

Compare - Contrast Essay

A *Comparison* or *Contrast* essay is an essay in which you either compare something or contrast something. To compare is to explain the similarities between things; to contrast is to describe their differences.

A compare – and – contrast essay might seem to be the easiest type of paper to write: just find things that are alike and then find things that are different. However, there's a catch. It is up to you to argue *why* those similarities and differences matter; otherwise, you don't have much of a paper.

So they're alike and they're different. So what? A good paper will not simply offer a summary of themes, characters, or plot. Your job is to think about how these comparisons and contrasts create meaningful connections to a larger issue. Here are some steps:

1) Create an effective thesis statement. Again, you need to say *why* the comparison and contrast is worthy of note. Let's say you want to compare and contrast the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*. Your thesis might be this:

“Although Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre are very different on the outside, their shared internal values connect them in literary history and in the fight for women's rights.”

Now you have a reason for your efforts and a compelling case for your audience's attention.

2) Select a pattern. When we compare and/or contrast two phenomena, like the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*, for example, we will look at two classic organizational patterns of a comparison or contrast essay.

One is called ***block arrangement*** of ideas; the other is called ***point-by-point*** or ***alternating arrangement*** of ideas.

Note: Before choosing a format it's important to brainstorm and find similarities and differences between your opposing topics or, in this case, protagonists. For example, if you're comparing Jane Austen's Elizabeth to Charlotte Brontë's Jane, your rough brainstorming list might look something like this:

<u>ELIZABETH</u>	<u>JANE</u>
Upper class	Dirt poor and an orphan
Beautiful	Plain looking
Outspoken	Outspoken
Resists marriage	Resists marriage
Socially inappropriate	Socially awkward
Ends up with her man, and all is well	Ends up with her man, but only after much trauma

Note: The traits of upper class and dirt poor/orphan might be placed under the umbrella of social status.

The first way to arrange your material is to use *block* arrangement, which is to write about one character's relationship to your unifying element by using three or more distinct points. If you mention a particular point when focusing on your first character you must use that same point when focusing on your second character, and the points must follow in the same order.

BLOCK ARRANGEMENT

I. Introduction in which you state your purpose, which is to discuss the differences between your characters (Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Eyre) and their relationship to your unifying element (i.e. women's rights).

II. Body paragraphs dealing with the points or traits of your first character (*Elizabeth*) and their relationship to your unifying element (*fight for women's rights*). Each point will be at least one paragraph.

- A. Upper Class
- B. Out spoken and beautiful
- C. Resists Marriage

III. Body paragraphs dealing with the points or traits of your second character (*Jane*) and their relationship to your unifying element (*fight for women's rights*). Each point will be at least one paragraph.

- A. Impoverished and an orphan
- B. Out spoken and plain looking
- C. Resists marriage

IV. Conclusion

A second way to organize your material is to discuss a particular point about a character and immediately discuss the same point about the second character. This is called *point-by-point* or *alternating* arrangement.

POINT-BY-POINT ARRANGEMENT

I. Introduction in which you state your thesis containing your unifying element (*i.e. fight for women's rights*), which will contrast and/or compare your two characters.

II. The first point (i.e. financial status) and its relationship to the unifying element and both characters.

A. Elizabeth and her financial status, and how it relates to the unifying element.

B. Jane and her financial status, and how it relates to the unifying element.

When comparing and/or contrasting the first point to each character, you can create more than one paragraph.

III. The second point (i.e. Out spoken personality) and its relationship to the unifying element and both characters.

A. Elizabeth and her out spoken personality, and how it relates to the unifying element.

B. Jane and her out spoken personality, and how it relates to the unifying element.

When comparing and/or contrasting the second point to each character, you can create more than one paragraph.

IV. The third point (i.e. commitment to marriage) and its relationship to the unifying element and both characters.

A. Elizabeth and her commitment to marriage, and how it relates to the unifying element.

B. Jane and her commitment to marriage, and how it relates to the unifying element.

When comparing and/or contrasting the third point to each character, you can create more than one paragraph.

V. Conclusion

If you choose Point-by-Point you will be juxtaposing Elizabeth and Jane, continually addressing the two characters “back and forth” as you compose the body of your paper. For example, you might say,

Elizabeth is a striking women, a traditional beauty, but Brontë's Jane is continually described as plain and homely. Nevertheless, both women 'fight for their place in a male dominated society' (Parker 23).

3) How to decide on a pattern. While there's no rule about selecting one method over another, for longer papers (those that exceed five or six pages), you should probably go with the alternating pattern, because it's difficult for the reader to retain all the pertinent information about each character in such a lengthy discussion.

For shorter papers, the tandem pattern will probably work best.

4) Support with primary text. Support your analysis by providing primary textual support; in this case, the primary sources are the novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane*

Eyre. For each point you address, whether in a tandem or an alternating pattern, offer textual evidence for your positions either by directly quoting from the text or by paraphrasing. Be sure to properly cite each quote or paraphrase in the MLA format.

5) Support with secondary sources if possible. A secondary source is anyone other than the original author. Use secondary sources to provide additional backing for your thesis.

6) Include your own voice. One of the biggest challenges for a writer is to offer his or her own take on a topic. You may feel that everyone else has already said everything there is to say about your subject, but don't be discouraged. Your own interpretation is what is the most valuable in the end.

7) Review – Revise – Repeat. Compare-and-contrast essays can often become convoluted if tight monitoring isn't placed on the writing process. Restructure and delete text in order to make clear and valid points, and never lose sight of your unifying element. Review your work often to make sure you have not summarized plot or over used your quotes.

Quoting:

Avoid the **awkward** incorporation of quotes and strive for a **smooth graceful** incorporation.

Awkward: Tom does not believe that he is going to go out on the window ledge. "The mental picture of himself sidling along the ledge outside was absurd" (Finney 9). However, within minutes, Tom is opening the window and preparing to step outside.

Smooth: Though he does eventually go out onto the ledge, his first reaction is that "the mental picture of himself sidling along the ledge outside was absurd" (Finney 9).

With awkward quoting, the quotation sits by itself as a complete sentence; with graceful quoting, the quotation is **blended** with the writer's own words.

Quoting should be natural, not something artificially added to an essay. Think about it. You are writing about a story. That story is a collection of words. How is it possible to talk about a large collection of words without using at least some of those words? When looked at logically, it would seem that not quoting would be more difficult than quoting. So if you are discussing a key point in the story, give the reader those same words that appear on the page. Quote gracefully and naturally.

Essay Prompt:

You must choose any character in *Romeo and Juliet* and compare and/or contrast him/her to any other character from one of the works you read first semester. Make sure you have a strong unifying element to tie the two characters together.

- Your essays must have a “Works Cited” page and you must use at least four sources.
- The essay cannot exceed 1100 words (not including the Works Cited page or the MLA signature content).
- Your essay must contain at least two sources of literary criticism. These pieces of criticism could be found in criticism reference books or our library databases.
- Your other sources will primary sources of the plays, short stories or novels (i.e. *Romeo and Juliet*).
- In most cases, you should stay away from internet information that doesn't list an author. While the information you find may be true, it is more difficult to validate information if you don't know the credentials of the author.

If the author is named, you will want to find his/her web page to:

- Verify educational credits
- Discover if the writer is either published in a scholarly journal
- Verify that the writer is employed by a research institution or university

Since it will be difficult to find all these requirements you should rely on our library databases.

- Good luck and work hard.