, complicate, incorporate (evidence), supplement, establish (relationships), test, draw (conclusions)—all active verbs that require creative, inquiring habits of mind. We can see right away that connecting texts involves more than just confirming, that is, identifying similarities; interesting connections often consider dissimilarities, outright contradictions, or elements that don’t fit neatly into one text’s categories or viewpoints, in this way complicating what the first author stated.

Interestingly, it is often in the process of discovering and investigating connections and assembling pieces of evidence that you begin to form a theory, to discover something that goes beyond the evidence or ideas in either text and also beyond common knowledge—something that everyone knows and that you knew before you ever encountered the readings. The power to invent relationships between texts gives beginning writers the opportunity to develop an original thesis within an academic context, the world of ideas. And perhaps that ability to create knowledge is the greatest value of connecting texts.

Intellectual Moves:
When you get to the point that you want to make your own judgment about something, rather than trusting an expert to do the thinking for you, you end up making certain intellectual moves over and over, whether you have a name for them or not. You take things apart, you put things together, you give things names and definitions, you value one thing over another, and so forth. One of the basic moves is connecting, seeing this in light of that. In university courses, students practice this move repeatedly. They try out an idea from the field of psychology by testing it against a case study of mental illness, for example. When they do so, they may find that the idea clarifies something about the case. They may also find that some element of the case resists being summed up by the psychologist's idea. In the encounter, they see one thing in light of another, and in doing so they have a chance to see them both more clearly: the power and limitation of the idea, the complexity of the case study. Connecting is a powerful intellectual move that strengthens a writer's own understanding and authority.

Connecting to Create Knowledge:
Connecting the texts is essential to creating knowledge because it involves seeing relationships. When we see things independently, as separate, then we aren't seeing the complete picture. What we're seeing is fragmented. When we start to put the pieces together, we deepen our understanding of the complexity of the topic. We can start to integrate, to see degrees and variations, rather than absolutes—the world in black and white. When we start to make connections, we can expand our awareness, and this can include a dialogue also between our own thoughts and feelings about a topic and those of the various authors. In this way, we can enlarge and re-shape our perspective, testing our experiences against other viewpoints we may not have previously considered.

Connecting texts is an essential academic move because it is only when a writer has both a masterful control of ideas already circulating on a subject and the ability to logically connect those ideas that anything new or useful about the topic can be added and knowledge can be created. However, the act of pulling information together into a coherent argument is never a simple matter of repeating or summarizing the theories and examples of other writers. You have to be able to arrive at your own conclusion by means of comparing and analyzing what others have written, and you have to be able to test your own opinions and experiences against those of others.

All academic writing is part of a conversation between what has been previously written about a topic and your unique contribution to the conversation, so learning to choose the parts of texts you will put together and learning how to define the nature of those connections can help you develop the habits of mind that can enhance your critical and creative thinking skills.

**Example:**

Culture is often thought of in broad terms, but it’s common to locate a culture in smaller groups such as schools, offices, or neighborhoods. No matter the group, it’s certain that the people in it are operating from a set of cultural myths. A cultural myth, as Colombo defines it, is a social rule that helps people sort out and make sense of their surroundings. The concept of cultural myths is critical to his discussion in alerting college students to the benefits of critical thinking. Myths are powerful and necessary, according to Colombo, because they “[hold] people together by providing [them] with a shared set of customs, values, ideas, and beliefs, as well as a common language” (3). Myths ground people in a sense of what is right, that the things they do seem logical and in line with what is acceptable to their peers, but there is an inherent danger because they can block new thinking. Cultures are often found in schools where
students have similar socio-economic backgrounds, social interests, or academic aspirations. At Mercy High, Rose and his voc-ed classmates formed a culture in which they shared a set of customs and values developed primarily from the experiences they had with teachers who lacked knowledge and proper disciplinary skills. Rose gives several examples of rowdy classrooms where teachers such as Mr. Montez lost control of students who were acting out physically, one student, Dweetz, “cracking Billy on the side of the head, right behind the eye” (160). Rose and his classmates developed an admiration for “physical prowess” and a popular student, Dave Snyder, “enjoyed acting the fool and could care less about studies” (161). Such were the customs of students who were, as Rose later concludes, “scuttling along at the bottom of the pond” (160). The voc-ed students were held together by the belief that they were “average” and not worthy of attention. For a time this belief worked for Rose, and it helped solidify his membership. But later he had difficulty imagining a different future, and he struggled with other ways to approach his studies. Seeing beyond cultural myths is one hurdle to overcome, but taking the steps necessary to actually transcend the group-think is much more difficult.