Compare and Contrast Essays: Purpose and Organization

Inquire: Compare and Contrast in Everyday Life

Overview

Who would win in a race: a shark or Michael Phelps? You might remember this question from when it was posed during Discovery Channel’s 2017 Shark Week. At its core, this question was a compare and contrast question. In what ways are a shark and Michael Phelps similar? Are they worth comparing?

We engage in this kind of thinking all the time. Whether we’re trying to decide on a new school to attend, a new place to live, or which professor to take a course from, we frequently compare and contrast two different subjects.

Big Question: What is a compare and contrast essay?

Watch: Compare and Contrast

“It’s like comparing apples and oranges.” It’s a phrase you’ve probably heard many times throughout your life as a criticism. But why, exactly, is it a criticism? If we think about the phrase very long, we’ll realize that the criticism is that apples and oranges are too different to deserve comparison.

If you really think about it, though, wouldn’t it be more boring to contrast apples and oranges? We already know all about their differences; we certainly don’t need to hear a speech or a paper explaining how and why apples and oranges are different. If, however, someone could deliver a compelling speech or paper about the similarities of apples and oranges and how they have more in common than we think, we might begin to be interested in the argument.

Whether you’re talking to friends about what restaurant to try for lunch, or you’re debating which professor to take for a general science course, you form many compare and contrast arguments each day. By taking two or more subjects and identifying their similarities and differences, you are engaged in a process of reasoning called compare and contrast.

Compare and contrast is when you examine two or more subjects from multiple sides. With these two subjects, you might:

- compare them
- contrast them
- compare and contrast
The focus of your paper will depend entirely on the kinds of subjects you choose. However, what is most important is that you write about things that are not obvious. Consider, for example, an iPhone and an Android phone. Your audience is probably familiar with the differences between these two items; they are very different phones and have very different operating systems. In this case, you would be better served to talk about their similarities. If someone is considering switching from one phone to the other brand, they might prefer to hear about what adjustments will be easy to make. If, however, your audience is completely unfamiliar with both phones, you might need to compare and contrast.

The content of your essay will change depending on your subjects and your audience. Think again about the apples and oranges. Imagine your reader has never had either one. You would, of course, change your essay’s focus to talk about both their similarities and their differences in order to write a compelling paper.

Have you ever used a compare and contrast argument to make a decision?

Read: Compare/Contrast Essays: The Basics

Overview

Some of the most passionate arguments we have among friends are ones that compare and contrast two competing elements. Who would win: Superman or Batman? Would you rather be able to fly or read minds? To answer these questions, we would have to engage in a discussion about the subtle differences of each option. We must compare their similarities and contrast their differences in order to arrive at a conclusion. We employ this same method of reasoning in writing a compare and contrast essay.

What is a Compare and Contrast Essay?

In writing, comparison is something that examines similar elements, whereas contrast examines elements that are different. When you write a compare and contrast essay, then, you are analyzing two or more subjects through comparison, contrast, or both.

One thing that is necessary for writing an effective compare and contrast essay is choosing subjects that connect in a meaningful way. You don’t want to write a whole paper about something that is already painfully obvious, like the fact that apples and oranges are different. Instead, you might want to show how the two have unexpected similarities or differences. You might, instead, compare two types of oranges, looking at their levels of sweetness, juiciness, and affordability. You want to help your reader gain a better understanding of your topic, which you can only do by making observations that are not already apparent to your audience.

Conversely, if you’re focusing on the comparison aspects of a compare/contrast essay, you should choose two or more subjects that seem very dissimilar. For a comparison essay, you don’t want to compare two things that are very similar, as you won’t have much to say. For example, it’s too easy to show the similarities between two types of oranges, but it is much more complex to examine the similarities between an apple and an orange.
Basic Compare and Contrast Writing Elements

The two most important components in a compare and contrast essay are the two subjects you will be dissecting. From there, you can settle on your focus: do you want to highlight the similarities of the two subjects by comparison? Or do you want to highlight the differences of the two subjects by contrast?

Either way, you will engage in both comparison and contrast throughout your essay. It can be difficult, however, to know how to organize all of this content. When you have to both compare and contrast different elements of two subjects, where do you put all of that information?

To begin a compare and contrast essay, you’ll need a thesis that outlines the two or more subjects you plan to compare or contrast and the purpose behind the comparison. Your thesis might focus more on comparison or contrast, depending on the purpose of your essay. Overall, you simply want to be sure that you’re providing useful information to your reader. For example, you might use a thesis like this:

While organic vegetables are marketed as environmentally friendly and a healthier option, the differences between organic and conventional vegetables are not significant enough to offset the cost of buying organic.

This thesis clearly states that it will compare organic and conventional vegetables for the purpose of helping the reader make a decision about which kind of vegetable to purchase.

Compare and contrast essays are often organized in one of two ways:

1. Subject-by-subject
2. Point-by-point

The organizational structure you choose will depend on your topic, your purpose, and your audience.

Since compare and contrast essays explore the differences and/or similarities between two subjects, it can be helpful to use some of the following compare and contrast words:

For comparison, you can use phrases like one similarity, another similarity, both, like, likewise, similarly, or in a similar fashion. Whereas in contrast writing, you can use phrases like one difference, another difference, conversely, in contrast, unlike, while, or whereas.

Organizing Your Essay

The first step you need to take in organizing your essay is to decide whether you will focus on comparing things that seem different, or contrasting things that seem the same, or if you want to do the work of both comparison and contrast. Once you’ve settled on a topic, you’ll begin with an introductory paragraph that engages your reader. At the end of the introduction, you should include your thesis, which should inform the reader as to the subjects you’ll be analyzing, the focus of your essay, and the overall purpose of your claim.

You can organize the body of your essay in one of two ways; you can either organize it by subject or by points. Ultimately, this decision will vary depending on your audience and your purpose. No matter which method you choose, make sure you use transitional words and phrases that clue your reader in to whether you’re comparing or contrasting your subjects.
Finally, as always, you should write a concluding paragraph that restates your thesis and reviews the main points of your argument.

Reflect Poll: When to Compare and Contrast

If you were to write an essay comparing or contrasting Garth Brooks and Kanye West, which would you be more likely to focus on?

- Comparison, because the similarities between Brooks and West are obvious.
- Contrast, because Brooks and West are obviously very different.

Expand: The Rhetorical Situation in Compare and Contrast Writing

Overview

There are no hard and fast rules for the rhetorical situation of a compare and contrast essay, since the purpose can change so dramatically from subject to subject. It’s important, though, that you have an understanding of your essay’s unique rhetorical situation before you begin writing, so you know what kind of ethos-based and pathos-based appeals you should be making.

Purpose and the Rhetorical Situation

In compare and contrast writing, identifying your purpose can be difficult and you really need to establish it before you begin writing. Mostly, you will derive your purpose from the subjects themselves. We all know how boring it can be to read about something that is painfully obvious, therefore, you need to have something new to say about the similarities or differences of your two subjects. Why spend your time explaining something that your audience already knows?

Therefore, the purpose of your essay needs to show something new to your audience. Whether you want your audience to focus on similarities they may have never considered or differences that they may have never noticed will depend on you and your subject matter. Establishing your purpose early on in the process will help you better understand who your audience is and what they require from you.

Ethos and Pathos: The Right Tone and the Right Kind of Appeal

Once you’ve settled on the purpose, you can begin to consider the kinds of appeals you will employ in your essay. If your topic is lighthearted and comical, you can adopt an ethos that is more casual and relaxed, even incorporating humor into your tone and writing. If, however, your topic is a bit more serious, you will want to pursue an ethos that is more clinical and reserved. In either case, you should cater your appeals to pathos to the kind of audience for which you are writing.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A compare and contrast essay sample

- Link to resource: http://www.oercommons.org/courses/english-composition-1/view
A compare and contrast essay sample
• Link to resource: http://www.oercommons.org/courses/english-composition-1/view

A compare and contrast essay with guiding questions
• Link to resource: http://www.oercommons.org/courses/english-composition-1/view

Lesson Glossary
comparison: discusses elements that are similar
contrast: discusses elements that are different

Check Your Knowledge

1. You should never both compare and contrast two subjects in an essay.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Your ethos should always be casual and informal in a compare and contrast essay.
   a. True
   b. False

3. We rarely engage in compare and contrast arguments in everyday life.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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