Compare and Contrast Essays: Writing Your Own

Inquire: It’s Time to Begin!

Overview
You’re now ready to write your own compare and contrast essay! Make sure, as with all essays, that you walk through the entire essay-writing process from brainstorming to editing. Each step is vitally important in ensuring that you finish with a product you are proud of! You’ll begin first by brainstorming, using tools like venn-diagramming and charting, before you move into outlining and drafting your essay. Finally, you should engage in the revision and editing process to create a completely polished final essay.

Big Question: How does the writing process apply to compare and contrast essays?

Watch: Trust the Process
It’s one thing to read compare and contrast essays or to read about writing compare and contrast essays, but it’s another thing entirely to sit down and write one. The whole process can be very frustrating, especially if you feel like you don’t have a goal, purpose, or direction in writing. So, how can you avoid the frustration of starting your compare and contrast essay? One way is to make sure to go through the full writing process just like you would with any genre of essay.

First, you should take the time to brainstorm. If you’ve ever felt stuck without anything to write about, try brainstorming. For compare and contrast essays, two of the most helpful methods of brainstorming — sometimes called pre-planning — are venn-diagramming and charting. Venn-diagrams can help you find similarities and differences, while charting can help you sort those similarities and differences into categories.

Once you’ve done a little brainstorming and you have a topic, you’ll want to begin outlining your essay. For a compare and contrast essay, there are three methods you can use:
1. Point-by-point comparison
2. Subject-to-subject comparison
3. Similarities-to-differences comparison

The kind of comparison you use will change your method of organization, so it’s important to figure out what kind of comparison you want to use before you begin outlining your essay. Each form of comparison has its own distinct outline structure, which you can then use as the outline to plan your essay.

Once you’ve outlined your essay, you will begin drafting, which is when you turn your outline into something that finally looks like a paper. It’s at this time that you can insert your voice and really make sure that you accomplish your purpose in writing.
After drafting, you have what looks like a paper, but you'll still need to do some revision and editing before your paper is ready to go out into the world. The process is easy, and it's easier with friends, but it is a necessary step in the writing process.

Are you ready to begin writing your compare and contrast essay?

Read: Beginning Your Compare and Contrast Essay

Overview
You’re now ready to start writing your compare and contrast essay, but where do you begin? As with any essay, you will need to walk through the full writing process: brainstorming, planning, outlining, drafting, revision, and editing.

Choosing Your Topic

There are many kinds of essays you could write that 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 need to do more work to get started.

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

- People
- Historical events
- Works of entertainment
- Services
- Businesses
- Ideas

These represent only a few possible categories you could use to explore and identify subjects for your compare and contrast essay.

Narrowing Your Topic

Now that you have a few subjects 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.

Venn-diagramming can be a good place to start in discovering similarities and differences between your subjects, but charting is a good next step to help you sort those similarities and differences into different categories. A chart organizes a list of
items into common categories. Now is the time for you to review your venn-diagram to help you figure out any common categories you can turn into a chart.

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

**Outlining Your Essay**

Your compare and contrast essay can be structured three ways. Read over the methods below and find the one that works best for you. Once you’ve chosen an organizational structure, you’re ready to begin outlining your essay and its evidence.

**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 use this structure, you might structure your essay in the following way:

1. Subject #1
   a. Point 1
   b. Point 2
   c. Point 3
2. Subject #2
   a. Point 1
   b. Point 2
   c. Point 3
3. Subject #3
   a. Point 1
   b. Point 2
   c. Point 3

This structure allows you to investigate each of your subjects in-depth, enabling your reader to draw their own conclusions. Alternatively, in this structure, you could use your conclusion to provide an overall assessment or conclusion 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 structure your essay into two sections: similarities and differences. You would structure a similarities-to-differences comparison like this:

1. Subject #1 and Subject #2 are similar in the following ways:
   a. Similarity 1
   b. Similarity 2
2. Subject #1 and Subject #2 are different in the following ways:
   a. Difference 1
   b. Difference 2
   c. Difference 3

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. A point-by-point comparison would look like this:

1. **Point #1**
   a. Subject #1
   b. Subject #2
   c. Subject #3

2. **Point #2**
   a. Subject #1
   b. Subject #2
   c. Subject #3

3. **Point #3**
   a. Subject #1
   b. Subject #2
   c. Subject #3

This method of comparison allows you to have 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.

Drafting Your Essay

Once you’ve settled on an organizational structure and used it to outline your essay, you’re ready to begin writing! Take your time considering your rhetorical situation. For whom are you writing? What do they value and want from you as a speaker? What is your overall purpose in writing? Try not to think too much about the way you phrase things; you can fix that in revision and editing.

Reflect Poll: The Writing Process

If you want to make sure your paper is polished before turning it in, what step in the writing process would you pay most attention to?

- Brainstorming
- Drafting
- Editing

Expand: Polishing Your Compare and Contrast Essay

Overview

Now that you have a draft of your essay, you’re almost done! Taking the time to go through the revision and editing process before turning in your paper can go a long way in improving your essay.
Revising Your Essay

Once you’ve written your essay, it’s time to engage in revision. As you read back through your essay, give special thought to how you appeal to your audience. Remember the audience for whom you are writing the essay; which of your claims might they take issue with? How can you make sure that you are not alienating them or pushing them away with your claims?

Try to read carefully back through your paper as if you’re reading for the first time, and as a member of your target audience. Keep in mind the level of knowledge and understanding your audience has. Is the topic completely new to them? If so, make sure that you take the time to explain important terminology and key concepts. If, however, your audience generally has expertise in the subject, don’t waste your time by explaining things they already know.

Finally, as you reread your essay, be sure that you’re considering what kind of ethos you are projecting to your readers. Do you come across as knowledgeable? Do you come across as trustworthy? Do you support all of your claims with reasonable and reliable evidence? Is your language professional and courteous?

Revision is also the time for you to review your essay’s structure. Did you choose the style of comparison that makes the most sense? Does everything flow smoothly? If not, consider revising your essay to another method of organization or incorporating more transitions in your writing.

Editing Your Essay

Take the time now to read carefully back through your revised essay for any proofreading or editing errors. Use methods like reading aloud or reading sentences backward to catch mistakes you might otherwise miss. You should also consider handing your essay over to a friend at this point in time, as a fresh pair of eyes can catch things you may miss after looking at your own paper for too long.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A resource providing additional tools for the compare/contrast writing process
- Link to resource: http://www.eapfoundation.com/writing/essays/candc/

A video guide to structuring compare/contrast essays
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7owKjx7zqd8

More tips on writing compare and contrast essays
- Link to resource: https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/comparing-and-contrasting/

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. All compare/contrast essays are organized in the same way.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Charting is the best place to start brainstorming for a compare/contrast essay.
   a. True
   b. False

3. Editing is the last step in the writing process.
   a. True
   b. False

**Answer Key:**
1. B  2. B  3. A

**Citations**

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