



## Guidelines for Writing a Compare-Contrast (or Comparative) Essay

The comparison-contrast or comparative essay is one of the most common types of writing assignments. Professors often assign this type of paper to encourage you to make connections between texts, positions on an issue, events, subjects/topics, objects, or theories. In this type of essay, you will analyze the similarities and differences between two (or more) items as you identify the relationship between them and offer your explanation about what is most important about considering them together: what does such a comparison yield or reveal?

### *Basis for comparison or Frame of reference*

Sometimes you will be given the basis for comparison. The assignment might tell you what to compare and contrast, such as:

- o Compare and contrast the hero figure in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.
- o Compare and contrast Plato's and Aristotle's ideas about the truth.
- o Compare and contrast representations of oppression in two works each by Cindy Sherman and Kara Walker.

In other assignments, you might be asked to develop your own basis for comparison. In this case, you will need to figure out a theme, concern, theory, or device common to both works from which you can draw similarities and differences.

### *Discovering Similarities and Differences: Take Notes & Develop a List*

Before you can create a list of connections across the texts/items you are comparing, you need to take detailed notes on each. In your notes, highlight the points from the text that stand out to you. These might stand out because you do not understand them, find them off-putting or (conversely) very interesting, or seem connected to the themes/topics of your class. Be sure you identify the author's main argument or central point of the text. When you take notes, be sure to write down the page numbers where you find these points so you can come back to these places later for quotes in your essay.

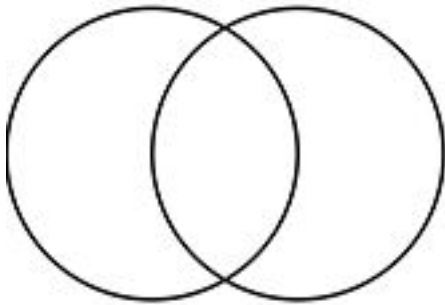
It may be difficult to decide what to focus on for your list of similarities and differences (which will become your points for analysis in the paper), so keep in mind these questions: Are there 'clues' about what to focus on in the assignment? What points from the texts are most relevant to the course? Which points would seem to prompt analysis (what seems most important)? Is a point made by the author both relevant (to the course perhaps) AND interesting or notable?

Once you have your main ideas about each text, you need to develop a list of similarities and differences between the items you are comparing. There are many ways to compile this list, but two of the most common are through the use of a Venn diagram or a chart (see below).

In the Venn diagram, list the most significant points from each item/text in the full circles, noting in the space of overlap the points that the texts have in common.



VENN DIAGRAM



In the chart, list each of the points or criteria you want to use for comparing the texts, leaving space to fill in (from your notes) the relevant content.

	TEXT "A"	TEXT "B"
<b>Point 1</b>		
<b>Point 2</b>		
<b>Point 3</b>		

*Thesis*

Once you have listed similarities and differences, decide whether the similarities or differences outweigh the other. A complex thesis for this type of assignment will include both similarities and differences between the texts, but might give more weight to one or the other. The thesis for this type of paper should not be a statement of simplistic comparison-contrast of the texts; avoid statements such as: "This paper will compare and contrast the myth versus reality theme in Text A and Text B." A stronger thesis might instead be more specific: "Although both A and B show [SHARED POINT], B argues BLANK while A claims BLANK." (Note: these 'samples' are intended to show the structure of thesis statements: content will be much more specific given your assignment.)

Your professor might also want you to dig deeper into the analysis of your comparison through a thesis that answers the 'so what' question: so what is interesting about this pairing of texts? So what that both texts engage similar topics, even if slightly differently? So what does this compare-contrast of texts reveal (about the topic or frame of reference perhaps)? So what conclusions do the authors make that are important to our understanding of the topic or frame of reference?

*Structure-Organization*

There are two main methods for organizing the ideas and paragraphs in your compare-contrast paper: the block method (subject-by-subject or text-by-text pattern) and the alternating method (point-by-point pattern).



In the **block method**, you arrange the paper by discussing all of the points you want to make about your first subject or text (in the first half of the paper) and then all of the points you want to make about your second subject or text (in the second half of the paper). So, you might have 3 paragraphs where you discuss Text A followed by 3 paragraphs where you discuss Text B. In this method, often there is one paragraph before the conclusion where you bring together the texts you've been discussing (this is the compare and contrast paragraph). Some professors may ask you to use this method when you are required to compare-contrast many texts or because the analysis of points of comparison or contrast are not as essential to the assignment.

Many professors are likely to prefer the **alternating method**, which will better enable you to highlight and analyze the similarities and differences between your selected texts. In this method, you organize your paper into paragraphs with the main points the texts have in common (the points you have noted in your diagram or list of similarities and differences). A paragraph 'map' of a paper organized in this method might look like this (a pattern you would continue throughout the essay):

Paragraph #1: Point 1 (topic claim)

Discussion-analysis of point 1 for Text A

Discussion-analysis of point 1 for Text B

How the two texts compare or are different on this point

This method often works best when you are comparing-contrasting fewer items or texts; otherwise, if you were comparing-contrast four texts, for example, the paragraphs would become too long and unwieldy.