



NO. 33 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

One of These Things Is Not Like the Other: Writing Compare/Contrast Papers

Comparing and contrasting assignments are common in the academic world, but quantity does not guarantee ease. Below, some tips, and a definition, to help you write a great paper.

Compare — analyze to search for **similarities** between two or more different things

Contrast — analyze to search for **differences** between two or more different things

Prewriting.

Visually note similarities/differences by creating charts and/or highlighting. For example,

- Two pieces by the same author. Can you find an evolution of ideas over the course of her career?
- Two approaches to the same subject. *Why* are the approaches different? Do the two authors differ in culture, age, or gender?

Thesis.

Identify *reasons* for similar or different ideas in order to develop a significant thesis.

- Avoid
 - ♦ “Text A and text B have many similarities but also have many differences.” This elementary sentence merely recognizes the existence of similarities and differences.
 - ♦ “Text A states X while text B states Y.” This elementary sentence merely states what is similar or different.
- Instead, concentrate on answering the “so what?”
 - ♦ What do you learn by drawing the comparison/contrast?
 - ♦ Mention the specific *reasons why* similarities and differences exist.

Organization.

- Use outlining to sort your points of comparison or contrast.
- Briefly summarize the texts themselves, emphasizing the grounds for comparison. Sometimes it helps to point out obvious similarities as a justification for writing about differences (or, conversely, to acknowledge obvious differences as a justification for writing about significant similarities).
- Following the introduction and brief summary, choose one of two available routes of organization:
 1. **Text-by-text (block method):** discuss all of text A, then all of B.
Text-by-text organization is often easy to control, but be careful that by separating your discussions of the two texts, you don’t essentially write two adjoining, but separate, papers. Avoid this pitfall by making certain that a clear thesis connects the two texts.
 2. **Point-by-point (alternating method):** alternate between significant points about text A and analogous points about text B.
Point-by-point organization is often more interesting and reader-friendly. But be careful when using this format that you don’t bounce back and forth too often. Avoid this tendency during your outlining by grouping similar points together and addressing them in clusters in reference to one text at a time.

Questions to ask yourself about your compare/contrast paper after finishing a draft.

- Is it clear *what* is being compared? Did you properly cite the points of comparison?
- Is it clear *why* these points of comparison are used? Does each similarity or difference work to further explain the important idea(s) in your thesis?
- Does the organization you’ve chosen support your ideas, or is it confusing, choppy, or hard to follow?

For more information on comparison/contrast papers, see

Writing With a Purpose, Joseph Trimmer: 114-17

Wordsmith: A Guide to Paragraphs and Short Essays, Pamela Arlov: 102-10

<http://www.users.drew.edu/~sjamieso/Comparison.htm>

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CompAnalysis.html>

The St. Martin’s Handbook (5th ed): 126, 132-33