Deconstruction:

A method of reading and theory of language that seeks to subvert, dismantle, and destroy any notion that a text or signifying system has any boundaries, margins, coherence, unity, determinate meaning, truth, or identity. Unlike structuralism, which privileges structure over event, deconstruction insists on the paradox of structure and event. "Theory," Jonathan Culler writes, "must shift back and forth between these perspectives," and this shifting results in "an irresolvable alternation or aporia." Associated with the writings of Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is, in Barbara Johnson's phrase, "a careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text," and because there is no outside the text, once one is inside the text one is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Riven by contradictions and indeterminacies, texts are inherently heterogeneous, and they inevitably undo the philosophical system to which they adhere by revealing its rhetorical nature. Because every term can be read referentially or rhetorically, the reader is unable to arrive at any ultimate decision and is left in the double bind of trying to master a text that has no boundaries and cannot be totalized. Not only is aporia or undecidability endemic to texts, it is thematized in them. As J. Hillis Miller puts it, "deconstruction is not a dismantling of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself." According to Culler, "a deconstruction involves the demonstration that a hierarchical opposition, in which one term is said to be dependent upon another conceived as prior, is in fact a rhetorical or metaphysical imposition and that the hierarchy could well be reversed." Hence the deconstructionist emphasis on the marginal and supplementary.

The essential rhetoricity of discourse undoes any metaphysics of presence or logocentrism, any orientation of philosophy, in Culler's phrase, "toward an order of meaning -- thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word -- conceived of as existing in itself, as foundation." Because philosophy, like literature, is but a mode of discourse, it suffers from the same undecidability that infects discourse in general.

Deconstruction's central point is that total context is unmasterable. Though meaning is context-bound, context is boundless. A double bind is thus produced, for meaning is contextually determined, on the one hand, and context is infinitely extendable and thereby indeterminate, on the other. Moreover, since any signifying system is but a system of differences with no positive terms, meaning is disseminated rather than conveyed. It disperses itself throughout the realm of what Derrida calls différance, the realm of end-less differing and deferral, of
limitless free play. "The absence of a transcendental signified [or ultimate referent]," he writes, "extends the domain and the play of signification endlessly."