Compare and Contrast Essays:
Technique, Topic, and Style

Inquire: From Everyday Argument to Essay

Overview

When you want to go to a pizza restaurant for dinner, but another family member wants to go to a buffet, how do you decide? Maybe you flip a coin or maybe you take turns? Or maybe you debate which meal will be better. If you have a discussion or a heated argument, you are probably engaging in a compare and contrast argument. We verbally use these kinds of arguments all the time, but what do they look like in writing?

Big Question: What are the different types of comparison and how do those impact my essay’s structure?

Watch: Comparing and Contrasting

Cake or pie? Superman or Batman? Casual or dressy? We ask these kinds of either/or questions every day, and we spend a lot of time reasoning through the answer. Even though we may not invest a lot of thought in them, we spend a fair amount of time engaged in compare and contrast thinking.

When you debate with a friend about which superhero is the best, you are actively developing and reasoning through a compare and contrast argument. Each example you provide serves as a piece of evidence that is meant to support your point.

So, how do we go about transferring this common kind of argument into an essay for a class? That really depends on how much freedom your teacher offers. The place to begin is, as always, to choose a topic. If your teacher has given you a prompt, you have a head start. If not, you will begin by brainstorming a subject to write about.

Once you have your topic, you’ll need to do some work to determine the similarities and differences of your subjects. Two tools that can be helpful for finding such similarities and differences are venn-diagrams and charts.

Venn-diagrams can help you list out qualities of your subjects and categorize them depending on whether they are similarities or differences. Charting can help you take the content you generated in your venn-diagram and sort it into shared categories that can be used to help organize your paper.
After you’ve done a little brainstorming, you have a decision to make about the kind of comparison you’ll be doing. Will you do subject-by-subject comparison? Similarity-to-difference comparison? Or point-by-point comparison? You should choose whichever type of comparison makes the most sense for your subject. Your essay’s structure will change depending on the type of comparison you use, no matter which kind you select.

Giving some thought to your subjects, their similarities, their differences, and the method of structuring your paper can give you a great start to writing your essay.

What kinds of compare and contrast arguments have you developed in your everyday life? Would any make a good essay topic?

Read: Choosing a Compare and Contrast Topic

Overview

We compare and contrast in everyday life. You might offer two movie options to your friends; this will likely lead to a discussion around the pros and cons of each option. Once you settle on the movie, you might spend some time discussing potential dinner options, comparing and contrasting the offerings and merits of each restaurant. This is the same kind of reasoning that makes up a compare and contrast essay.

Choosing Your Topic

There are many types of essays you could write to compare and contrast two things. If your teacher has provided you with a prompt that guides you to a specific topic, then you have a starting point. If your teacher has not provided this, you have some more freedom of topic, but you do need to do more work to get started.

So, what can you write about? You can compare and contrast any of the following (and more):

People
- Consider the different strategies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. What are their similarities and differences?
- This works for living people as well; you could compare two political candidates or two candidates for a job.

Historical events
- You can compare major historical events like WWI and WWII, but you’ll want to narrow it down to something specific, such as “causes of WWI” or “outcomes of WWII.”
- You could also choose similar events and compare them, like Woodstock or Coachella.

Two works of entertainment
- You can compare several books, movies, or TV shows, but you will want to make sure that they have enough in common to make an interesting and worthwhile comparison.

Two services
- You could compare two streaming services like Netflix and Hulu, or you could compare the services offered at different local businesses.

Two ideas
- This is a concept that works best when you’re familiar with two competing ideas or theories in a field. Think about your experience as a student: which is better? Lecture? Or project-based-learning?
These represent only a few possible categories you could use to explore and identify subjects for your compare and contrast essay.

Venn Diagramming: Discovering Similarities & Differences

Once you have chosen a subject to compare, it is time to start generating similarities and differences. One of the best ways to go about doing this is by brainstorming. An excellent brainstorming strategy for discovering similarities and differences is the venn-diagram.

A venn-diagram is a diagram composed of two or more circles that overlap in the middle. This serves as a visual representation of the similarities and differences for the concepts represented by each circle. Any content listed in the overlapping section means that the content is a shared feature of all overlapping circles. Conversely, the content that is written outside the overlapping sections is unique to only that particular subject.

If you are choosing a restaurant, your venn-diagram might look something like this:

![Venn Diagram Example]

Venn-diagramming can offer you a way of organizing your thoughts about your subjects. You do not have to limit yourself to only two circles. Adding additional circles will only offer you different combinations of overlapping content between your subjects.

Charting: Discovering Similarities and Differences

Venn-diagramming can be a good place to start in discovering similarities and differences between your subjects, but charting is a good next step. Charting can help you sort those similarities and differences into different categories. A chart organizes a list of items into common categories.

Take a look at the items listed in the above venn-diagram. Are there any that can be placed in similar categories? A quick glance shows that we can lump most of the items together under the following categories: menu options, ambience, and pricing.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Menu Options</th>
<th>Ambience</th>
<th>Pricing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant #1</td>
<td>Vegan, pizza</td>
<td>Large seating, chic, live music</td>
<td>Happy hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant #2</td>
<td>Sushi, pizza, fancy cocktails</td>
<td>Relaxed vibe, live music</td>
<td>Inexpensive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After identifying a few ways to focus in on your topics, you’ll be ready to start writing your essay.

**Style in Compare and Contrast Writing**

Compare and contrast writing is an incredibly flexible form of writing. It’s a genre that can be used in both formal and informal settings; in fact, as shown in the examples above, we most often use it in informal ways as we make decisions in our everyday lives. If you’re writing a compare and contrast essay for this kind of everyday decision among friends, your language and tone will be casual and informal, employing contractions and casual diction.

If, however, you are comparing and contrasting two historical events or figures for a class, or if you’re comparing two important philosophical ideas for publication in an academic journal, you will need to write in a more formal, academic style. If you’re writing this kind of essay, make sure you eliminate all contractions and informal language, and make an effort to elevate your diction in order to meet the needs of your audience.

**Reflect: Topics of Interest**

**Poll**

Which topic would you find most interesting for a compare and contrast essay?

- Historical figures
- Political candidates
- Movies
- Music Festivals

**Expand: Types of Comparison**

**Overview**

The type of comparison used in an essay will impact its overall structure. There are three types of comparison:

- Subject-to-subject (or whole-to-whole)
- Similarities-to-differences
- Point-by-point

**Subject-to-Subject Comparison**

A subject-to-subject comparison is when you structure your paper around separate discussions of your subjects. So, if you were to compare different automotive shops for oil changes, you might structure your essay in the following way:
1. Auto Shop #1
   a. Honesty
   b. Affordability
   c. Convenience

2. Auto Shop #2
   a. Honesty
   b. Affordability
   c. Convenience

3. Auto Shop #3
   a. Honesty
   b. Affordability
   c. Convenience

With this structure, you investigate each of your subjects in-depth, allowing your reader to draw their own conclusions. Alternatively, in this structure, you could use your conclusion to provide an overall assessment to the content outlined in the body paragraphs.

Similarities-to-Differences Comparison

A similarities-to-differences comparison works best with only two subjects. In this kind of comparison, you would structure your essay into two sections: similarities and differences. To continue with the auto shop example from above, you might structure a similarities-to-differences comparison like this:

1. Auto shop #1 and auto shop #2 are similar in their customer service.
   a. Friendliness
   b. Honesty

2. Auto shop #1 and auto shop #2 differ in their affordability.
   a. Upcharges
   b. Hidden fees
   c. Base price-list

This structure allows you to examine both the similarities and the differences of a topic by direct comparison.

Point-by-Point Comparison

Finally, you can structure your essay in the fashion of a point-by-point comparison. The name of this style of comparison says it all; you’ll compare your subjects to each other, point-by-point. Borrowing our categories from the subject-to-subject comparison of auto-shops, a point-by-point comparison would look like this:

1. Honesty
   a. Auto shop #1
   b. Auto shop #2
   c. Auto shop #3

2. Affordability
   a. Auto shop #1
   b. Auto shop #2
   c. Auto shop #3

3. Convenience
This method of comparison allows you to make a direct comparison for each of your subjects. In this structure, you can then use your concluding sentences to provide an evaluation of the best performer for each category.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Comparing and Contrasting
- A handout providing additional guidance in the styles of comparison
  https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/comparing-and-contrast/

Compare & Contrast
- A resource providing an examination of whether the compare/contrast genre is useful
  http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/110126/chapters/Section-1@-Why-Compare-$-Contrast%C2%A2.aspx

How to Teach Students to Compare and Contrast
- A video providing a quick getting-started guide to compare and contrast writing
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtGzwoVCO4E

Lesson Glossary

**chart**: a diagram that organizes a list of items into common categories

**venn-diagram**: a diagram comprised of overlapping circles that allows the user to visualize similarities and differences

**subject-to-subject comparison**: when you structure your paper around separate discussions of your subjects

**similarities-to-differences comparison**: when you divide your essay into two sections: one for similarities and one for differences

**point-by-point comparison**: when you divide your essay according to individual points, and you compare each of your subjects by how well they meet or align with these individual points

Check Your Knowledge

1. The style of comparison you choose can impact your organizational structure.
   A. True
   B. False

2. Charting works best before venn-diagramming.
   A. True
   B. False

3. A subject-to-subject comparison works only with two subjects.
   A. True
B. False
Answer Key:

Citations

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