Compare and Contrast Essays: Reading Samples

Inquire: Rhetorical Appeals in Compare and Contrast

Overview
Timandra Harkness is mostly an entertainer, working as a writer and comedian, but the subject matter of her performances and books is usually scientific or mathematical in subject. This means that her content strikes a delicate balance as she writes about serious subject matter, but in a more informal and entertaining way. In her essay “Nature and Nurture: Then and Now,” she focuses on two films that depict a figure being brought in from an uncivilized community in order to be shown civilization. She uses this contrast to draw a conclusion about societal attitudes toward human nature. As you make your way through today’s lesson, consider how you feel about human nature.

Big Question: What does it look like to rhetorically analyze a compare and contrast essay?

Watch: But, What’s the Point?
So, your teacher has assigned a compare and contrast essay. You sit at your computer, staring blankly at the blinking cursor on your screen, perhaps tapping your pencil against your forehead in frustration. You might ask yourself, “But, what is the POINT of a compare and contrast essay?” This is a common complaint of composition students, but — fortunately — compare and contrast essays can work for many purposes; you just need to know what you’re doing as you go in.

You can use a compare and contrast essay to show many things:
- To show that one thing is better than another
- To persuade someone that two things are similar
- To ask someone to consider something in a new light
- To get someone to consider how similar or different two things really are

In the case of this lesson’s reading sample, Timandra Harkness, a writer and comedian who focuses on scientific and mathematical subject matter, writes a compare and contrast essay with a clear and definite purpose. Though Harkness deals with sometimes difficult-to-understand subjects, she writes her essay with a slightly more informal tone, even when her subject matter is serious. As a comedian, her writings are often funny, but — in the case of this essay — she is slightly more serious.

Harkness uses a classic subject-to-subject comparison structure for her essay, where she breaks down two films separately to show the similarities of their subject matter. She then compares each film’s treatment of its “uncultured” subjects. Her ultimate conclusion is that — by watching the two films — we can see how societal opinions of nature and nurture have changed over time. Harkness feels that our opinions on human nature have changed, but that they have changed for the worse.
Harkness takes a unique approach to this particular topic. Probably, she did not approach this essay by saying that she wanted to write about how ideas about human nature have changed. Instead, she likely found inspiration in the movies themselves. You, too, can find inspiration for your essays in this way. Try to watch movies or TV shows with a critical eye for the ideas they represent.

Do you think you'll agree with Harkness? Has our opinion of human nature changed over time? Do you think it’s effective to talk about such an important topic by using movies?

Read: “Nature and Nurture, Then and Now” by Timandra Harkness

Overview
What does a compare and contrast essay look like? In the passage provided below, Timandra Harkness writes a compare and contrast essay about the films *Oklahoma, 1973* and *L’Enfant Sauvage*, using the compare/contrast method as a tool to argue that views on human nature have changed dramatically over time. As you read, be sure to watch for Harkness’ use of the rhetorical situation and rhetorical appeals to talk to the audience.

“Nature and Nurture, Then and Now” by Timandra Harkness

‘Oklahoma, 1973’ begins the documentary account of an experiment to teach a baby chimpanzee human language and thus, in the words of one of the researchers, ‘test the nature versus nurture hypothesis.’ And through today’s eyes, the eyes of filmmaker James Marsh (of *Man on Wire* fame), much of that experiment seems bizarre if not downright wrong. Nim’s first surrogate mother, Stephanie Lafarge, takes the baby chimp into her home like another baby, changing its nappies, dressing it and even breastfeeding the animal for several months.

The film is a mixture of interviews, archive footage, and reconstruction, and the testimony of the humans involved is, of course, far more revealing about them than about Nim. Both Stephanie and her daughter recall how Nim quickly learned to manipulate the dynamics of the family, playing off the jealousy of Stephanie’s poet husband (who was not consulted before the baby ape moved in) and defying the authority of the project’s supervisor, professor Herb Terrace, when he visited.

But while chimps are social animals with a strong sense of power relationships, it is also clear that Stephanie was playing games of her own. The ostensible purpose of the project was to teach Nim sign language, but at one point, she says ‘words became the enemy’ in her relationship with writer husband and linguistic psychologist (and ex-lover) Herb. And when Herb removes the chimp, and puts Nim in the care of attractive 18-year-old student Laura-Ann Pettito, the human dynamics continue to overshadow the scientific study of an ape learning sign language.

Yet the excitement of the researchers is clear. If they can teach a chimpanzee to communicate, they can find out how it ‘thinks.’ They are well aware of how radical an idea this is, a potential breaking down of the barrier between humans and animals. It is an ideal that sits well in their hippy era and milieu. Unfortunately for them, a chimpanzee is not a child. From the start, Nim uses violence to assert himself in social interactions, and as he grows stronger physically, this makes the ‘chimp as child’ conceit harder and harder to sustain. The researchers suffer bites that sever arteries and tendons, and one has her face
torn open. Nim uses the sign for ‘sorry’ after these attacks, but they continue. Eventually, Herb decides to return Nim to the research facility where he was born.

Marsh’s interviews reveal just how emotionally involved the humans became with Nim, but the story itself is told as a biography of the chimp. So, it is impossible to avoid seeing how the contradictions of the human attitudes to the ape—treating it like a baby and then like the dangerous animal it is—added to Nim’s distress. One minute he is a spoilt pet with the run of a country house, the next he is in a cage with other chimpanzees, a social group he has never learned to live in. So, while we are invited to empathise with the humans, still crying all these years later as they recall leaving Nim in his cage, it also implicitly criticises them for having taught him to live around humans and then thrown him back in with the other experimental subjects. And yet, the film humanises Nim in our eyes too, so when he is sold on to a medical research establishment, we identify not with the human scientists but with the apes.

If this 1970’s experiment reveals that era’s confusion about where apes end and humans begin, the film says much about today’s ambivalent attitudes too. So, it is worth comparing it to François Truffaut’s *L’Enfant Sauvage*, a 1970 feature film based closely on Dr. Jean Itard’s account of his own experiment 170 years earlier. In 1798, a boy is found in the woods, apparently without language and completely unsocialised. Dr. Itard reads about the boy and brings him to Paris to be the subject of his own experiment in nature and nurture, to see whether a child of around 11 can be transformed by education from a near-animal into a civilised man.

At first, there are many parallels in the behaviour of the boy, whom the doctor names ‘Victor,’ and that of Nim. Both show instinctive fear and resistance, bite their captors, and have to be restrained with a rope from running away. Both learn table manners and to ask for food and drink. Both—in strikingly parallel scenes—love to be wheeled around at high speed, Nim in a child’s pushchair and Victor in a wheelbarrow. But there are vital differences in the two experiments. Dr. Itard wants to teach Victor language not to see the world through the eyes of a boy who survived in the forest for 10 years, but to equip him to communicate with the wider world and—crucially—to be able to ask for things which are not in front of his eyes. He is thrilled by Victor’s spontaneous tool making, when the boy fashions a chalk-holder, but even more thrilled when he shows that Victor has developed a sense of justice and thus become ‘a moral being.’

This investigation into human nature happened in revolutionary France—supported by a grant—and aspired to prove that the most savage human being had the potential to be civilised—that human potential outstrips what initial circumstances endow on us, and that we are all capable of learning not only the superficial trappings of human society but to be free, moral agents. Through the prism of 1970, the 1798 experiment looks cruel at times, but though Dr. Itard treats Victor harshly, he sees the fellow human in him. The educator’s struggle to turn a wild child into a full member of human society, and the implicit faith that we are all capable, given the right conditions, of thus flourishing, is an echo of Enlightenment optimism in 20th century France.

By contrast, the Project Nim experiment saw the capacity for language as not uniquely human. It was based on the idea that nurture alone is responsible for making us human—that even an ape can have essentially human characteristics if it is reared with humans. Though the film, with 21st century eyes, is critical of confusing chimpanzee nature with human nature because of its adverse effects on Nim’s happiness, it does not entirely reject the basis of the failed experiment. As well as criticising human willingness to treat animals as experimental subjects, Project Nim draws implicit parallels between Nim’s behaviour and that of the humans studying him. It takes care not to elevate Nim to human status, but it does, at times, reduce the humans to primate social groups, with dominant males and nurturing females. Nim may be ruled by the desire for instant gratification, but so are the researchers, is the implication.
Both films tell us something about human nature, but they tell us more about how our view of that nature, and that potential, has changed since 1798 and since 1970. And not for the better.

Reflect Poll: Effective Tone

Which kind of tone is most likely to keep you reading?

- humorous
- serious
- passionate

Expand: Rhetorically Analyzing a Compare and Contrast Essay

Ethos

Timandra Harkness’ ethos in this passage is fairly approachable. While she uses slightly elevated language, she still uses simple — and even casual — sentence structure at times. Look, for example, at the conclusion of the essay: “And not for the better.” Harkness ends her essay with an incomplete sentence, which shows that she is not particularly focused on using the structure of her writing, but rather the content of her essay, to bolster her ethos. She comes across as informed, but passionate.

Pathos

How and where do we see Harkness appealing to her audience’s emotions? Really, the content of the entire essay is pathos-based. Harkness hones in on the fact that two figures (an ape and a human) were brought out of their own environment and asked to quickly adapt to a different one. Some of Harkness’ phrasing, particularly when discussing Nim, works to elicit the sympathy of the reader, as she focuses primarily on Nim’s mistreatment.

Logos

Harkness structures his essay as a subject-by-subject comparison. Notice, however, that there is no establishment of this in the introduction. What we have is an excerpt, so we are missing some of the more formal parts of the essay. At the beginning, it seems that Harkness’ only focus will be the documentary that focuses on the life of Nim.

Overall, the essay spends time focusing mostly on the similarities between how the two films view human nature and how the two groups went about taking an “uncivilized” figure into the world of civilization.

Purpose

Notice that Harkness focuses primarily on Nim’s story. While she compares it to the story in L’Enfant Sauvage, the purpose is mostly to reach a conclusion about the view of human nature represented in Oklahoma, 1973. The conclusion of Harkness’ essay is harsh, as she observes that our views on human nature have not evolved for the better over time. Do you agree or disagree?
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Helpful tips for compare and contrast writing
- Link to resource: https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/comparing-and-contrasting/

A professional example of a compare/contrast essay
- Link to resource: https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/02/weekinreview/02wright.html

A professional example of a compare/contrast essay

Lesson Glossary

subject-by-subject comparison: a paper structured around separate discussions of subjects

Check Your Knowledge

1. Timandra Harkness uses a casual, informal tone because she is not an expert in her field.
   a. True
   b. False
2. Harkness changes her tone at the end of her essay.
   a. True
   b. False
3. The purpose of a compare/contrast essay should never be more than simple comparison or contrast.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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