

Essay and Paragraph Development Tutorial:

Tutorial #27:

Comparing and Contrasting

Writing Center

English 800 Lab

All notes and exercises can be done on separate sheets of paper, which you will bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.

As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Lab if you have any questions or difficulties.

Comparing and Contrasting

This tutorial will give you some guidelines and practice for organizing an essay by comparing—explaining the similarities between things—and/or contrasting—explaining the differences. Although you may not have received an essay assignment that specifically asks you to compare and/or contrast two or more things, you may find uses for the organizational patterns and idea-generating practices explained in this tutorial in a wide variety of writing tasks—describing different places, making decisions or recommendations, trying to argue a position or persuade an audience, and so on.

Consider the following examples:

- From an advice column:

Dear Annie,

Last week I had an experience that I guess many women would find thrilling. I received not one but *two* proposals of marriage, both from wonderful men, whom I will call Fred and Bob. I am flattered of course, but I am having a hard time choosing.

Fred has a good job as a butcher at the local Piggly Wiggly and is one of the most honest, sensitive men I have ever met. He always brings me flowers when he comes to visit me at work, and even though I know he steals them and I know where he gets them (I work at a cemetery), I am always touched. At the same time, I must admit that I am not physically attracted to Fred, who resembles a cross between a pitbull and a banana slug.

On the other hand, I am *very* attracted to Bob but worry about him in other ways. I just love to stare at the black dagger tattoos on his beefy biceps and the skull and crossbones nose ring he wears. When he gets out of jail, Bob promises that he will do whatever he can to make me happy, but I'm not sure he will give up his criminal ways.

Annie, which man should I marry?

- From an advertisement:

Do you want a fast track to a future of fancy cars, long paid vacations, and beautiful people, or would you rather sit around in some college thinking, writing, reading, and stuff like that for four more years? Both require hard work, but only one can guarantee you \$6 an hour! Call 1-800 SUC-KERS to learn about an exciting new business opportunity!!!

Both of these real world writing examples make use of a strategy that you yourself use all the time: they compare things by looking at how they are similar and contrast things by looking at how they are different. You may have done this very recently if you had to choose a place to live, a college major, or a new job. Making a major decision often requires thinking about different options, and thinking it through carefully often requires that you spend some time both **comparing** (looking at similarities) and **contrasting** (looking at differences).

While this tutorial will *not* give you a simple format for something called “the comparison contrast essay,” it will give you some practice with strategies that will help you generate ideas, organize your thoughts, and show transitions in your writing so that your readers will follow along. Using these strategies can help you with some of the difficulties that all writers face.

Getting Started

On the very first day of her first semester writing course in college, Geneva receives the following assignment as homework:

In a short (3-5 pages) essay, explain whether you believe your own school experiences so far have been mostly positive or negative. Try to use plenty of specific examples from your experiences to support a thesis that makes a point about education in general.

This is the kind of open-ended assignment that many students find intimidating. What does this teacher want? Why does she assign this on the first stinking day? And does she really think 3-5 pages is “short?”

After brainstorming for a while, Geneva realized that she had a unique experience, having attended both an open admissions public high school and an expensive, exclusive private high school. A good way to organize her essay might be to compare and contrast these two school systems in order to make a general point about private versus public education.

She begins generating ideas by writing out a list of all the major things she can remember from both schools:

PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL

small classes—15 students max

expensive

teachers strict

dress code: black and white only—uniforms

good, healthy food in cafeteria

some students snotty

PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

big classes—25-40 students in most

free

teachers not strict at all

wear (almost) anything—no gang colors or short skirts, otherwise OK

cafeteria food so bad we all go to McDonald’s

some students snotty

same religion for all students: Catholic

felt guilty not studying (waste my parents' \$!)

lots of cliques

homework and tests—tons

brand new textbooks

many different religions—Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, Buddhist, and so on—met lots of new people

didn't do much homework, didn't care

lots of cliques

homework and tests—tons

old textbooks

A list such as this one is a great place to start generating ideas for an essay that uses comparison and contrast. Geneva has some information that she can describe in her essay as she tries to make a general point about which experience was better for her. Notice that some of the information shows similarities (grounds for comparison) while some shows differences (grounds for contrast).

Throughout this tutorial, you will be developing a topic by using the same strategies Geneva uses to develop her comparison/contrast of public and private high school.

Exercise 1

Instructions: Choose *one* topic from the bulleted list below (or in the space provided write a topic you find more interesting).

NOTE: Try to pick a topic you think might be genuinely interesting, one that you really have something to say about. You're going to be stuck with it for most of the exercises in this tutorial!

- the person you are today and the person you would like to be in the future
- two different movies you have seen recently (two you liked equally or one you liked and one you did not)
- high school and college
- your own favorite type of music and another kind of music that you don't like
- your favorite school subject and your least favorite or two that you like or dislike equally
- an ideal job—the best one you can imagine for yourself—and your current job

- your first impression of someone or something and what you thought later on a second or third impression
- two sports teams or two athletes in the same sport
- a traditional practice valued by your family and your own different practice
- two different cultures you have lived in or know a lot about
- two different college majors you have considered or are considering
- two different purchases you have considered (for example, a small car versus an SUV)
- two different political or religious beliefs you find compelling
- your own topic: _____
and _____

Instructions: Once you have circled or written the topic you will work with, begin by creating a brainstorming list similar to Geneva’s in the example above. Fill in the blanks beside *item A* and *item B* with the two items in the topic you have chosen. Keep in mind that you should think of both similarities and differences between the two topics. Try to come up with *at least* ten points including both similarities and differences between the two items. You may do this on a separate sheet of paper or in the space below if you have printed this tutorial yourself.

ITEM A: _____

ITEM B: _____

Noticing Similarities and Differences

As Geneva was writing her list, she noticed both similarities and differences between the two schools. This is an important part of essays that ask you to *both* compare *and* contrast two things and is often useful even in writing that does not require both. Sometimes it helps to write out the similarities and differences together or to draw lines connecting your two columns.

Geneva creates new lists to see the similarities and differences:

Public and Private: Similarities

snotty students
cliques
lots of homework and tests

Public and Private: Differences

Private School: smaller classes
more strict teachers
dress code
good food
same religion for all students
I felt pressured to study
had up-to-date textbooks

Exercise 2

Instructions: On a separate sheet of paper or in the space below, organize your own lists from above by listing the similarities under one heading and the differences under another.

Similarities between your two items:

Differences between your two items:

Classifying by Creating Categories

Sometimes it is more helpful to create categories for the things you are comparing and contrasting rather than just listing how they are similar and different. Creating categories requires you to think of similarities between things that you may not have noticed as you listed them at first.

For example, consider the following random list of college courses that a group of students might take in the first two years:

- English Composition
- Business Math
- Second Year Astronomy
- Symbolic Logic
- Second Year Computer Programming
- Basic Chemistry
- African History
- Shakespeare
- Cultural Anthropology
- The Films Of Keanu Reeves
- First Year Arabic
- Psychology
- Philosophy
- Music Appreciation
- Art History

In order to explain their graduation requirements, colleges often categorize these courses in groups according to the different sets of skills they require and teach:

- Courses that require math and logic
 - Business Math
 - Symbolic Logic
 - Second Year Computer Programming
 - Second Year Astronomy

- Courses that require extensive reading and writing
 - English Composition
 - African History
 - Shakespeare
 - Cultural Anthropology
 - Philosophy
 - Art History

- Courses that build awareness and appreciation of the arts
 - Music Appreciation
 - Art History
 - African History
 - The Films of Keanu Reeves

But students often create their own categories organized around their own agendas: “courses I am dreading” might be a category, or “courses that sound interesting,” or “courses that will help in my career.” The categories you create to organize information often depend on what your goals are. And, as with the school courses above, your items may fall into more than one category.

Geneva might create categories for the information she has listed under “similarities” and “differences” that allow her to organize around concepts beyond just what the two schools have in common and how they are different. For example:

- Ways of controlling students
 - dress codes (private)
 - strict teachers (private)
 - lots of homework (both public and private)
- Ways I felt pressured and stressed
 - cliques and snotty students (both)
 - lots of homework (both)
 - parents spending a lot of \$ (private)
 - strict teachers (private)

The point of creating these broader categories is that they can allow you to see your data—the simple lists of information you have already produced—in new ways, allowing you to organize an essay that is more meaningful to you.

The categories can also help you begin thinking of possible *thesis statements* if you have not already. For example, Geneva might consider a thesis that points out that “For me and many other students, the atmosphere of the private school was both more controlling and more stressful.”

Exercise 3

Instructions: Using the lists of information you have already written out, try to create new categories of your own for organizing. Your categories may include some overlapping items (as Geneva’s example includes “strict teachers” in more than one category). Create at least three categories and list the relevant items under each heading.

Category One: _____

Category Two: _____

Category Three: _____

Organizing by Outlining

How you go about organizing your essay will depend on many different factors such as your intended audience (how much will your readers already know about the subject?) and your purpose in making the comparison. But the outlines included in this section are a good way to think about how your organization might make the information you are presenting clear to your readers for a variety of subjects.

The Parallel Method

When you use the parallel method, you simply present all of the information you have on your first topic and then do the same for your second.

- Introduction: Provides background information and presents a thesis statement about the topics being discussed
- Section on Topic A
 - one quality of topic A
 - second quality of topic A
 - third quality of topic A
 - (and so on, depending on the topic)

- Section on Topic B
 - one quality of topic B
 - second quality of topic B
 - third quality of topic B
 - (and so on, depending on the topic)
- Conclusion: Sums up the major issue or makes a recommendation based on the information provided

For Geneva's information, the outline might look like this:

- Introduction: Explains why people debate about public and private schools and presents my thesis that private schools created more stress for me and many other students
- Section on Public Schools
 - laid back teachers
 - didn't feel pressured to study
 - lots of homework and tests
 - students can dress however they want, almost
- Section on Private Schools
 - strict teachers
 - felt pressured to study
 - lots of homework and tests
 - uniforms only
- Conclusion: private schools created the kind of pressure that forced me to learn a little more but made me hate school more than ever

Notice that the items under each section are similarities or differences of the qualities being compared—laid back teachers versus strict teachers, for example. Also notice that these are *sections*, not paragraphs; Geneva's actual essay, like yours, may involve several paragraphs on her first topic before moving on to her second.

This may seem to be the easiest way to create an outline, but whether it will work for your final essay depends in part on how much information you are presenting. If you are discussing something fairly detailed and complex, you may write many paragraphs or even pages about topic A before moving on to topic B, by which time some of your less attentive readers may not remember the more subtle details of topic A.

Exercise 4

Instructions: Using your own information from the previous exercises, create a parallel outline like the models above. Include at least four items for each topic and make sure that the items under each topic are parallel (that is, the compare and contrast the same general information, as in the example above).

Introduction: write here what you will explain in the intro:

Topic A: _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Topic B: _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Conclusion: write here, briefly, how you will conclude:

The Point By Point Method

This method allows you to show similarities and differences between your topics one at a time, often by using categories such as those you created in exercise three.

- Introduction: Provides background information and presents a thesis statement about the topics being discussed
- One quality of both A and B
- A second quality of both A and B
- A third quality of both A and B
- A fourth quality of both A and B
- and so on, depending on the information
- Conclusion: Sums up the major issue or makes a recommendation based on the information provided

Using this method, Geneva's outline might become:

- Introduction: (as above) Explains why people debate about public and private schools and presents my thesis that private schools created more stress for me and many other students
- Uniforms versus open clothing policy
- homework and tests in both schools
- pressure to study--different in public and private schools
- cliques and snotty students in both schools
- Conclusion: (as above) private schools created the kind of pressure that forced me to learn a little more but made me hate school more than ever

Notice that the qualities listed in the point-by-point comparison can be similar or different---one section in Geneva's essay might compare the cliques in both schools while another section contrasts the different pressures to study.

Exercise 5

Instructions: Organize your information into a point-by-point outline. Try to include at least four points.

Introduction: _____

First quality of _____ and _____:

Second quality: _____

Third quality: _____

Fourth quality: _____

Conclusion: _____

The Similarities and Differences Method

This method allows you to focus first on all the qualities that your two issues have in common, then on the differences; of course you can also do this in reverse, focusing first on the differences and then the similarities. What order you choose may depend on what conclusion you want readers to remember. Are the differences more important than the similarities? If so, then you might put the differences second. If you are arguing that the similarities are more important, then putting the similarities after the differences might make the point more effectively.

- Introduction: As above
- Similar qualities of A and B
 - First similarity
 - Second similarity
 - Third Similarity
 - and so on
- Different qualities of A and B
 - First difference
 - Second Difference
 - Third difference
 - and so on
- Conclusion: as above

It does not matter if you have the same number of similarities and differences in each section; the point is to organize them clearly so that readers will find them in the same sections of your paper.

To use the example of Geneva's possible outline again, an outline focusing on similarities and differences might look like this:

- Introduction: as above
- Section on similarities between public and private school systems
 - cliques and snotty students in both
 - lots of homework and tests in both
- Section on differences between public and private
 - private requires dress code
 - less religious and cultural diversity in private school
 - teachers more loose and open ended in public school
- Conclusion: as above

Exercise 6

Instructions: Organize your information into an outline focusing on similarities and differences. Try to come up with at least four similarities and four differences.

Introduction: _____

Similarities between _____ and _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Differences between _____ and _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Conclusion: _____

Writing the Essay

A strong outline can provide you with guidelines that you should keep in mind when you are organizing your essay. You should not, however, feel the need to stick completely to your outline without making any changes. If you realize as you are writing that you have new ideas about similarities and differences between your subjects or that you want to change your thesis statement to explain a different main point, you should feel free to do so. It is always easier to make changes to an outline than to your final essay!

Transition Words and Phrases

If your essay is well organized, your readers will often see the connections between your ideas fairly easily. But it is often helpful to provide specific transitions between sections of your paper so that readers will be able to see when you are making a shift--moving from discussions of similarities to differences, for example, or discussing a new point.

Many specific words and phrases can help you show the logical relationships between your ideas. This tutorial will provide you with a few of the words that can help you show transitions and will give you some practice using them in sentences. If you need a refresher course in the rules for punctuation in sentences using these kinds of words, see the tutorial on *Coordination and Subordination*.

Words and phrases that show contrast (differences between two things)

- but
- yet
- on the other hand
- in contrast
- however
- although
- though
- while
- even though

Words and phrases that show comparison (similarities between two things)

- and
- both
- in addition
- like
- as
- at the same time

Exercise 7

Instructions: Using the previous list of words and phrases, create sentences for each pair of items below by joining those in column A to those in column B. As an example, number one has been completed for you.

Column A

1. circus clowns don't make much money
(show differences)

Solution: While circus clowns don't make much money, corporate executives are well paid.

2. computer programmers work long hours
(show similarities)

3. circus clowns work with people and animals
(show differences)

4. doctors have huge responsibilities
(show differences)

5. librarians have to be quiet
(show differences)

6. movie stars sign autographs
(show similarities)

7. secretaries wear comfortable shoes
(show differences)

8. nightclub bouncers have to be tough
(show differences)

9. clowns get laughed at
(show similarities)

10. clowns live in fabulous mansions
(show differences)

Column B

corporate executives are well paid

clowns work long hours

zookeepers work only with animals

circus clowns take long vacations

clowns have to be noisy

clowns sign autographs

clowns' shoes don't fit

clowns have to be funny

college professors get laughed at

anthropologists live in grass huts

Exercise 8

Instructions:

1. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
2. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay