



THE COMPARATIVE ESSAY STUDYSHEET (2)



PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

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

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 the following website:

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



PART II: COMPARISON vs. CONTRAST

When you **compare** things, you show their **similarities**; when you **contrast** things, you show their **differences**.

We can really understand only those things that are familiar to us or similar to things we already understand, so comparing and contrasting the unfamiliar with the familiar is one of the most important techniques for writing. You can, and probably do, use comparison and contrast to describe things, to define things, to analyze things, to make an argument -- to do, in fact, almost any kind of writing.

When they are comparing and contrasting, for example, two ideas, like corsets and footbinding, most writers structure their essays one of four ways.

1. [First compare, then contrast](#) (or vice versa).
2. [First do one idea, then do the other](#).
3. [Write only about the comparable and contrastable elements of each idea](#).
4. [Only compare or only contrast](#).

1. First compare, then contrast (or vice versa)

Writers using a comparison/contrast structure might begin by discussing the ways in which corsets are similar to footbinding, then they move to a description of the ways in which the two ideas are different. This method is probably the one used most commonly.

I.	Introduction
II.	Corsets and footbinding are similar
III.	Corsets and footbinding are different
IV.	Conclusion



A quick outline [comparing and then contrasting](#) corsets and footbinding shows one way that such a paper might be structured.

This structure focuses on the comparison and contrast instead of on the two ideas (e.g., corsetry and footbinding) being compared and contrasted.

Clearly, the sequence is important. If you begin with the comparison, then the contrast will get emphasis - the logical movement is from thinking about similarities to thinking about differences. If you begin by contrasting the ideas (and then move toward a comparison), the similarities get emphasis.

2. First do one idea, then do the other

Writers might compare and contrast ideas by treating one idea thoroughly before taking up the second one. This method is probably the one most students try first, but many evolve past it into something more flexible.

Introduction
Similarities (or differences)
Differences (or similarities)
Conclusion

A quick outline that treats [first corsets and then footbinding](#) shows one way that such a paper might be structured.

A structure like this one seems more focused on the ideas being compared and contrasted than on the comparison and contrast itself. The similarities and differences between the ideas do not begin to emerge until the writer gets to the second idea. It is as if the writer is comparing and contrasting (for example) footbinding to corsetry, instead of corsetry and footbinding to each other.

3. Write only about the comparable and contrastable elements of each idea

Writers might compare and contrast ideas by taking important specific elements and looking at their similarities and differences. This method requires real control over your subject.



Introduction
Element #1
Element #2
Element #3
...
Conclusion

A quick outline that [compares and contrasts only relevant aspects](#) of corsets and footbinding shows one way that such a paper might be structured.

A comparison/contrast essay like this one would probably focus only on those elements of the ideas that are explicitly comparable or contrasting.

4. Only compare or only contrast

It is always possible, of course, to write an essay that treats only the similarities or differences between ideas.

- Writers who **only compare** two ideas sometimes briefly mention the contrast in the introduction and then move on so that they don't lead readers to think they can't make relevant distinctions.
- Writers who **only contrast** ideas sometimes briefly summarize similarities in the conclusion so they don't leave the impression that they are thinking in opposites.

Comparison / contrast is useful for more than an essay topic

Many teachers assign topics that ask writers to write an essay comparing and contrasting two or more ideas, but besides its value in organizing an essay, comparison/contrast is also useful as a technique

- to structure a paragraph
- to work within [other techniques or modes](#)
 - to define a complex idea (by comparing to something similar and contrasting it with its opposite)



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- to think about one thing in terms of another (like the present in terms of the past or the past in terms of the future or humans in terms of primates)
- to make an argument, first describing what people shouldn't do and then ending - with a bang! - with what they should.

Adapted from: <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/comparcontrast.html>



PART III: CONTRAST ESSAY SAMPLE

Contrast of the Modern American and British House

Modern American and British houses may appear similar from the outside, just as an American may appear similar to an Englishman. One cannot judge a house by its façade, however, and beneath the surface, two altogether different design paradigms exist. The American house is a sprawling retreat that is designed for comfortable living. Compact and efficient, the British house embodies a conservative lifestyle. The two also differ in the amenities they offer. The modern American house overflows with built-in features; the modern British house is sparse in comparison. They are even constructed with dissimilar materials and techniques. Although modern American and British houses can appear similar, they differ significantly in the amenities they offer, their size, and in the way they are constructed.

The modern British house typically has fewer amenities than that of its American counterpart. In the bedroom, walk-in closets organize the American's ensemble and accommodate his shoe collection. Conversely, the Englishman uses a pine wardrobe, possibly a family heirloom, which moves with him from home to home. In the American bathroom, a shower is a standard feature that is quite uncommon in the British home. When one is installed, the British shower is a point of significant difference as well. The pressurized American shower is powerful, and leaves one with a feeling of invigoration. The gravity fed British shower, however, is hardly capable of developing enough power to leave one with a feeling of satisfaction. In the modern American kitchen, one is certain to find a dishwasher. In the British kitchen, a dishwasher is the exception, not the rule. Americans also consider most kitchen appliances to be a part of the house. The Englishman holds a different view. It is not unusual for him to take the stove, refrigerator, or even the kitchen cupboards when moving to a new home. The modern British house lacks many amenities that Americans consider basic. It also offers less living space than the modern American house.

The grand American house is designed for comfort, whereas the conservative British house is designed for efficiency. These contrasting design approaches yield houses that differ immensely in the amount of living space they offer. American houses have "mud" rooms, laundry rooms, dining rooms, formal living rooms, and family rooms. British houses converge and integrate these functional areas into their common rooms. The hall, or the "reception," is the "mud



room." The kitchen is the laundry room and the dining area. The formal living room and family room combine in the appropriately named "lounge." The average bedroom of an American home can usually accommodate a king-sized bed. In comparison, a British bedroom can be termed a "double bedroom" if a double bed can be squeezed in, even if there is no room to move around it. The American living room is sometimes referred to as the "great room" and, on average, consumes over 300 square feet. A large British "lounge," in comparison, can measure a mere 150 square feet. Additionally, the American garage usually has enough room for two cars and space for a workbench. Before entering the typical single car British garage, however, it is necessary to let the passengers out first. When compared to its British counterpart, the American home is larger, and behind the façade it is also constructed differently.

Although British and American houses can appear similar, beneath the outer shell they are constructed with dissimilar techniques and materials. Lumber, siding, and drywall comprise the bulk of American home construction materials, while British home construction requires cinder block, brick, and plaster. The modern American house is commonly framed with wood and nails, while the British house is structured with cinder block and mortar. Although usually covered with siding, some American homes do have a brick veneer exterior. Alternately, the brick façade of a British house is probably solid. Inside the home, American carpenters quickly cover interior walls with drywall. The patient English tradesman gradually forms the interior walls with successive layers of plaster. American and English roofing materials differ as well. The roof of the American home is typically weatherproofed with shingles, while kiln-fired terra-cotta tiles shelter the British roof.

American and British houses can be similar in appearance, but a comparison of the two will reveal notable differences. Although material availability and differing economies certainly affect house design, it is the culture itself that has the greatest impact. America is said to be one of the most demanding countries in the world, and this notion is reinforced in their expansive, amenity rich homes. The English are regarded as conservative and polite; their homes are compact and efficient. Modern American and British house construction is a direct reflection of the people who design them. Although they may look similar, they are nothing alike when you get to know them.

<http://www.basementpapers.com/newsite/ReportEssay/MusicArt/Architecture/American And British Houses.htm>



PART IV: COMPARISON/CONTRAST PARAGRAPHS

In a compare and contrast paragraph, you write about the similarities and differences between two or more people, places, things, or ideas.

Example: Write a paragraph comparing the weather in Vancouver and Halifax.

The following words can help you to write a good comparison/contrast paragraph:

Similarities

is similar to

Example: Spring weather in Vancouver **is similar to** spring weather in Halifax.

both

Example: **Both** Vancouver and Halifax have rain in the spring.

also

Example: Halifax **also** has a rainy spring season.

too

Example: Halifax has a rainy spring season, **too**.

as well

Example: **As well,** Halifax has rainy spring season.



Differences

on the other hand

Example: **On the other hand**, winter is much colder in Halifax.

however

Example: **However**, winter is much colder in Halifax.

but

Example: Vancouver has a mild winter, **but** Halifax has a cold one.

in contrast to

Example: **In contrast to** vancouver, Halifax has a cold winter.

differs from

Example: Halifax **differs from** Vancouver by having a cold winter.

while

Example: **While** Vancouver has a mild winter, Halifax has a cold winter.

http://wwW2.actden.com/Writ_Den/Tips/paragrap/compare.htm#table



PART V: ORGANIZING COMPARISON/CONTRAST PARAGRAPHS (COMPARING 2 SUBJECTS IN 2 PARAGRAPHS)

I. Block Format

When using the block format for a two-paragraph comparison, discuss one subject in the first paragraph and the other, in the second.

Paragraph 1: Opening sentence names the two subjects and states that they are very similar, very different or have many important (or interesting) similarities and differences.

The remainder of the paragraph describes features of the first subject without referring to the second subject.

Paragraph 2: Opening sentence *must* contain a transition showing you are comparing the second subject to the first. (e.g. "Unlike (or similar to) [subject #1], [subject #2]...")

Discuss all the features of subject #2 in relation to subject #1 using compare/contrast cue words such as *like, similar to, also, unlike, on the other hand* for each comparison.

End with a personal statement, a prediction, or another snappy clincher.

II. Separating Similarities and Differences

When using this format, discuss only the similarities in the first paragraph and only the differences in the next. This format requires careful use of many compare/contrast cue words and is therefore more difficult to write well.

Paragraph 1: Opening sentence names the two subjects and states that they are very similar, very different or have many important (or interesting) similarities and differences.



Continue discussing similarities only using compare/contrast cue words such as *like*, *similar to*, and *also* for each comparison.

Paragraph 2: Opening sentence **MUST** contain a transition showing you are switching to differences (e.g. Despite all these similarities, [these two subjects] differ in significant ways.)

Then describe all the differences, using compare/contrast cue words such as *differs*, *unlike*, and *on the other hand* for each comparison.

End with a personal statement, a prediction, or another snappy clincher.



PART VI: ORGANIZING COMPARE CONTRAST ESSAYS

(COMPARING 2 SUBJECTS IN AN ESSAY)

I. Block Format

Introduction

Begin with a sentence that will catch the reader's interest. This might be a question, a reason people find the topic interesting or important, or something the two subjects have in common. Then name the two subjects and say they are very similar, very different or have many important (or interesting) similarities and differences.

Paragraphs 2 - ?

- The next paragraph(s) describe features of the first subject.
- Be sure to include examples proving the similarities and/or differences exist.
- Do not mention the second subject.
- If necessary, make new paragraphs to avoid very long paragraphs.

Paragraphs ? - ?

- The next section *must* begin with a transition showing you are comparing the second subject to the first.
- For each comparison, use compare/contrast cue words such as */ike, similar to, a/so, un/ike, on the other hand*.
- Be sure to include examples proving the similarities and/or differences exist.
- Make new paragraphs to avoid very long paragraphs.

Conclusion

In the final paragraph, give a brief, general summary of the most important similarities and differences. End with a personal statement, a prediction, or another snappy clincher.

<http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/rubric/ccstruc1.htm>



II. Feature by Feature (or Point by Point) Format

Introduction

- Begin with a sentence that will catch the reader's interest. This might be a reason people find the topic interesting or important, or it might be a statement about something the two subjects have in common. Review opening sentences in your English text for additional ideas.
- Then name the two subjects and say that they are very similar, very different or have many important (or interesting) similarities and differences.

Paragraph 2

- Transitions beginning each paragraph are made by repeating ideas, phrases or words. Without transitions, the essay will sound choppy and disjointed.
- Discuss how both subjects compare on feature one.
- For each comparison, use compare/contrast cue words such as *like, similar to, also, unlike, on the other hand*.
- Be sure to include examples proving the similarities and/or differences exist.

Paragraphs 3 - ?

- Transitions beginning each paragraph are made by repeating ideas, phrases or words. Without transitions, the essay will sound choppy and disjointed.
- Continue the pattern set in paragraph 2 discussing a new feature in each new paragraph.
- For each comparison, use compare/contrast cue words such as *like, similar to, also, unlike, on the other hand*.
- Be sure to include examples proving the similarities and/or differences exist.

Conclusion

- In this paragraph, give a brief, general summary of the most important similarities and differences.
- End with a personal statement, a prediction, or another snappy clincher.



PART VII: ANALYZING PARAGRAPHS OF CONTRAST

1. Read each paragraph below and answer the questions that follow them.

Paragraph A

City life is easier than suburban life in every way. City dwellers can usually walk to the stores and to the movies. If they have to go beyond walking distance to work, they can take public transportation, such as buses or even taxis. People in the city usually don't have to spend a lot of time taking care of large lawns, because they don't have them. On the other hand, suburbanites almost have to have a car, because they cannot walk to schools, shopping centers, or theaters. Those who live in the suburbs often spend a lot of time mowing and watering grass and otherwise taking care of their lawns.

1. Write the first three words of the topic sentence.
2. What words in the topic sentence are a signal that the paragraph is going to be one of contrast?
3. What other signal of contrast is used in this paragraph?
4. What two points of difference are discussed?
5. Does the paragraph follow the plan of a) telling about one subject and then the other or b) contrasting point by point?

Paragraph B

Many modern English words have come down either from Old English or from Latin, and they are so different that a person can usually guess which words are derived from which language. Words from Old English tend to be short, often of only one syllable, while words from Latin generally have several syllables. For example, *rise* is from Old English but *ascend* from Latin; *fire* from Old English but *conflagration* from Latin. Also, our most important words, such as *man*, *wife*, and *child*, come from Old English. On the other hand, many words we do not use every day, such as *lunatic*, *spacious*, and *lucrative*, come from Latin.

1. What two subjects are compared in this paragraph?
2. Write the first three words of the topic sentence.
3. What two points of difference are used in the contrast?
4. Does the paragraph follow the plan of (a) telling about one subject and then the other or (b) contrasting point by point?
5. Write three words or phrases that are used to indicate contrast in this paragraph.