

Discussion topics / writing prompts

“'E' is for Ellipse” by Mark R. DeLong

[relates to July 2015 draft distributed via <http://etype.inetogogether.net/book/>]

The essay that relates to these topics is freely available to secondary and post-secondary teachers at <http://etype.inetogogether.net/book/>. Please send your comments and suggestions to mark.delong@duke.edu.

These topics can be used as either discussion topics or for writing exercises. In many cases, I have found that students have an inordinate desire to find The Answer To The Question, and these topics often defy that urge – to everyone's benefit.

1. The author writes, “We tend to associate artistic achievement with artists, though we do not do that with our engineers. In part, at least, that is because of a probably unfair and misleading distinction: artists create something new, while engineers explore, use, and extend what already exists.” Why does the author think the distinction is “probably unfair and misleading”? Does the distinction hold true? In what ways might it hold true? In what ways might it not?

2. From the essay:

“An artist, if good for anything, foresees what his public will see; and what his public will see is what he ought to have intended — the measure of his genius,” wrote Henry Adams when he was considering “twelfth century glass” in France. “If the public sees more than he himself did, this is his credit; if less, this is his fault. No matter how simple or ignorant we are, we ought to feel a discord or a harmony where the artist meant us to feel it, and when we see a motive, we conclude that other people have seen it before us, and that it must, therefore, have been intended.”

Examine Henry Adams' statement on artists' “intentions.” Outline the elements that Adams' statement imply about artists and about “genius.” How do we know intention?

The quotation from Adams appears in *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* that Adams privately published in 1904. Has interpretation of art and literature changed over time? If so, how would you characterize the change?

3. Why would Malcolm Sayer have preferred to be called an “aerodynamicist” rather than a “stylist”?

4. The author observes that institutions like universities require a certain societal stability, something that was lacking in 1940s Iraq and the Middle East. What qualities in a society are needed to provide fertile ground for institutions like universities, schools, businesses, and religious assemblies? How important are these societal qualities, and what responsibilities do individuals have to foster them?

5. Who was Daniel Bernoulli, and why would the author refer to him at the beginning of the essay?

6. In some ways, the essay seeks to bring matters of art and matters of engineering together. What tactics does the author use to accomplish that? Are those tactics successful? Why, or why not?