



THE WRITING PROCESS

Comparison and Contrast

You aren't likely to sit down and say to yourself, "I think I'll write a comparison-and-contrast essay today. Now what shall I write about?" Usually you will use comparison and contrast because you have been told to or because you decide it suits your topic. Many instructors, for instance, tell students how to treat the material. When you read the question(s), certain key words and phrases—**compare and contrast, similarities and differences, advantages and disadvantages**—indicate that you should use a comparison-and-contrast pattern to organize your essay.

A comparison-and-contrast essay shows how certain things are essentially the same or different. Your purpose in writing such an essay may be **informational** or **judgmental**. An informational essay simply presents two or more items side by side and draws attention to their similarities or differences. It does not judge the relative merits of the items but rather informs the reader of their relationship to each other. An essay which is judgmental, on the other hand, always has a closed or final thesis that establishes the significance of the comparison or contrast and takes an arguable position on the relative merits of the items discussed.

In a college paper that uses a comparison-and-contrast pattern, the thesis statement almost always strengthens the writing by clarifying its purpose. As in other essays, your thesis statement should tell your readers what to expect in your essay. It should mention not only the subjects to be compared and contrasted, but also the point the comparison is to make. In addition, your thesis should indicate whether you will concentrate on similarities or differences or whether you will balance the two. The very structure of your thesis announces the focus of your essay.

When two subjects are extremely similar, it is the contrast that is worth writing about. And when two subjects are not very much alike, you should find enlightening similarities. In either case, after you brainstorm to generate ideas, you should think about each point to decide whether it is significant or not. To test each comparison and contrast, ask yourself:

- Is there a meaningful basis for the comparison?
- Does the comparison lead readers beyond the obvious?
- Does it serve my writing purpose?
- Does it support my thesis?

Your next step is to select those points that have a bearing on your thesis. You do this by determining the emphasis of your thesis (whether it emphasizes similarities, differences, or both) and what the major point of your paper is. When you compare and contrast, make sure that you treat the same common elements for each subject you discuss. A frequent error that you should avoid is to discuss different elements for each subject. Remember, a comparison-and-contrast essay requires that you draw relationships between the two subjects, not just describe each one.

STRUCTURING A COMPARISON-AND-CONTRAST ESSAY

After you have formulated your thesis statement, established your basis of comparison, and selected your points for discussion, you are ready to organize your paper. Like other types of essays, a comparison-and-contrast essay has an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Within the body paragraphs, however, there are two basic comparison-and-contrast patterns you can follow:

- You can discuss one subject at a time, making all your points about Subject A in the first section of your paper, and going on to make all your points about Subject B. This is called a **subject-by-subject comparison**.
- Alternately, you can discuss one common element in each section, making points about Subject A and Subject B in relation to that element. This is called a **point-by-point comparison**.

As you might expect, both organizational patterns have advantages and disadvantages that you should consider before you use them.

Subject-by-Subject Comparison

When you make a subject-by-subject comparison, you are discussing each subject separately, but in each case, you use the same basis of comparison to select your points, and you arrange these points in the same order. Usually you present points in order of increasing significance to hold your readers' interest. In longer papers, where many points are made about each subject, this organizational pattern can put too many demands upon your readers, requiring them to remember all your points throughout your paper. In addition, because of the size of each section, your paper may sound like two separate essays weakly connected by a transitional phrase. Therefore, this form of comparison is best used for short papers.

Point-by-Point Comparison

For longer or more complex papers, it is best to discuss each point of comparison for both subjects together, making your comparisons as you go along. When you use point-by-point comparison, your paper is organized differently. Paragraph by paragraph, you first make a point about one subject, then follow it with a comparable point about the other. This alternating pattern continues throughout the body of your essay, until all your comparisons or contrasts have been made.

With point-by-point comparison your readers can follow the comparisons and contrasts more easily as they go along. However, it is easy to fall into a pattern of monotonous, back-and-forth sentences when writing point-by-point comparison. To avoid this, try to vary the length and structure of your sentences as you move from point to point.