Comparison and Contrast Essays- Hints and Tips etc.

Writing a comparison/contrast paper involves comparing and contrasting two subjects. A comparison shows how two things are alike. A contrast shows how two things are different.

***Choosing a Topic***

When you choose a topic, be sure not to choose two totally unrelated subjects.  You must start with subjects that have some basic similarities.  For instance, you could choose to compare/contrast two movies, two authors, two modes of transportation, or two sports figures, but you would not want to try to compare train travel and Babe Ruth!

***Brainstorming***

The first thing you want to do is brainstorm everything you know about each subject and then go back and look for connections that show similarities and differences, which might look something like this:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Autumn | Spring |
| cooler | warmer |
| leaves change | flowers bloom |
| brilliant colors | trees bloom |
| precedes winter | precedes summer |
| death | birth |

***Developing a Thesis***

The thesis statement will evolve from the brainstorming. Look at your list and ask yourself some questions.

"Is there something important, significant, or interesting in the similarities and differences on my list?   
"What have I discovered about autumn and spring?"

After looking at the list, a thesis statement might be:

Although there is exquisite beauty in the seasons of autumn and spring, there are also distinctions which allow each season to stand on its own.

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.

Comparison and Contrast Essays

A comparison and contrast essay may discuss only similarities, only differences, but more often than not, both comparison and contrast is used. The essay may be organised in one of two patterns. Either is acceptable, but mixing patterns is not. Review the two patterns below carefully, noting the differences in structure

that each presents.

►Pattern A: The Block Method. Present all the information about A, and then present parallel information about B. This pattern tends to work better for shorter papers, and those with few subtopics It can be used when you have

three or more principal similarities or differences.

First: All of A: Second: All of B:

point 1 (plus support) point 1 (plus support)

point 2 (plus support) point 2 (plus support)

point 3 (plus support) point 3 (plus support)

The danger built into Pattern A is that the writer can end up with two separate essays instead of one unified comparison and contrast essay. To insure unity, take note of the following guidelines:

- Each subtopic in Part I must also be discussed in Part II.

- Subtopics should be discussed in the same order in both parts.

- Subtopics in Part II should generally include reminders of the point made

about the same subtopic in Part I.

►Pattern B: The Point-by-Point Method. Present one point about A, and then go to the parallel point about B. Move to the next point, and do the same thing. This pattern tends to work better for long papers and those with many subtopics.

Use this pattern when you have only two principal similarities or differences.

First A: point 1 (plus support)

Then B: point 1 (plus support)

Then A: point 2 (plus support)

Then B: point 2 (plus support)

Then A: point 3 (plus support)

Then B: point 3 (plus support)

►Guidelines for a Successful Comparison-Contrast Essay:

- Choose items that are related in some way so they can be compared or contrasted.

- Compare according to a single organized idea.

- Choose a method of development that works well with your organizing idea.

- Use specific and relevant examples for support.

- Give equal treatment to both elements that you are discussing

- Use transitional words or phrases to help the reader understand the similarities and differences in your subject.

- Conclude your paper by restating your thesis, summarizing the main points, and give the reader the final ‘so what’ of the major similarities and/or differences that you discussed.

►Outlines of Sample Essays:

Thesis: Although dogs are often called man’s best friend, cats make more convenient pets.

Block Method Outline:

Part A Point 1: Cats can clean themselves.

Point 2: Cats can exercise by themselves.

Point 3: Cats do not require training.

Part B Point 1: In contrast to cats, dogs need baths.

Point 2: Unlike cats, dogs must be walked regularly.

Point 3: Whereas cats need no training, dogs must be trained.

Point-by-Point Method Outline:

Point 1: Para. 1: Cats can clean themselves.

Para. 2: In contrast to cats, dogs need baths.

Point 2: Para. 3 Cats can exercise by themselves.

Para. 4 Unlike cats, dogs must be walked regularly.

Point 3: Para. 5 Cats do not require training.

Para. 6 Whereas cats need no training, dogs must be trained.

Note that the transitions used in each outline (in contrast to; unlike; whereas) emphasise the distinction being made between cats and dogs.

To write a compare/contrast essay, you’ll need to make NEW connections and/or express NEW differences between two things. The key word here…is NEW!

1. **Choose 2 things that could go in the same category, but are also quite different.** Good choices might be:
   * Basketball & Football (both sports)
   * Horses & Cats (both animals, but different in many ways)
   * Writing & Singing (both art forms, but different in many ways)
2. **Gather your ideas by writing down characteristics of each thing.** Note the differences and similarities between them.
3. **Ask yourself these important questions before you begin writing your draft:**
   * [Does my instructor want me to compare AND contrast, or am I only being asked to do one of those things?](http://www.roanestate.edu/owl/Com_Con.html#q1)
   * [Are these 2 things similar and/or different, in at least one **meaningful** way?](http://www.roanestate.edu/owl/Com_Con.html#q2)
   * [Do I know enough about my topic to write an effective compare/contrast essay about it?](http://www.roanestate.edu/owl/Com_Con.html#q3)

**Sample thesis statement for contrast paper:** In terms of social networking sites, Facebook focuses on presenting your daily life to others, whereas MySpace allows you to focus more on demonstrating your personal style.

**Sample thesis statement for compare/contrast paper:** While both Facebook and MySpace allow you to meet other users who have similar interests, only MySpace allows you to demonstrate your personal style.

**Are these 2 things similar and/or different, in at least one meaningful way?**

If you want to write a successful compare/contrast essay, you'll need to avoid writing about really obvious differences and similarities. For example:

* We all know that horses are larger than cats.
* We also know that basketball teams contain less players than football teams.

**Tell us something we don't know (or might not notice)!**

It would be better to write about how sensitive both horses and cats are to human needs and emotions. You could also suggest that though both basketball and football require a lot of teamwork, basketball players are expected to be a lot more versatile than football players.

You don't have to be a genius to write an interesting compare/contrast essay--you just have to look at ordinary things in a new way!

**Do I know enough about my topic to write an effective compare/contrast essay?**

Unless you're being asked to do some research as part of your compare/contrast project, make sure that you choose 2 things that you feel comfortable discussing, at length.

Your instructor may ask for multiple similarities and differences--make sure you're prepared to write a well-developed, meaningful essay on a topic that you know well before you get started!

**Organizing Your Compare and Contrast Paper**

There are two primary ways to organize your compare and contrast paper.

**Chunking:** placing all of the information for each individual subject in one place (chunk), and then using similarities as transitions.

**Here’s a sample outline:**

1. Jane is distinct because…
2. Jane is similar to Alice in these ways
3. Alice is distinct because…

**Piecing:** giving pieces of the information for each individual subject in each paragraph—arranging the information by topic rather than by subject.

**Here’s a sample outline:**

1. Differences and Similarities in Jane and Alice’s appearances
2. Differences and Similarities in Jane and Alice’s backgrounds
3. Differences and Similarities in Jane and Alice’s interests

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Some writing topics will ask you to consider the relationship between two things, for example, your hometown (that is, the town where you were born or grew up) and your university town. Such topics may allow you to organize your essay either around the *similarities* between these two *subtopics* (for example, between your hometown and your university town) or around the *differences* between them. If you write about the similarities, the essay will be a **comparison** essay. On the other hand, if you want to write about the differences, your essay will be a **contrast** essay. This information will show you some ways in which you can structure sentences to write a comparison or contrast paragraph. We will first look at comparison paragraphs and then briefly look at contrast paragraphs.  ***Comparison Paragraphs Organized by Similar Points***  Consider the following paragraph:   |  | | --- | | My hometown and my college town have several things in common. First, both are small rural communities. For example, my hometown, Gridlock, has a population of only about 10,000 people. Similarly, my college town, Subnormal, consists of about 11,000 local residents. This population swells to 15,000 people when the college students are attending classes. A second way in which these two towns are similar is that they are both located in rural areas. Gridlock is surrounded by many acres of farmland which is devoted mainly to growing corn and soybeans. In the same way, Subnormal lies in the center of farmland which is used to raise hogs and cattle **. . . .** (continued below) |   The passage above is from a **comparison** paragraph. that is, a paragraph which discusses the similarities between two subtopics. Notice how the ideas in this paragraph are organized. As usual, the **topic sentence** is at the beginning of the paragraph. After that, the paragraph continues by discussing one point of similarity between the towns of Gridlock and Subnormal, namely, their small population. **Specific details** are given to support the statement that "both are small rural communities." Following this, the paragraph briefly discusses a second point of similarity between the two towns, that is, their geographic surroundings. Here, the paragraph also gives supporting details to illustrate their similarity, namely, that they are "both located in rural areas." As you can see, therefore, this comparison paragraph is structured (organized) according to the **points of similarity** between the two towns. This particular paragraph discusses only two points of similarity, but of course we can imagine a paragraph that gives three, four, or even more points of similarity. This paragraph, for example, might continue in this way:   |  | | --- | | (continuation of above paragraph). **. .** Thirdly, both of these towns are similar in that both contain college campuses. Gridlock, for example, is home to Neutron College, which is famous for its Agricultural Economics program as well as for its annual Corn-Watching Festival. Likewise, the town of Subnormal boasts the beautiful campus of Quark College, which is well known for its Agricultural Engineering department and also for its yearly Hog-Calling Contest. |   We can place the points of similarity and their supporting details in a table in order to see more clearly how this short paragraph is organized: **Comparison Paragraph -- Organized by Similar Points**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **TOPIC SENTENCE** | My **(a)** hometown and **(b)** college town are similar. | | **POINT #1** | *Both are small rural communities.* | | DETAIL (a) | * Gridlock has about 10,000 people. | | DETAIL (b) | * Subnormal has about 11,000 local residents. * It has about 4000 college students. | | **POINT #2** | *Both are located in rural areas.* | | DETAILS (a) | * Gridlock is surrounded by many acres of farmland. * This farmland is devoted to growing corn. * The land is also used to grow soybeans. | | DETAILS (b) | * Subnormal is in the center of land used for raising hogs. * This land is also used to raise cattle. | | **POINT #3** | *Both towns contain college campuses.* | | DETAILS (a) | * Gridlock is home to Neutron College. * This college is famous for its Agricultural Economics program. * It is also famous for its annual Corn-Watching Festival. | | DETAILS (b) | * Subnormal contains Quark College. * This campus is famous for its Agricultural Engineering department. * It is also famous for its yearly Hog-Calling Contest. |   **Comparison Paragraphs Organized by Subtopic**  Another way of organizing a comparison is not according to supporting details that are similar, but according to subtopic. (A subtopic is a main example, or main supporting idea, that illustrates the topic sentence of a paragraph. )That is, we can organize the paragraph by first discussing all the relevant points associated to one subtopic, then discussing those of the second subtopic. Look at the following example, based on the above paragraph:   |  | | --- | | My hometown and my college town have several things in common. First, my hometown, Gridlock, is a small town. It has a population of only about 10,000 people. Located in a rural area, Gridlock is surrounded by many acres of farmland which are devoted mainly to growing corn and soybeans. Gridlock also contains a college campus, Neutron College, which is famous for its Agricultural Economics program as well as for its annual Corn-Watching Festival. As for my college town, Subnormal, it too is small, having a population of about 11,000 local residents, which swells to 15,000 people when students from the nearby college are attending classes. Like Gridlock, Subnormal lies in the center of farmland which is used to raise hogs and cattle. Finally, Subnormal is similar to Gridlock in that it also boasts a beautiful college campus, called Quark College. This college is well known for its Agricultural Engineering department and also for its yearly Hog-Calling Contest. |   As you can see, after the topic sentence, this paragraph first discusses the relevant details about Gridlock and then presents the details about Subnormal. As with the paragraph above, we can illustrate this paragraph's structure in the following way:  **Comparison Paragraph -- Organized by Subtopic**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **TOPIC SENTENCE** | My hometown and college town are similar. | | **SUBTOPIC #1:** | **GRIDLOCK** | | **DETAILS ABOUT GRIDLOCK:** | * Gridlock is a small town.   + It has about 10,000 people. * Gridlock is in a rural area.   + It is surrounded by many acres of farmland.   + This farmland is devoted to growing corn.   + The land is also used to grow soybeans. * Gridlock is home to Neutron College.   + This college is famous for its Agricultural Economics program.   + It is also famous for its annual Corn-Watching Festival. | | **SUBTOPIC#2:** | **SUBNORMAL** | | **DETAILS ABOUT SUBNORMAL:**  **DETAILS ABOUT SUBNORMAL CONT.** | * Subnormal is a small town.   + Subnormal has about 4000 college students.   + It has about 11,000 local residents. * Subnormal is in a rural area.   + Subnormal is in the center of land used for raising hogs.   + This land is also used to raise cattle. * Subnormal contains Quark College.   + This campus is famous for its Agricultural Engineering department.   + It is also famous for its yearly Hog-Calling Contest. |   **Comparison Conjunctions**  In the above paragraphs you will see various conjunctions that contribute to paragraph coherence. We can look at the above paragraphs again to see how the conjunctions are used:   |  | | --- | | My hometown and my college town have several things in common. First, **both** are small rural communities. For example, my hometown, Gridlock, has a population of only about 10,000 people. **Similarly,** my college town, Subnormal, consists of about 11,000 local residents. This population swells to 15,000 people when the college students are attending classes. **A second way in which these two towns are similar** is that they are **both** located in rural areas. Gridlock is surrounded by many acres of farmland which is devoted mainly to growing corn and soybeans. **In the same way,** Subnormal lies in the center of farmland which is used to raise hogs and cattle. Thirdly, **these towns are similar in that** they contain college campuses. Gridlock, for example, is home to Neutron College, which is famous for its Agricultural Economics program as well as for its annual Corn-Watching Festival. **Likewise,** the town of Subnormal boasts the beautiful campus of Quark College, which is well known for its Agricultural Engineering department and also for its yearly Hog-Calling Contest. |   This paragraph, of course, is organized according to similarities.   Notice how the ORDER of the similarities is the same throughout the paragraph. That is, at each similar point, the paragraph first discusses Gridlock and then it discusses Subnormal. Keeping the same order throughout the paragraph prevents the reader from getting confused.   Also notice how the conjunctions (for example, *similarly,* and *...X are similar in that...*) are placed near each similar point.   Now examine the following paragraph, which is organized by subtopic:   |  | | --- | | My hometown and my college town are similar in several ways. First, my hometown, Gridlock, is a small town. It has a population of only about 10,000 people. Located in a rural area, Gridlock is surrounded by many acres of farmland which are devoted mainly to growing corn and soybeans. Gridlock also contains a college campus, Neutron College, which is famous for its Agricultural Economics program as well as for its annual Corn-Watching Festival. As for my college town, Subnormal, it **too** is small, having a population of about 11,000 local residents, which swells to 15,000 people when students from the nearby college are attending classes. **Like Gridlock,** Subnormal lies in the center of farmland which is used to raise hogs and cattle. Finally, Subnormal **is similar to Gridlock in that** it **also** boasts a beautiful college campus, called Quark College. This college is well known for its Agricultural Engineering department and also for its yearly Hog-Calling Contest. |   These are not the only ways to give coherence to a comparison paragraph. There are other conjunctions, too. Here is a list of comparison conjunctions you can use:   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Short Conjunctions | Longer Expressions | | Similarly,  Likewise,  ...the same...  ...the same as...  ...also...  ..., too.  both | In the same way,  X is similar to Y in that (they)...  X and Y are similar in that (they)...  Like X, Y [verb]...  In like manner,  One way in which X is similar to Y is (that)...  Another way in which X is similar to Y is (that)... |     **Contrast Paragraphs**  As mentioned above, a **contrast paragraph** discusses the differences between (at least) two things. You can organize contrast paragraphs in much the same way that you can organize comparison paragraphs. That is, you can organize them either according to points of similarity or according to subtopic. Here is an example of such a paragraph organized by subtopic. Notice the contrastive expressions in **bold** letters:   |  | | --- | | Even though Arizona and Rhode Island are both states of the U.S., they are strikingly **different in many ways.** For example, the physical size of each state **is different**. Arizona is large, having an area of 114,000 square miles, **whereas** Rhode Island is only about a tenth the size, having an area of only 1,214 square miles. **Another difference** is in the size of the population of each state. Arizona has about four million people living in it, **but** Rhode Island has less than one million. The two states **also differ in** the kinds of natural environments that each has. For example, Arizona is a very dry state, consisting of large desert areas that do not receive much rainfall every year. **However,** Rhode Island is located in a temperate zone and receives an average of 44 inches of rain per year. In addition, **while** Arizona is a landlocked state and thus has no seashore, Rhode Island lies on the Atlantic Ocean and does have a significant coastline. |   Here are some contrast conjunctions that you can use:   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Short Conjunctions | Subordinating Conjunctions | | However,  In contrast,  By contrast,  ..., but  ..., yet | On the other hand,  even though + [sentence]  although + [sentence]  whereas + [sentence]  unlike + [sentence]  while + [sentence]  nevertheless, | |

## Shades of Being Human by Ella Berven

**Student Sample: Comparison/Contrast, Alternating Pattern**

Alice Walker and Maya Angelou are two contemporary African-American writers. Although almost a generation apart in age, both women display a remarkable similarity in their lives. Each has written about her experiences growing up in the rural South, Ms. Walker through her essays and Ms. Angelou in her autobiographies. Though they share similar backgrounds, each has a unique style which gives to us, the readers, the gift of their exquisite humanity, with all of its frailties and strengths, joys and sorrows.

Tragedy struck both of these women at the age of eight. Ms. Walker lost her sight in one eye. Ms. Angelou was raped. Each described the incident as part of a larger work. Ms. Walker related her experience in the body of an essay published in her book, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Ms. Angelou told her story as a chapter in her autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Although both wrote about their traumatic experience, the way each depicted the incident was distinct and seemed to be told for very different purposes.

Alice Walker reports the facts to the reader with short sentences written in the present tense. She chooses words which elicit a forceful emotional response from her audience. For example, in telling how her brothers were given BB guns and she was not, Ms. Walker writes, "Because I am a girl, I do not get a gun. Instantly, I am relegated to the position of Indian." The word "relegated" causes the reader to be irate and indignant. Most people do not like being "relegated" to anything. Another illustration of Ms. Walker's use of dynamic words can be found in her description of the encounter with her parents following the accident. She speaks of being "confronted" by her parents. "Confronted" is a combative word. When people are confronted by others, they want to launch an attack. Her style and choice of words make the reader aware that she is alone and fearful. She is left to fight her battles by herself.

Maya Angelou narrates her account in a conversational tone. She uses the past tense which tells her audience "it's over" for her. Her words are free from severity. They encourage the reader to see hope in the midst of sadness. Instead of trying to elicit a particular emotional response, Angelou invites her audience to share in her thoughts and feelings. For instance, having given an account of the rape, she writes, "I thought I had died--I woke up in a white-walled world, and it had to be heaven." The reader feels a connection with her pain, yet realizes redemption lies close at hand. Whereas Walker tells how she was confronted by her parents, Angelou explains,"she [mother] picked me up in her arms and the terror abated for a while." There is no impression of combativeness. There is only tenderness and care. Once again, she invites the reader in. Walker wants the reader to feel for her; Angelou wants her audience to feel with her. They achieve their objectives by directing the reader's attention to specific emotions.

The emotional focus of Alice Walker's story is rage, red-hot and isolating. As I read this piece, I became livid, not only at the thought of her devastating injury and her family's apparent disassociation, but also at Ms. Walker herself. It appeared to me that she never let go of it. Instead, she seemed to embrace her anger.

On the other hand, Ms. Angelou's anger is subtle and short-lived. Though I was incensed by what happened to her, she quietly insisted that I leave it behind. She concentrated less on her anger and more on the warmth and support of her family.

It would be impossible not to address the ways in which both women refer to the intense physical pain each of them suffered as little girls. Ms. Walker gives little description of her anguish, but I clearly felt it. When I read, ". . . I feel an incredible blow in my right eye . . ." and, "my eye stings, and I cover it with my hand," my immediate response was to quickly cover my eye with my hand. My body reacted to her pain.

Ms. Angelou's description produced another effect. She wrote, "Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart." Instead of a physical reaction, I felt a wrenching of the heart. Ms. Walker focused my attention on the injury to her body, while Ms. Angelou focused on her emotional scars.

My most powerful emotional response throughout both stories was one of incredible sorrow. I felt the tremendous weight that sadness and despair can fold around a heart, not only for a child's trauma, but also for the devastating repercussions that tragedy can produce--loss of dignity, self-esteem, and childhood itself. I wanted to comfort them both. However, by the end of Ms. Walker's account of the incident, I not only wanted to comfort her, I wanted to shield her as well. Her wounds were still open. At the end of her narrative, she wrote, "Now when I stare at people--a favorite pastime up to now--they will stare back. Not at the 'cute' little girl, but at her scar. For six years, I do not stare at anyone, because I do not raise my head." I wanted to intervene and help her.

Although in Ms. Angelou's story I yearned to comfort the child, it was obvious that the adult Maya Angelou did not need my protection. She ended her account with these words:

I would have liked to stay in the hospital the rest of my life. Mother brought flowers and candy. Grandmother came with fruit and my uncles clumped around and around my bed, snorting like wild horses. When they were able to sneak Bailey in, he read to me for hours.

Her family loved her all the way through her trauma, and she moved from despair to hope with their help.

Alice Walker and Maya Angelou are both extremely courageous writers. From each we receive a rare and poignant gift. As her book suggests, Alice Walker challenges us to search for resolution in the face of loneliness and despair. Maya Angelou, who "knows why the caged bird sings," reminds us that loneliness and despair never have the last word. She gently points us to a window of hope. Both women bless us with shades of being human.