**The Compare & Contrast Essay**

**What is a comparative essay?**

A comparative essay asks that you compare at least two (possibly more) items. These items will differ depending on the assignment. You might be asked to compare:

• positions on an issue (e.g., viewpoints on assisted suicide)

• theories (e.g., capitalism and communism)

• figures (e.g., GDP in the United States and Britain)

• texts (e.g., Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Macbeth)

• events (e.g., the Great Depression and the global financial crisis of 2008–9)

Although the assignment may say “compare,” the assumption is that you will consider both the similarities and differences; in other words, you will compare and contrast.

1. **Make sure you know the basis for comparison**

The assignment sheet may say exactly what you need to compare, or it may ask you to come up with a basis for comparison yourself.

• Provided by the essay question: The essay question may ask that you consider the figure of the gentleman in Charles Dickens’s Great Expectationsand Anne Brontë’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.* The basis for comparison will be the ways in which the idea of the gentleman is portrayed and to what effect.

• Developed by you: The question may simply ask that you compare the two novels. If so, you will need to develop a basis for comparison, that is, a theme, concern, or device common to both works from which you can draw similarities and differences.

1. **Develop a list of similarities and differences**

Once you know your basis for comparison, think critically about the similarities and differences between the items you are comparing, and compile a list of them or make a chart.

For example, you might decide that in Great Expectations, women are presented as vindictive and destructive, whereas in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, being a true gentleman is not about luxury and self-indulgence but hard work and productivity.

The list you have generated is not yet your outline for the essay, but it should provide you with enough similarities and differences to construct an initial plan. You should create an outline to plan your essay.

1. **Develop a thesis based on the relative weight of similarities and differences**

Once you have listed similarities and differences, decide whether the similarities on the whole outweigh the differences or vice versa. Create a thesis statement that reflects their relative weights.

A more complex thesis will usually include both similarities and differences.

Examples of the two main cases:

1. Differences outweigh similarities:

*While Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye and Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby both use their narrators to express their discontented views on society, their respective use of structure and style differ greatly.*

2. Similarities outweigh differences:

*Although Salinger’s Holden Caulfield and Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway differ as narrators in their use of language and characterization, they both ultimately serve to highlight the flaws of the societies in which they live.*

**NOTE:** The thesis statement should contain:

* the names of the items to be compared
* what about the items is being compared
* the purpose of the comparison.
1. **Come up with a STRUCTURE for your essay**

**OPTION 1. Alternating method: Point-by-point pattern**

In the alternating method, you find related points common to your central subjects or texts, and alternate between them on the basis of these points. For example, a comparative essay on theme within two different works might compare and contrast the ways in which themes are developed in the texts through several elements, like characterization, symbolism, and structure, and alternate between these elements in the two texts.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Body Paragraph 1 | Issue/theme developed through point of comparison 1 *(ex: characterization)* | Text 1 |
| Body Paragraph 2 | Issue/theme developed through point of comparison 1 *(ex: characterization)* | ***Text 2*** |
| Body Paragraph 3 | Issue/theme developed through point of comparison 2 *(ex: symbolism)* | Text 1 |
| Body Paragraph 4 | Issue/theme developed through point of comparison 2 *(ex: symbolism)* | ***Text 2*** |
| Body Paragraph 5 | Issue/theme developed through point of comparison 3 *(ex: structure)* | Text 1 |
| Body Paragraph 6 | Issue/theme developed through point of comparison 3 *(ex: structure)* | ***Text 2*** |

**NOTE:** you can really hone in and frame the entire essay around one textual element – like characterization, for example – but this means you would need a few ideas about different elements of characterization and how they convey theme.

To use the alternating method, you just need to have something noteworthy to say about both A and B in each area. Finally, you may certainly include 2-6 pairs of alternating points: allow the subject matter to determine the number of points you choose to develop in the body of your essay.

**When do I use the alternating method?**

The alternating system generally does a better job of highlighting similarities and differences by juxtaposing your points about A and B. It also tends to produce a more tightly integrated and analytical paper. Consider the alternating method if you are able to identify clearly related points between A and B. Otherwise, if you attempt to impose the alternating method, you will probably find it counterproductive.

**OPTION 2. Block method: Subject-by-subject pattern**

In the block method, you discuss all of text 1, then all of text 2. For example, a comparative essay using the block method on theme in two texts would address text 1 and how theme is conveyed in that text in the first half of the essay and text 2 and how theme in the second half. If you choose the block method, however, do not simply append two disconnected essays to an introductory thesis. The second half of your essay should refer to the first half, and make clear points of comparison whenever comparisons are relevant (“Unlike A, B…” or “Like A, B…”).

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| Body Paragraphs 1-3 | Issue/theme developed through various point of comparison  | Text 1 |
| Body Paragraphs 4-6 | Issue/theme developed through various points of comparison | ***Text 2*** |

**When do I use the block method?**

The block method is particularly useful in the following cases:

• You are unable to find points about A and B that are closely related to each other.

• Your ideas about B build upon or extend your ideas about A.

• You are comparing three or more subjects as opposed to the traditional two.

**\*FOR BOTH OPTIONS, you need topic sentences that link to your argument, and examples with explanations and links to the thesis. You also need transition words to link ideas and to compare & contrast the texts so your writing flows.**

Adapted from a file prepared by Vikki Visvis and Jerry Plotnick, University College Writing Centre (www.writing.utoronto.ca)