

Compare/Contrast Essays

Compare/Contrast essays look at the similarities and/or differences between two things in order to bring to light something significant or make an argument about their relationship. Comparing or contrasting is a method of analysis. It's a means, not an end.

Developing a Compare/Contrast Thesis

As in other essays, a compare/contrast thesis should answer the questions *what?* *how?* and *why?*

- What things are you comparing?
- How are you comparing them?
- Why are you comparing them?

In addition, we want to avoid stating the obvious, which would make it harder to construct an argumentative, meaningful thesis. Try comparing dissimilar things or contrasting similar things in order to dig deeper into a relationship.

Organizing a Compare/Contrast Essay

There are two main methods for organizing a compare/contrast essay: the *point-by-point method* and the *block method*. Both have strengths and weaknesses, and depending on what type of paper you're writing and what style you're going for one might be better than the other.

Point-by-Point: Each body paragraph describes and analyzes *one point* of comparison. This means that each body paragraph will include both things you are comparing and contrasting in relation to one subtopic of your thesis.

- Strength: The comparison/contrast you're making is clear and built into the structure.
- Weakness: There's a tendency to focus more on the comparison (the means) than on the argument (the end).

Block: Each body paragraph focuses on one of the things (text, place, person, etc.) you're comparing. In one paragraph you will analyze all the aspects of one thing and the next will analyze all the aspects of the other. There is often an additional paragraph explicitly for relating the previous analysis paragraphs.

- Strength: The analysis of each part is clear and easy to tie back to the overall argument.
- Weakness: The aspect of comparison is undermined, which can weaken the analysis, and there is the danger of repetition.

Compare/Contrast Example

Thesis: Despite the fact that *Macbeth* is a tragedy and *Taming of the Shrew* is a comedy, the character arches of both Lady Macbeth and Kate represent the struggle women at the time had in maintaining autonomy and power.

- ➔ We are comparing Lady Macbeth and Kate (what) by looking at their character arches (how) in order to gain insight into the perception of women at the time (why).
- ➔ *Comparing* two *different* things avoids stating the obvious and makes the thesis more argumentative.

Organization: Here is a table showing two possible ways to organize the paper:

	Point by Point Method	Block Method
Introduction	Hook, brief background of the two plays, and thesis	
Body 1	Comparison between the initial beliefs and actions of Lady Macbeth and Kate related back to the thesis	Analysis of Lady Macbeth's character arch related back to the thesis
Body 2	Comparison of how both characters are perceived and changed throughout the play related to the thesis	Analysis of Kate's character arch related back to the thesis
Body 3	Comparison of the characters' change in beliefs and/or presentation by the end of the play related to the thesis	Explanation of how the two character arches are similar and what that means for the thesis
Conclusion	Summary of what the comparison shows and why it matters	

Tips

Prewrite: A good method for preparing a compare/contrast essay and developing a strong thesis is to make a matrix to visualize how your topics relate to each other.

	Beginning	Middle	End
Lady Macbeth			
Kate			

Re-organize: Sometimes the initial method we choose doesn't end up working. If that's the case, try reorganizing your ideas in a new document using a different method.