

Writing an Effective Comparison/Contrast Essay

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we will discuss how to begin drafting your comparison/contrast essay by utilizing the writing process to brainstorm and prewrite, as well as draft an effective working thesis and outline. We will also look at two different methods of organizing information. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Brainstorming and Prewriting
2. Drafting a Thesis Statement
3. Methods of Organization

1. Brainstorming and Prewriting

Recall that a comparison/contrast essay serves the purpose of examining the similarities and/or differences between two subjects. When you compare things, you show their similarities; when you contrast things, you show their differences.

The first step in writing a comparison/contrast essay is to brainstorm ideas and decide upon a topic. It is important that you find two things that have enough differences or similarities in order to be able to effectively compare or contrast them. If you choose two things that are too similar, you'll struggle to find meaningful differences. If you choose two things that are too different, you'll struggle to find meaningful comparisons.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You can easily find similarities or differences between two pets, such as cats and dogs. On the other hand, comparing or contrasting a chocolate cake with country music makes no sense.

During the brainstorming stage of the writing process, you can use a variety of activities to help you generate ideas for your topic. It can be helpful to make a list of similarities and differences between your two subjects, then choose the ones that are most important to use in your comparison/contrast essay. This will help you to see the multitude of similarities and differences, and then focus in on the most important ones to use in your essay. Clustering, or mapping, is another way to generate ideas using words and shapes, and lines that show the connections between them.

➞ **EXAMPLE**

Similarities	Differences
Both are cold-blooded reptiles	Crocodiles are larger than alligators
Both eat a similar diet	Crocodiles have a pointed snout and alligators have a rounded snout
Both can move quickly on land	Crocodiles live in salt water and alligators live in freshwater
Both live in a water environment	Alligators live only in the U.S. and part of China, while crocodiles live across the globe

When deciding upon a topic, here are some helpful tips to keep in mind:

- There are unending things that you can compare/contrast, and choosing two might seem overwhelming. Some common themes for a comparison/contrast essay may include events (Battle of Fort Sumter versus Battle of Sewell's Point), situations (riding the bus versus driving to work), people (a CEO versus a CFO of a company), places (London versus Tokyo).
- A good approach for beginner writers can be to pick two things that are in the same overarching category (foods, animals, locations, people, events, etc.) but differ in some significant ways. This can make it easier to see the similarities as well as the differences.
- Don't forget to consider the "So what?" question when deciding on your topic. Why are you choosing this topic? Why should anyone care? Is it at all meaningful? You should be able to explain to your reader why it is useful that they understand the similarities or differences between these two topics.

Below is a short list of some additional example topics that could work well for a comparison or contrast essay. Note how the two subjects being compared or contrasted belong to a shared category, given in parentheses.

- Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. (historical figures)
- The 1960s and today (two eras in time)
- A pop singer and a country singer (genres of singers)
- Oprah and Ellen (talk show hosts)
- Online college courses and in person college courses (ways to take college courses)
- Communism and Socialism (belief systems)
- Solar power and wind energy (environmental issues)

After you've determined your topic and listed points of comparison or contrast, you can begin to narrow your focus by drafting a working thesis statement, thinking about the best way to organize your information, and creating an outline. As you narrow your focus, you will need to determine which points of comparison or contrast are most important. The number of points of comparison or contrast that you settle on will be driven by the topic you choose. However, for the comparison/contrast essay you'll be writing for this course, you will need to focus in on two or three main points of comparison or contrast.

An outline can be a useful tool during prewriting to help you further develop the ideas and organization of your essay. Creating an outline will help you plan the way in which you want to organize your body paragraphs, and which details you want to include in each. This will help you to produce a sort of roadmap for your essay.

2. Drafting a Thesis Statement

A good thesis statement is the cornerstone of any academic essay. During the brainstorming and prewriting steps, you will have selected a topic and chosen your strongest main points to either compare or contrast within your essay. This will help you further develop your thesis statement. A good thesis statement should convey the main points of your essay, and should avoid being overly generic. A thesis statement such as “Dogs and cats have many similarities, but they also have some differences,” doesn’t do a very good job of informing the reader of exactly what will be covered in the essay because it is very vague. What are those similarities and differences? Why should the reader care?

Instead, a good thesis statement should provide more information on which points of comparison or contrast will be discussed in the essay. Below are some templates you can consider as you begin to draft your thesis statement. A good thesis statement is not required to follow one of these patterns, but as a beginner writer, you may find that they provide a helpful starting point.

For an essay contrasting two subjects, your thesis statement may look something like this:

[subject] and [subject] may appear similar, but they differ in [first], [second], and [third].

Or, if you are comparing two subjects, your thesis statement might look something like this:

[subject] and [subject] do not appear to have a lot in common, but they are very similar in [first], [second], and [third].

A thesis statement might meaningfully contrast two subjects using the template above, like this:

"Paris and Tokyo are both large metropolitan cities, but they differ in terms of their job opportunities, average income, and living expenses."

Notice how the primary emphasis in the above thesis is about how the two cities differ based on the three points the author chose to focus on: job opportunities, income, and living expenses. This thesis statement gives the reader a clear idea of the specific points of contrast that will be covered within the body of the essay.

3. Methods of Organization

Now that you have your working thesis statement, you’re ready to begin thinking about how to organize the body paragraphs within your essay. There are two primary ways in which the body paragraphs can be organized— the point-by-point method and the block method. The organizing strategy that you choose will depend on your audience and purpose, and should also align with your thesis statement. You may also consider your particular approach to the subjects as well as the nature of the subjects themselves; some subjects might better lend themselves to one structure or the other.

The point-by-point method is one method of paragraph development and organization for a

comparison/contrast essay. It's also known as the alternating format method. When you use the point-by-point method, you are choosing one point of comparison and then writing one paragraph about each of your subjects that shows how they are similar or different.

➞ **EXAMPLE** For example, if I am comparing two fast food restaurants, McDonalds and Burger King, I would first determine my points of comparison. Let's say I'm going to focus on similarities in costs, menus, and taste. My first body paragraph would consider the costs at McDonalds, and my second body paragraph would consider the costs at Burger King. My third and fourth body paragraphs would consider the menus at McDonalds and Burger King, and my final two body paragraphs would consider the tastes at both restaurants.

This method of organizing is usually easier for the reader to follow as the main points of the body paragraphs alternate in sequence between subjects. To demonstrate this method, let's take the thesis statement, *"Paris and Tokyo are both large metropolitan cities, but they differ in terms of their job opportunities, average income, and living expenses."* In this case, the author is focusing on the differences between the two cities in regards to three main points. The organization of the essay using the point-by-point method would look like this:

- Introduction + thesis statement
- Body paragraph 1: Job opportunities in Paris
- Body paragraph 2: Job opportunities in Tokyo
- Body paragraph 3: Average income in Paris
- Body paragraph 4: Average income in Tokyo
- Body paragraph 5: Living expenses in Paris
- Body paragraph 6: Living expenses in Tokyo
- Conclusion

The block method is another method of paragraph development and organization in a comparison/contrast essay. It's also known as the subject-by-subject method. As the name implies, if you choose the block method, you will consider all of your points of comparison or contrast for one subject in the first two or three body paragraphs in your essay, and then discuss the same main points for the second subject in the remaining body paragraphs.

➞ **EXAMPLE** For example, if I'm contrasting my local grocery store with the giant superstore outside of town, I would first determine my points for contrast. I might choose to focus on the differences in prices, convenience, and atmosphere. I would begin the body of the essay by devoting one paragraph each to these three points about my local grocery store; then I would write three paragraphs that show how the superstore is different according to those same points.

This organizational pattern discusses two or three main points about one subject and then two or three main points about the second subject. If you choose this method, pay special attention to transition use to help guide your reader.

To demonstrate this method, let's again take the thesis statement, *"Paris and Tokyo are both large metropolitan cities, but they differ in terms of their job opportunities, average income, and living expenses."* The organization of the essay using the block method would look like this:

- Introduction + thesis statement

- Body paragraph 1: Job opportunities in Paris
- Body paragraph 2: Average income in Paris
- Body paragraph 3: Living expenses in Paris
- Body paragraph 4: Job opportunities in Tokyo
- Body paragraph 5: Average income in Tokyo
- Body paragraph 6: Living expenses in Tokyo
- Conclusion



Let's say you are writing an essay that is contrasting two restaurants. Your working thesis statement is: "The two Italian restaurants in town differ significantly in atmosphere, prices and service, and convenience." What would your organization look like if you used the point-by-point method? What about the block method?

If you organized the essay using the point-by-point method, your organization would look like this:

- Introduction + thesis statement
- Body paragraph 1: Atmosphere/ambiance of Restaurant A
- Body paragraph 2: Atmosphere/ambiance of Restaurant B
- Body paragraph 3: The prices and service of Restaurant A
- Body paragraph 4: The prices and service of Restaurant B
- Body paragraph 5: Convenience/location/opening hours of Restaurant A
- Body paragraph 6: Convenience/location/opening hours of Restaurant B
- Conclusion

If you used the block method, your organization would look like this:

- Introduction + thesis statement
- Body paragraph 1: The atmosphere/ambiance of Restaurant A
- Body paragraph 2: The prices and service at Restaurant A
- Body paragraph 3: Convenience/location/opening hours of Restaurant A
- Body paragraph 4: The atmosphere/ambiance of Restaurant B
- Body paragraph 5: The prices and service at Restaurant B
- Body paragraph 6: Convenience/location/opening hours of Restaurant B
- Conclusion

Remember that writing is a recursive process and you don't have to always get it right the first time. If you choose one approach, but decide it isn't working as well as you hoped, you can always change your approach later. However, creating an outline with some key points that you plan to discuss in each paragraph can help you more easily and effectively organize your ideas early on so that you run into fewer snags as you begin drafting. A sample outline using the block method for a thesis statement that is contrasting two restaurants might look something like this:

- Introduction

- Thesis statement: The two Italian restaurants in town differ significantly in atmosphere, prices and service, and convenience.
- Body paragraph 1: The atmosphere/ambiance of Restaurant A
 - Upscale, dim lighting, romantic, smaller dining room, more quaint setting
- Body paragraph 2: The prices and service at Restaurant A
 - High prices, excellent service
- Body paragraph 3: Convenience/location/opening hours of Restaurant A
 - Good location, accepts reservations, open 7 days a week from 11 am - 10 pm
- Body paragraph 4: The atmosphere/ambiance of Restaurant B
 - Kitsch theme to decor, not as upscale, family-style dining, large dining room
- Body paragraph 5: The prices and service at Restaurant B
 - Lower prices, generally good service, but often slower due to the restaurant being larger and more crowded
- Body paragraph 6: Convenience/location/opening hours of Restaurant B
 - Difficult to find parking, does not accept reservations, open 6 days a week from 10 am - 10 pm
- Conclusion

A sample outline using the point-by-point method for a thesis statement that is contrasting the differences between paper and plastic bags might have an outline that looks like this:

- Introduction
 - Thesis statement: While paper and plastic bags from the grocery store serve the same general purpose, they differ in environmental impact and convenience.
- Body paragraph 1: The environmental impact of paper bags
 - Easy to recycle or compost, made from a renewable source
- Body paragraph 2: The environmental impact of plastic bags
 - Does not compost, contributes to plastic pollution, made from a non-renewable source
- Body paragraph 3: Convenience of paper bags
 - Typically larger than plastic bags, can hold more groceries, easier to recycle when you're done with them, tear more easily than plastic bags (less strong)
- Body paragraph 4: Convenience of plastic bags
 - Holds less than paper bags, but is stronger, easier to carry multiple plastic bags at once due to larger handles, can be reused for other purposes
- Conclusion


Given that comparison/contrast essays analyze the relationship between two subjects, it is also helpful to have some transitional words and phrases on hand that will cue the reader to such analysis. These words and phrases help to highlight the points you are trying to make by signaling the relationships between the subjects in a clear way. Below are some sample transitional words and phrases that you may use to indicate a comparison or contrast.

Comparison words/phrases	Contrast words/phrases
both	alternatively

similarly	in contrast
likewise	one difference/another difference
one similarity/another similarity	conversely
in comparison	whereas
like	nevertheless
similar to	unlike
in the same way	on the other hand
also	despite
compared to	however
in a similar fashion	while

HINT

As a reminder, in this course the emphasis is on using comparison/contrast essays to practice writing within the informative mode. Therefore, you should compare or contrast your subjects using academic language and an objective/unbiased tone to inform your reader about the similarities or differences.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, we've examined how to begin organizing and drafting a comparison/contrast essay. Remember that topic choice is vital in this type of essay and you should choose two subjects that connect in a meaningful way. The rest of your essay will then draw out those connections, whether they be similarities or differences. The specific way in which you organize your body paragraphs will be largely determined by your topic and subjects, your audience, and your purpose. Finally, while there is no clear cut formula for writing a comparison/contrast essay, we explored a few tips that can help make the process a little bit easier.