

## COMPARISON WRITING

In academic writing, comparison and contrast is particularly valuable because it enables you to see familiar things in new ways. "Common sense" says that two things are the same, but a careful comparison and contrast demonstrates their important differences. That same common sense may say that two things are totally incompatible, but when you compare and contrast them systematically, you discover their affinities. Making comparisons helps student writers make decisions and judgments, both in planning other papers (see the discussion of synthesis) and in the forming theses and interpretations of data and ideas. In addition to helping you decide which of two or more items is more appropriate or more useful, comparison can help you think about the unfamiliar by allowing you to contrast it with something you already know.

### Comparison in Everyday Life

Question: "which team is going to win?" To answer this question you must first evaluate each team, considering a number of features from the skill and readiness of the players on each team to the strength of the coaching. You'll probably consider averages, recent performance, health information and a host of other details. Once you've considered these aspects of each team, you will use them as criteria on which to base a comparison. You'll compare the teams point-by-point to decide which is the stronger (these two activities often occur simultaneously because people who engage in such discussions generally agree on the criteria for comparison). Based on this comparison, you will give your answer to the initial question. In this case the answer is a prediction, but we ask and answer similar questions about a host of other topics hundreds of times a day--where to get something to eat, which store to buy supplies from, which candidate to vote for, what task to do first. Sometimes the sequence is evaluate-compare-predict, at other times it is evaluate-compare-decide, or evaluate-compare-recommend, and even evaluate-compare-and then reject both options! The final term in this chain is a claim (this team will win, we should eat at the diner, we should buy brand X), which in academic papers tends to be called a thesis. Academic papers often employ the same analytical sequence and evaluative and comparatives skills as we use in every day decision-making, and we write them for the same reason--to help us reach a decision about things we are comparing and then explain that decision to others.

### Key Features of a Comparison

- (1) it allows readers to easily see similarities and differences between two or more sources,
- (2) it accurately presents the information from the sources,
- (3) it presents the comparison for a purpose (i.e.: it has a thesis).

### Preparing to Write a Paper using Comparison

Prewriting for comparison and contrast papers can be conducted visually, through charts. Draw vertical lines down the center of a sheet of notebook paper, allowing one column for each thing to be compared and a small margin on the left. If you prefer to work on your computer, make a table using your word processing software or a spread sheet program. List the main points, topics, or features in the left margin or column and then note how each text responds or represents it in the relevant column. You might find it helpful to indicate all of the similarities using a highlighter, marks next to each similarity, or some other system. This technique will help you identify and keep track of the important similarities and differences.

## **A Warning!**

When a comparison and contrast assignment asks you to compare your personal experience with something else, it is important not to fall into the fallacy of using personal experience to evaluate the accuracy of the other. For example, you might read an essay arguing that the traditional image of family life in which Dad goes off to work and Mom stays at home to take care of the house and the children no longer describes the lives of the majority of American families. Let us suppose that you are asked to compare your family and the families of your friends with the new image that the article describes (both parents working, or a single parent working and raising the children). If your personal experience contrasts with the author's description of how the majority of American families live, that is not sufficient evidence for denying (or, if your experience accords with her findings, validating) the accuracy of the author's description. The argument "The traditional family in which I grew up demonstrates how little the author of the article knows about American life" makes no sense because you are comparing a specific case with a generalization based on many cases. Your experience might, however, support a thesis along the line of "The work pattern described in Bergmann's essay might describe general trends, but many families, like mine, found other ways to respond to the fall in middle-class wages that she describes" or "While Barbara Bergmann describes the reasons that many women returned to the workplace in the last decade, my own experience shows that for some women the reasons are harder to isolate and analyze."

## **Formulating a Comparative Thesis**

Inexperienced academic writers often get lost when they are trying to decide on a thesis for a paper that uses comparison and contrast. Assuming that the purpose of comparison and contrast is to discover similarities and differences, they formulate a thesis that says something like "X and Y have important similarities and differences" or "X is very similar to/different from Y." For example, "The Republican and Democratic platforms for the 1960 American presidential election were very similar." Readers of college-level papers with such a thesis might rightly ask "So?" or "Who cares?" because college-level writing requires that you say something about what you know rather than simply repeating it.

Developing a good thesis for a college-level comparison and contrast paper involves your looking at those similarities and differences and asking yourself the crucial question, "So what?"

- \* What do you learn from having discovered similarities and differences?
- \* How does it affect your point of view?

The answer to this question can lead to a thesis statement like "A comparison of the Republican and Democratic platforms for the 1960 presidential race reveals so many similarities that one must wonder whether Americans actually have options when they go to the polls." That's a thesis that a reader might find interesting--or at least worth arguing about.

## **Organizing a Paper using Comparison**

Once you have figured out a thesis statement, or at least something that you can work with temporarily (remember, you can always revise or replace your thesis once your paper is underway), you can begin drafting.

Two general structural patterns are available for papers that use comparison and contrast. Some papers adopt one or the other, but many actually blend these two patterns together in various ways. Being aware of the two basic patterns will help you make wise rhetorical choices as you draft your paper. The structures are the point-by-point pattern and the block pattern:

**The point-by-point pattern:**

When you use this structure, you work back and forth between the sources you consider in your paper discussing one point of similarity or difference at a time. Each paragraph takes one feature or point of similarity or difference and discusses each source in relation to it. For example, a paper comparing three paintings might contain one paragraph discussing the similarities and differences in the use of light and shade in the three paintings, another discussing how each painting uses color, and so on. A more complex paper might only focus on the use of color, with several paragraphs each discussing one color in the three paintings.

The point-by-point pattern is essential if your material is complicated or if your paper is a long one. It is also a standard pattern for academic comparison and contrast essays. Most of your college professors will expect you to follow this pattern.

**The block pattern:**

In this structure, you discuss first one item, and then the other. A comparison paper written using this pattern discusses all of the important features of one item and then, turning to the second item discusses all of its important features, explaining how they compare or contrast with those of the first item. Some very simple block comparisons describe one item and then the second and then compare them. This method rarely works for papers over three pages in length because readers do not remember the salient features of the first item once they have moved to the second (and third).

The block pattern is a good approach for a short paper (five pages or less) and may be familiar from high school comparison papers. You should also consider this approach if you're not feeling too confident of your analysis of one of the two items. Using the principle of Nestorian order, you can begin the essay with what you consider to be your lesser analysis, and then place your more convincing analysis toward the end of the essay, where it will make a favorable impression on your readers.

**The combination:**

As with all writing, there is no simple formula for a paper that uses comparison. You will read some professionally written comparisons that use a combination of these two methods, and you may find that a combination makes sense for your own papers as well. Some longer papers may begin with a few paragraphs using the block pattern and then move on to point-by-point pattern. This may be especially useful if the paper is comparing three or more articles and you want to provide a brief overview of each before you begin the comparison.

Once you have selected an organizational pattern for your paper, you may find it helpful to make a rough outline of what will be included where and then to ask a peer to review it to see if it makes sense.