

Writing Effective Comparison/Contrast Essays

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn 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 organize the rest of your essay. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. **Brainstorming and Prewriting**
2. **Drafting a Thesis Statement**
3. **Methods of Organization**
 - 3a. **Point-by-Point Method**
 - 3b. **Block Method**
4. **Using Transitions**

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's important that you find two things that have enough similarities or differences 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:

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 saltwater, 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.

Clustering, or mapping, is another way to generate ideas using words, shapes, and lines that show the connections between those ideas.

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

1. 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), and places (London versus Tokyo).
2. 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.
3. 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 readers 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/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)
- Pop music and country music (genres of music)
- Oprah Winfrey and Ellen DeGeneres (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 (energy types)

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.

As you know, 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.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** 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 beginning 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 1} and {Subject 2} may appear similar, but they differ in {first point of contrast}, {second point of contrast}, and {third point of contrast}.

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

{Subject 1} and {Subject 2} do not appear to have a lot in common, but they are very similar in {first point of comparison}, {second point of comparison}, and {third point of comparison}.

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
- 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.

3a. Point-by-Point Method

The point-by-point method, also known as the alternating format method, is one method of paragraph development and organization for a comparison/contrast essay.

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.

IN CONTEXT

If you are comparing two fast-food restaurants, McDonalds and Burger King, you would first determine your points of comparison. Let's say you're going to focus on similarities in costs, menus, and taste.

Your first body paragraph would consider the costs at McDonalds, and your second body paragraph would consider the costs at Burger King. Your third and fourth body paragraphs would consider the menus at McDonalds and Burger King, and your final two body paragraphs would consider the taste of the food 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 regard 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

3b. Block Method

The block method, also known as the subject-by-subject method, is another method of paragraph development and organization in a comparison/contrast essay.

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 of your essay, and then discuss the same main points for the second subject in the remaining body paragraphs.

IN CONTEXT

If you're contrasting your local grocery store with the giant superstore outside of town, you would first determine your points for contrast. You might choose to focus on the differences in prices, convenience, and atmosphere.

You would begin the body of the essay by devoting one paragraph each to these three points about your local grocery store; then, you would write three paragraphs that show how the superstore is different according to those same points.



HINT

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

4. Using Transitions

Given that comparison/contrast essays analyze the relationship between two subjects, it is also helpful to have some transitions 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



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how to begin putting your comparison/contrast essay together by first starting with **brainstorming and prewriting**, then moving on to **drafting a thesis statement**.

There are two **methods of organization** for the body of a comparison/contrast essay that you can choose from: the **point-by-point method** and the **block method**. The specific way in which you organize your body paragraphs will be largely determined by your topic and subjects, your audience, and your

purpose. Whichever method you choose, **using transitions** effectively can help readers follow along with your main points.

Best of luck in your learning!

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