Comparing and Contrasting

WHAT THIS HANDOUT IS ABOUT

This handout will help you first to determine whether a particular assignment is asking for comparison/contrast and then to generate a list of similarities and differences, decide which similarities and differences to focus on, and organize your paper so that it will be clear and effective. It will also explain how you can (and why you should) develop a thesis that goes beyond "Thing A and Thing B are similar in many ways but different in others."

INTRODUCTION

In your career as a student, you'll encounter many different kinds of writing assignments, each with its own requirements. One of the most common is the comparison/contrast essay, in which you focus on the ways in which certain things or ideas—usually two of them—are similar to (this is the comparison) and/or different from (this is the contrast) one another. By assigning such essays, your instructors are encouraging you to make connections between texts or ideas, engage in critical thinking, and go beyond mere description or summary to generate interesting analysis: when you reflect on similarities and differences, you gain a deeper understanding of the items you are comparing, their relationship to each other, and what is most important about them.

RECOGNIZING COMPARISON/CONTRAST IN ASSIGNMENTS

Some assignments use words—like compare, contrast, similarities, and differences—that make it easy for you to see that they are asking you to compare and/or contrast. Here are a few hypothetical examples:

- Compare and contrast Frye's and Bartky's accounts of oppression.
- Compare WWI to WWII, identifying similarities in the causes, development, and outcomes of the wars.
- Contrast Wordsworth and Coleridge; what are the major differences in their poetry?

Notice that some topics ask only for comparison, others only for contrast, and others for both.

But it's not always so easy to tell whether an assignment is asking you to include comparison/contrast. And in some cases, comparison/contrast is only part of the essay—you begin by comparing and/or contrasting two or more things and then use what you've learned to construct an argument or evaluation. Consider these examples, noticing the language that is used to ask for the comparison/contrast and whether the comparison/contrast is only one part of a larger assignment:

- Choose a particular idea or theme, such as romantic love, death, or nature, and consider how it is treated in two Romantic poems.
- How do the different authors we have studied so far define and describe oppression?
- Compare Frye's and Bartky's accounts of oppression. What does each imply about women's collusion in their own oppression? Which is more accurate?
- In the texts we've studied, soldiers who served in different wars offer differing accounts of their experiences and feelings both during and after the fighting. What commonalities are there in these accounts? What factors do you think are responsible for their differences?

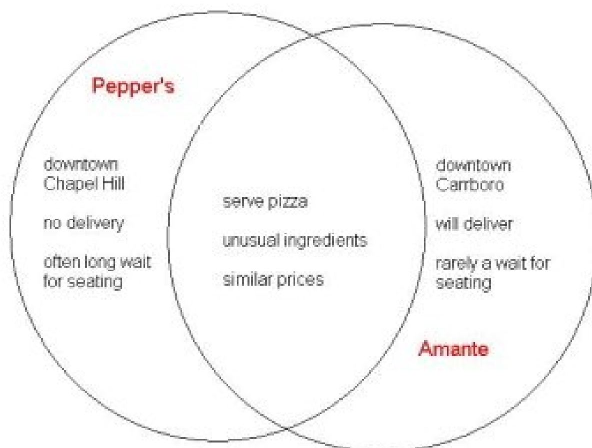
You may want to check out our handout on Understanding Assignments for additional tips.

USING COMPARISON/CONTRAST FOR ALL KINDS OF WRITING PROJECTS

Sometimes you may want to use comparison/contrast techniques in your own pre-writing work to get ideas that you can later use for an argument, even if comparison/contrast isn't an official requirement for the paper you're writing. For example, if you wanted to argue that Frye's account of oppression is better than both de Beauvoir's and Bartky's, comparing and contrasting the main arguments of those three authors might help you construct your evaluation—even though the topic may not have asked for comparison/contrast and the lists of similarities and differences you generate may not appear anywhere in the final draft of your paper.

DISCOVERING SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Making a Venn diagram or a chart can help you quickly and efficiently compare and contrast two or more things or ideas. To make a Venn diagram, simply draw some overlapping circles, one circle for each item you're considering. In the central area where they overlap, list the traits the two items have in common. Assign each one of the areas that doesn't overlap; in those areas, you can list the traits that make the things different. Here's a very simple example, using two pizza places:



To make a chart, figure out what criteria you want to focus on in comparing the items. Along the left side of the page, list each of the criteria. Across the top, list the names of the items. You should then have a box per item for each criterion; you can fill the boxes in and then survey what you've discovered. Here's an example, this time using three pizza places:

	Pepper's	Amante	Papa John's
Location			
Price			
Delivery			
Ingredients			
Service			
Seating/eating in			
Coupons			

As you generate points of comparison, consider the purpose and content of the assignment and the focus of the class. What do you think the professor wants you to learn by doing this comparison/contrast? How does it fit with what you have been studying so far and with the other assignments in the course? Are there any clues about what to focus on in the assignment itself?

Here are some general questions about different types of things you might have to compare. These are by no means complete or definitive lists; they're just here to give you some ideas—you can generate your own questions for these and other types of comparison. You may want to begin by using the questions reporters traditionally ask: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? If you're talking about objects, you might also consider general properties like size, shape, color, sound, weight, taste, texture, smell, number, duration, and location.

Two historical periods or events

- When did they occur—do you know the date(s) and duration? What happened or changed during each? Why are they significant? What kinds of work did people do? What kinds of relationships did they have? What did they value? What kinds of governments were there? Who were important people involved? What caused events in these periods, and what consequences did they have later on?

Two ideas or theories

- What are they about? Did they originate at some particular time? Who created them? Who uses or defends them? What is the central focus, claim, or goal of each? What conclusions do they offer? How are they applied to situations/people/things/etc.? Which seems more plausible to you, and why? How broad is their scope? What kind of evidence is usually offered for them?

Two pieces of writing or art

- What are their titles? What do they describe or depict? What is their tone or mood? What is their form? Who created them? When were they created? Why do you think they were created as they were? What themes do they address? Do you think one is of higher quality or greater merit than the other(s)—and if so, why? For writing: what plot, characterization, setting, theme, tone, and type of narration are used?

Two people

- Where are they from? How old are they? What is the gender, race, class, etc. of each? What, if anything, are they known for? Do they have any relationship to each other? What are they like? What did/do they do? What do they believe? Why are they interesting? What stands out most about each of them?

DECIDING WHAT TO FOCUS ON

By now you have probably generated a huge list of similarities and differences—congratulations! Next you must decide which of them are interesting, important, and relevant enough to be included in your paper. Ask yourself these questions:

- What's relevant to the assignment?
- What's relevant to the course?
- What's interesting and informative?
- What matters to the argument you are going to make?
- What's basic or central (and needs to be mentioned even if obvious)?
- Overall, what's more important—the similarities or the differences?

Suppose that you are writing a paper comparing two novels. For most literature classes, the fact that they both use Calson type (a kind of typeface, like the fonts you may use in your writing) is not going to be relevant, nor is the fact that one of them has a few illustrations and the other has none; literature classes are more likely to focus on subjects like characterization, plot, setting, the writer's style and intentions, language, central themes, and so forth. However, if you were writing a paper for a class on typesetting or on how illustrations are used to enhance novels, the typeface and presence or absence of illustrations might be absolutely critical to include in your final paper.

Sometimes a particular point of comparison or contrast might be relevant but not terribly revealing or interesting. For example, if you are writing a paper about Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," pointing out that they both have nature as a central theme is relevant (comparisons of poetry often talk about themes) but not terribly interesting; your class has probably already had many discussions about the Romantic poets' fondness for nature. Talking about the different ways nature is depicted or the different aspects of nature that are emphasized might be more interesting and show a more sophisticated understanding of the poems.

YOUR THESIS

The thesis of your comparison/contrast paper is very important: it can help you create a focused argument and give your reader a road map so she/he doesn't get lost in the sea of points you are about to make. As in any paper, you will want to replace vague reports of your general topic (for example, "This paper will compare and contrast two pizza places," or "Pepper's and Amante are similar in some ways and different in others," or "Pepper's and Amante are similar in many ways, but they have one major difference") with something more detailed and specific. For example, you might say, "Pepper's and Amante have similar prices and ingredients, but their atmospheres and willingness to deliver set them apart."

Be careful, though—although this thesis is fairly specific and does propose a simple argument (that atmosphere and delivery make the two pizza places different), your instructor will often be looking for a bit more analysis. In this case, the obvious question is "So what? Why should anyone care that Pepper's and Amante are different in this way?" One might also wonder why the writer chose those two particular pizza places to compare—why not Papa

John's, Dominos, or Pizza Hut? Again, thinking about the context the class provides may help you answer such questions and make a stronger argument. Here's a revision of the thesis mentioned earlier:

- Pepper's and Amante both offer a greater variety of ingredients than other Chapel Hill/Carrboro pizza places (and than any of the national chains), but the funky, lively atmosphere at Pepper's makes it a better place to give visiting friends and family a taste of local culture.

You may find our handout Constructing Thesis Statements useful at this stage.

ORGANIZING YOUR PAPER

There are many different ways to organize a comparison/contrast essay. Here are two:

Subject-by-subject:

Begin by saying everything you have to say about the first subject you are discussing, then move on and make all the points you want to make about the second subject (and after that, the third, and so on, if you're comparing/contrasting more than two things). If the paper is short, you might be able to fit all of your points about each item into a single paragraph, but it's more likely that you'd have several paragraphs per item. Using our pizza place comparison/contrast as an example, after the introduction, you might have a paragraph about the ingredients available at Pepper's, a paragraph about its location, and a paragraph about its ambience. Then you'd have three similar paragraphs about Amante, followed by your conclusion.

The danger of this subject-by-subject organization is that your paper will simply be a list of points: a certain number of points (in my example, three) about one subject, then a certain number of points about another. This is usually not what college instructors are looking for in a paper—generally they want you to compare or contrast two or more things very directly, rather than just listing the traits the things have and leaving it up to the reader to reflect on how those traits are similar or different and why those similarities or differences matter. Thus, if you use the subject-by-subject form, you will probably want to have a very strong, analytical thesis and at least one body paragraph that ties all of your different points together.

A subject-by-subject structure can be a logical choice if you are writing what is sometimes called a "lens" comparison, in which you use one subject or item (which isn't really your main topic) to better understand another item (which is). For example, you might be asked to compare a poem you've already covered thoroughly in class with one you are reading on your own. It might make sense to give a brief summary of your main ideas about the first poem (this would be your first subject, the "lens"), and then spend most of your paper discussing how those points are similar to or different from your ideas about the second.

Point-by-point:

- Rather than addressing things one subject at a time, you may wish to talk about one point of comparison at a time. There are two main ways this might play out, depending on how much you have to say about each of the things you are comparing. If you have just a little, you might, in a single paragraph, discuss how a certain point of comparison/contrast relates to all the items you are discussing. For example, I might describe, in one paragraph, what the prices are like at both Pepper's and Amante; in the next paragraph, I might compare the ingredients available; in a third, I might contrast the atmospheres of the two restaurants.

If I had a bit more to say about the items I was comparing/contrasting, I might devote a whole paragraph to how

each point relates to each item. For example, I might have a whole paragraph about the clientele at Pepper's, followed by a whole paragraph about the clientele at Amante; then I would move on and do two more paragraphs discussing my next point of comparison/contrast—like the ingredients available at each restaurant.

There are no hard and fast rules about organizing a comparison/contrast paper, of course. Just be sure that your reader can easily tell what's going on! Be aware, too, of the placement of your different points. If you are writing a comparison/contrast in service of an argument, keep in mind that the last point you make is the one you are leaving your reader with. For example, if I am trying to argue that Amante is better than Pepper's, I should end with a contrast that leaves Amante sounding good, rather than with a point of comparison that I have to admit makes Pepper's look better. If you've decided that the differences between the items you're comparing/contrasting are most important, you'll want to end with the differences—and vice versa, if the similarities seem most important to you.

Our handout on Organization can help you write good topic sentences and transitions and make sure that you have a good overall structure in place for your paper.

CUE WORDS AND OTHER TIPS

To help your reader keep track of where you are in the comparison/contrast, you'll want to be sure that your transitions and topic sentences are especially strong. Your thesis should already have given the reader an idea of the points you'll be making and the organization you'll be using, but you can help her/him out with some extra cues. The following words may be helpful to you in signaling your intentions:

- like, similar to, also, unlike, similarly, in the same way, likewise, again, compared to, in contrast, in like manner, contrasted with, on the contrary, however, although, yet, even though, still, but, nevertheless, conversely, at the same time, regardless, despite, while, on the one hand … on the other hand.

For example, you might have a topic sentence like one of these:

- Compared to Pepper's, Amante is quiet.
- Like Amante, Pepper's offers fresh garlic as a topping.
- Despite their different locations (downtown Chapel Hill and downtown Carrboro), Pepper's and Amante are both fairly easy to get to.

SOME ADDITIONAL WEBSITES ABOUT COMPARISON/CONTRAST PAPERS

https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-write-comparative-analysis

http://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/compare.html

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License. You may reproduce it for non-commercial use if you use the entire handout (just click print) and attribute the source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

If you enjoy using our handouts, we appreciate contributions of acknowledgement.

Make a Gift