

Introduction to Comparison/Contrast Essays

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WHAT'S COVERED

We are constantly comparing and contrasting in our daily lives. We compare and contrast which breakfast cereal and which television brand to buy; we compare and contrast people we know, places we've visited, movies we've seen, and foods we like. When writing a comparison/contrast essay, writers will engage in critical thinking and go beyond mere description or a presentation of facts. When you think about similarities and differences between two things, you not only come to a deeper understanding of the things themselves, but you see more clearly the connection between the two and why that's meaningful. In this lesson, we will discuss the purpose of a comparison/contrast essay, how to choose a topic for a comparison/contrast essay, and some basic ways to structure a comparison/contrast essay. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. The Purpose of Comparison/Contrast in Writing
2. Choosing a Topic for a Comparison/Contrast Essay
3. Structure of a Comparison/Contrast Essay

1. The Purpose of Comparison/Contrast in Writing

Remember that when writing any essay or composition, the author should have a clear purpose or goal he/she hopes to achieve with that piece of writing. If the writer's purpose is to compare (discuss similarities) or contrast (discuss differences) between two subjects, then a comparison/contrast essay will achieve this goal.

A comparison/contrast essay can be an effective way to draw connections between two subjects and convey the important similarities and differences between them. In other words, a comparison/contrast essay should increase the audience's understanding of how two subjects within a category are similar or different. This type of essay isn't always written in a single mode. In fact, it sometimes utilizes elements from multiple modes such as informative, persuasive, or argumentative.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** An author may use a comparison/contrast essay to argue reasons why Fresh Foods Market is a better place to buy groceries than Herman's Market. Or, an author may choose to use a comparison/contrast essay to simply inform the reader in an objective way about the similarities or differences between Fresh Foods Market and Herman's Market.

While either approach is acceptable in a broader academic setting, in this course we'll focus on using a

comparison/contrast essay as a type of informative writing with the purpose of informing the reader of similarities and differences between two subjects. You do not have to argue that one grocery store is better than another grocery store, for example. You simply have to inform your reader how the two stores are similar or how they are different from one another.



TERM TO KNOW

Informative Writing

Writing designed to inform, describe, or explain.

Because the goal of informative writing is to inform readers about something, it's important for writers to be as objective as possible when writing in this way. They should do their best to set aside personal feelings and opinions and simply report information as clearly and as honestly as they can. The goal of informative writing is not to persuade the reader or to argue a point, but rather to inform the reader about something using an objective tone. One important way to achieve this is to avoid use of first person references in your writing (“I”, “me”, “my”). Statements such as “I think,” or “I believe,” or “in my experience,” are not appropriate for objective, informative writing.



HINT

Complete objectivity is nearly impossible, because writers always interpret information in terms of their perspective and experiences. However, a writer should do his or her best to avoid bias or non-objective language in informative writing.

Striving for objectivity is a worthwhile task for informative writers. When writing in the informative mode, it's especially important that writers be aware of their personal biases and/or assumptions about the subject(s) they're writing about. Being aware of personal biases and assumptions, and addressing them accordingly, brings writers closer to an objective perspective, no matter the subject.

Therefore, in a comparison/contrast essay written in the informative mode, the writer should objectively present the similarities or differences between the two subjects.

2. Choosing a Topic for a Comparison/Contrast Essay

The key to a good comparison/contrast essay is to choose two or more subjects that connect in a meaningful way. The point of writing a comparison or contrast is not to state the obvious, but rather to highlight subtle differences or unexpected similarities.



EXAMPLE If you wanted to focus on comparing or contrasting two subjects, you would not pick pies and whales. There is no meaningful connection to be made in that case. Instead, you might choose to compare or contrast two restaurants. For example, you could compare or contrast a variety of aspects such as the prices, the atmosphere, the service, or the menus.

One approach for this type of essay is to contrast two subjects (restaurant A and restaurant B) in a similar category (types of restaurants). Don't forget to consider the “So what?” question when deciding on your topic. Why are you choosing this topic? Why should anyone care or be interested? Is it at all meaningful? You should

be able to explain why it is useful that the reader understand the similarities and differences between these two subjects.

An additional approach for this type of essay is to focus on comparison of two subjects. If you use this approach, you likely would not choose two types of pie because they share so many of the same properties already. Although not a required element of comparison essays, selecting two subjects that initially seem divergent to compare can make the essay more interesting.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You may choose to compare orca whales with wolves. At first glance, they may seem to have little in common other than the fact that they are animals. However, both live and hunt in packs, both are primarily carnivores, and once born, both wolves and orcas usually stay with the pack or pod in which they were born for the remainder of their lives.

When choosing a topic, sometimes it is helpful to think about things in your everyday life that can be compared or contrasted. You may choose to contrast your daily routine as a child to your daily routine as an adult. Or compare the personalities of your children who are two separate individuals, but may have many things in common with one another. Or contrast your family's holiday traditions to your significant other's holiday traditions.



BIG IDEA

The key point is that there should be a meaningful connection between the two things you are comparing or contrasting.

3. The Structure of a Comparison/Contrast Essay

Remember that all academic essays follow a general essay structure, which includes certain key components. Since a comparison/contrast essay is a type of academic essay, it should also contain these components:

- Introductory paragraph which contains a thesis statement
- Body paragraphs which support the thesis statement and highlight the similarities and/or the differences between the two subjects
- A conclusion

The comparison/contrast essay begins with an introductory paragraph. Introductions are one of the most important part of any essay. The introduction is the beginning of the essay. It's the first thing readers learn about the topic, and as such, it bears the burden of convincing readers to keep reading. If it fails, it falls to reason that it doesn't matter how well the conclusion is written. So, what goes into making an introduction? There are two critical things introductions need to do:

- Establish the essay's topic, including any conflict or controversy that the writer will be addressing
- Include a clear articulation of the thesis

In a comparison/contrast essay, the thesis should clearly state the two subjects that are to be either compared, contrasted, or both, along with the points of comparison/contrast that will be further explored in the body of the essay. Remember, the point of comparing and contrasting is to provide useful information to the reader.

Take the following thesis as an example:

While paper and plastic bags from the grocery store serve the same general purpose, they differ in environmental impact and convenience.

Here the thesis sets up the two subjects to be contrasted (paper and plastic bags), and introduces the points of contrast (environmental impact and convenience). The thesis statement informs the reader that the essay will explore the environmental impacts and convenience of paper bags and plastic bags. As a shopper, this may inform your decision the next time the cashier asks “paper or plastic?”

Following the introductory paragraph are the body paragraphs. The body paragraphs contain the primary points or ideas of the essay, making up the body of the work. The body paragraphs expand upon the points in the thesis statement and provide further details. Each body paragraph should contain a topic sentence and supporting sentence that support the thesis statement. The number of body paragraphs your comparison/contrast essay contains will vary depending on how many points of comparison or contrast you are discussing in your essay. However, a typical comparison/contrast essay will have anywhere between 4-6 body paragraphs.



There are two primary ways in which the body paragraphs for a comparison/contrast essay can be organized. These include the point-by-point and block methods. You'll learn more details about these two methods and how to use each in another tutorial.

Lastly, your essay should end with a strong conclusion to bring the essay to a close. Besides putting a physical end to the text, the conclusion needs to wrap up the essay and give readers a feeling of cohesion and closure. One way writers do this is by referring back to the introduction, to create a sense of circular motion.

A conclusion can be more than just a summary of what's come before it. Recall that there are three main approaches a writer can take when drafting a conclusion: the summary approach, the expansion approach, or the hybrid approach. As a reminder, the summary approach entails briefly noting the essay's major points, and restating the thesis -- in different words than before, of course. The expansion approach expands the discussion beyond the scope of the essay's thesis. These types of conclusions work most often by raising questions that still need answers, or which are not possible to answer in the time and space allowed. Sometimes they list work or research that still needs to be done, or even bring up related ideas that weren't able to be incorporated into the text, due to space and time constraints. Finally, the hybrid approach incorporates some elements of both the summary and expansion approaches, taking advantage of the strengths of both.



A comparison/contrast essay is a type of essay which serves the purpose of examining similarities or differences between two subjects. When choosing the topic for such an essay, the writer should be sure to choose two subjects that have a meaningful connection, and the writer should have a compelling reason to compare the two subjects. Finally, a comparison/contrast essay can take on a variety of structures, depending on the topic itself and the overall goal of the essay.



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