



## COMPARATIVE ESSAY: STUDYSHEET



Many essay topics call for a comparison between two elements (e.g., two characters in a story, two different economic theories, two different philosophical theories or scientific explanations, two different historical actions or characters or policies, and so on). Such essays introduce special factors which you need to take into account in designing the structure of the argument.

### **General Observations on Comparative Arguments**

The key principles to remember in a comparative essay featuring two items are that you must, first, clarify for the reader precisely what you are comparing and, second, that you must keep the comparison alive throughout the essay. One of the commonest faults of a poor comparative essay is that the comparison becomes unbalanced, that is, the essay turns into an extensive discussion of one of the two items and gives a distinctly less important place to the other.

To clarify for the reader the precise nature of the comparison which the essay is exploring, you must in the introduction to a comparative essay specify exactly a very particular focus, so that the reader understands the limits of your comparative treatment of the subjects. For example, you cannot in a short essay or even in a longer research paper compare Marx's view of human nature with Freud's. That comparison is far too large. You must, therefore, narrow down the focus of the comparison considerably to compare one aspect common to both thinkers (e.g., by comparing Marx's view of the origins of evil with Freud's views of the same subject and by omitting everything else). The reader must understand what you are looking at and what you are not looking at in the comparison.

The thesis of a comparative essay will normally be a statement of a preference for one of the two things being compared or an interpretative assertion about the differences or similarities between the two. Thus, the argument will be an attempt to establish the validity of your interpretations of the two items.

### **Sample Openings to a Comparative Essay**

The following illustrations show how one can introduce an argument based upon a comparative evaluation. Notice that the introduction follows the customary format (subject, focus, thesis).

#### **Essay 1: A Comparison of the Theories of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud**

Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud are obviously two of the most influential thinkers of modern times. Both developed enormously important and comprehensive views of human nature and society, theories which have exerted a major and continuing influence on the way we think about ourselves and our fellow citizens. Of particular importance for us are the views of these two thinkers about the nature of evil in society. For their theories on the origin of human evil have shaped in large part the way we understand and therefore the methods we attempt to deal with the eternal problems of evil. And the differences between these two men's ideas have created continuing debates about how we should organize ourselves to mitigate human suffering. What does seem increasingly clear, however, is that, of the two great thinkers, Freud developed a much more subtle and enduring understanding of the origin of human evil; Marx's writings on the subject, though complex and still fascinating, now appear by comparison in many respects inadequate.

**Essay 2: A Comparison of Two Literary Characters**

In many ways Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Elisa in John Steinbeck's short story "The Chrysanthemums" face similar circumstances. Each woman lives with a husband who does not understand her intelligently, in confined circumstances with little prospect for significant change. And in the course of both stories, each woman comes to discover just how much she is being brutalized by men. However, the two women react very differently to the crisis which that recognition brings: Elisa collapses and retreats, and Nora abandons her family for a life on her own. By examining the characters of these two women and their reactions to the most important emotional crises in their lives, we can better understand the very human tensions created by married life and the enormous difficulties of finding a proper response to that situation.

Notice how in the first sample, the writer introduces the general comparison first (Marx and Freud), pointing out the basis for the similarity (two great thinkers with theories of human nature), then moves onto a very specific aspect of that general subject (the different views on the origin of evil), and finally establishes a thesis by declaring a preference.

In the second sample above, the writer again starts with a general point which establishes the similarity between the two fictional heroines. Then the introduction moves to the specific focus of the essay (their response to an emotional crisis in their lives), and then finally establishes a thesis in an interpretative assertion. This is not the statement of a preference but an argument about the significance of the two stories.

**The Structure of a Comparative Essay**

Once the comparison and the basis of the argument have been defined, then you need to organize, as before, the sequence of paragraphs in the main body of the argument. In setting up the sequence of the paragraphs, you have some options, as follows:

1. You can keep the comparison alive in every paragraph, so that the argument discusses each half of the comparison in each paragraph. For example, in comparing Elisa and Nora, you could begin with a paragraph comparing their two situations, follow that with one comparing how they each react to the realization of how men have treated them, and finish with a comparison of how each woman ends up as a result of the conflict. The advantage of this structure is that it keeps the comparison between the two subjects constantly before the reader, and forces you to pay equal attention to each side of the comparison.

2. A second method for organizing the sequence of paragraphs in the main body of a comparative essay is to alternate between the two subjects. In the first paragraph of the argument, for example, you can focus on Elisa's relationship with her husband, pointing out how that defines certain things about her and her life. Then in the second paragraph of the main body, you discuss Nora's relationship with her husband, pointing out how that defines certain things about her and her life. Then in the third and fourth paragraphs you repeat the process, looking at another point in the comparison. The method gives you the chance to discuss each point in greater detail, and it also keeps the comparison alive for the reader, provided you keep alternating and making sure that you continue to discuss the same aspect of each character's life.

3. The third way of dealing with comparative essays is to say in a series of paragraphs all you want to argue about one side of the comparison and then, when

you have said all you want to about that subject, switch to consider the other side of the comparison. Thus, the main body of the essay would tend to fall into two parts: in the first you consider the first element in the comparison, and in the second half you consider the second element in the comparison. The danger with this method (and it is a considerable and common problem) is that the comparison will become lop sided, that is, you will end up writing a great deal more about one of the two items than the other. The other real danger is that you will discuss both elements, but switch the criteria of the comparison in the second half, so that you discuss different features of the second item in the comparison from those you considered in the first. If this happens, then the comparison will fall apart, because you are not comparing the same features of the two things (like comparing, say, the body styling, the fuel economy, and the interior size of one car model with the engine capacity, the transmission, and the trunk space of another car model; such a comparison is difficult to follow because the writer does not compare the two models under a common feature).

Generally, in a short essay comparing two items it is better to follow the first or the second structural design for the comparison, rather than the third. If you are comparing three items, then you need to use the second or third principle, since dealing with three or four separate items in a single paragraph will make that paragraph too bulky.

Adapted from <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/arguments/argument7.htm>