Read the Borges first, and then, as you read Castelle's essay, search for parts that evoke, align with, and/or contradict passages from Borges. These connections can be as literal or Impressionistic as you want them to be. Find between three and five connections between the two texts and for each connection write a brief paragraph describing how you understand the overlap between the two.

A network database quickly becomes incomprehensible to the human brain because there is a limit to the amount—and complexity—of visual information human beings can absorb at one glance. The lines connecting the five suppliers and five parts, as Castelle references in figure 1, are already too much information to represent in one intelligible chart. The relational database helps us find, process, and interpret the information faster and more easily because it strips the data of extraneous information. The information underlying a network database and a relational database is the same; the difference is whether you see all of it at once, or selections of it. This filtering is what makes a relational database efficient and digestible—various pieces of the data are broken down to categories, filtered, and rearranged into a table with just enough information to answer a specific query.

Borges’s library is fractal—each unit (hexagon) is defined and identical, and contains bookshelves and books, which in turn contain words, which in turn contain characters. The hexagons are all connected, stretching downward, upward, and sideways. Because they extend in all directions and are identical, there is no hierarchy among the hexagons, bookshelves, books, or characters. The hexagons—and by extension, the books and words and characters contained in them—are endless. People are able to navigate through them and find books, words and characters—in other words, information—because the library has been divided into parts and subparts, and each of these units feels more manageable. In both the relational database and Borges’s library, information is divided into smaller parts, and this breaking down and the imposition of boundaries are what allows people to search for information without becoming lost in the labyrinth of information.

The relational database and Borges’s library, however, are divided in fundamentally different ways. The divisions in the library are arbitrary—it seems that there are no rules dictating what books should belong in what hexagon, and no apparent logic as to why the gallery should be hexagonal instead of triangular, pentagonal, etc. There is, however, a logic to how information in a relational database is categorised; the pivotal bridge that connects each table to another is a common set of identifiers. In other words, the way in which relational tables are joined—and separated—is unique and meaningful. In Borges’s library, the thing that connects and separates the hexagons is an always-identical spiral staircase, with always-identical steps.

The divisions in Borges’s library are arbitrary because the library breaks down information more thoroughly than does a relational database. For example, Castelle talks of relational databases that track transactions between banks and clients. This relational database does not track the money involved in the transactions indefinitely; it stops tracking the money when the transaction between the bank and client ends. But in reality, this end is artificial—if, for example, the transaction involved $50, these dollars were split up and used in countless different ways even after the transaction has ended. The money continued to cycle through the world, yet none of this is captured by the bank’s database because the bank is not concerned with continuously tracking the $50. Information in a relational database exists within a confined parameter of companies, banks, or some other category, and therefore information is not broken down to the smallest unit possible (i.e. the dollar, the penny, fractions of a penny, etc.).

Unlike a relational database, which stops breaking down information at some level that is convenient to whoever is interpreting the data, Borges’s library breaks information down to its most basic units—the space, the period, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. In the library, there are no defined parameters such as countries, genres, time periods or languages because such parameters themselves are ambiguous; if the same lines can have valid (and different) meanings in both Portuguese and Yiddish, how can one categorise these lines as either Portuguese or Yiddish? If information can be interpreted in various, equally valid ways, then choosing one method of interpretation over another is arbitrary, and says more about the person imposing this selection than about the actual information at hand.