



## English 42 I Cross-Pollination

Note that you need to consider the goals/effect/function as well as the means, manner, methods, techniques, strategies. For example, what is the goal of cubism and what techniques do artists employ? What is a sculptor doing, and how does she do it?

And by the way, this is exactly what happens when we discuss a text in terms of gender, social class, psychology, historical context, sexuality, etc. We trespass disciplines, but generate new ways of reading as a result.

### Assignment Clarification

As I mention in the syllabus, “One move that theorists and critics often make is to appropriate the theoretical tools and insights from one discipline and apply them to another. It’s yet another skill you need to pick up, but crossing disciplinary boundaries produces interesting insights as well as energizing the disciplines themselves.” This week we focus on ways to use art theory to make sense of literary texts.

As I note on the supplementary handout, you can use definitions and concepts from any art form—painting, sculpture, music, dance, theatre, architecture, film, etc.—to make sense of a literary text. For example, as we demonstrated in class, you can use definitions of surrealism to discuss Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Man-Moth.” You could talk about a Gertrude Stein prose description in terms of cubism or discuss Susie Asado in terms of a flamenco dance or a song. You might talk about Susan Howe’s “Incloser” in terms of collage or cinematic montage. [But you can’t just duplicate our class discussions. I don’t mind if you use the same texts as long as you find a different way to discuss them.]

Again, the strategy is as basic as creating a metaphor or a simile: You make sense of one thing by comparing it or equating it with another. It’s not a poem; it’s a dance. It’s not an essay; it’s a collage. It’s not a poem; it’s a cubist painting. This act of talking about one thing in terms of another will generate new insights, perspectives, and meanings. Put yet another way, we are recontextualizing the literary text; we are placing a text in an art context instead of a literary context, and that move will generate insights.

### Key Steps:

I. Choose a text that invites or encourages you to read it in terms of art, not literature (admittedly, “literary” elements remain). This “invitation” may take three different forms:

A. The invitation is **evident in the text itself**. For example, Susan Howe’s “Incloser” is a series of apparent fragments, and that suggests a collage. “Susie Asado” is so unusual that applying traditional literary approaches (identify a theme and consider how that theme is conveyed through rhyme, meter, diction, figures, character, narrative, POV, etc.) doesn’t work, and it turns out that Susie Asado is the name of a flamenco dancer, and that’s my clue to look elsewhere. The cine-poem’s form and language obviously invites us to discuss the poem in terms of film, not literature. Stein entitles several prose-pieces as “portraits,” leading us to think in terms of painting, not prose.

B. An **author’s comment** may encourage us to rethink our approach. For example, Stein writes, “what I may call the early Spanish and Geography and Play period finally resulted in things like Susie Asado and Preciosila in an extraordinary melody of words and a melody and excitement in knowing that I had done this thing.” This comment “invites” me to read the poem as a melody of words instead of a traditional poem. E.E. Cummings writes “Like the burlesk

comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement. ...“  
This comment tells me to read his poem as a kind of vaudeville act (and to figure out the difference between burlesk and burlesque). So, you need to read what writers say about their own work.

C. Writers share **contexts** with artists, and this connection *may* justify a new lens. The connection has to be rather strong. For example, artists like Matisse, Picasso, and Cezanne frequented Gertrude Stein’s salon. So, if we consider her friends and the fact that her prose descriptions resist traditional reading, we might find a reason to think about her prose in terms of impressionism and cubism. In other words, the artists whom writers hang out with may invite you to think about new ways to approach their prose and poetry.

In short, there needs to be a **reason** why you’re trespassing disciplines. You need a motive. You need an invitation.

2. Using specialized dictionaries, glossaries, encyclopedias, and textbooks, learn about the key terms, definitions, and concepts that pertain to your project. As you’ve learned so far, you don’t need volumes of material. A really helpful definition or comment can go a long way.

For example, consider this definition:

They wanted instead to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the canvas. So they reduced and fractured objects into geometric forms, and then realigned these within a shallow, relief-like space. They also used multiple or contrasting vantage points.

Your task now is to translate those key characteristics/qualities of cubism into literary strategies. What might “emphasize the two-dimensionality of the canvas” mean for a writer? How might a writer “reduce and fracture objects into geometric forms”? And it’s easy to see how a writer can “use multiple or contrasting vantage points.”

3. When you make claims and discuss your text, you **MUST** use the vocabulary of the new discipline. If the poem is music, then talk about the poem in terms of melody, harmony, pitch, rhythm, counter-point, notes, etc. If the story is cinematic, then talk about it in terms of editing, lighting, composition, cuts, scenes, montage, sound bridges, etc. ... whatever is relevant to your text. The student examples I provided with the supplementary handout demonstrate this rather well.