

The Compare/Contrast Essay: What It Is and How to Construct One

A compare/contrast essay looks at two or more things to find meaningful similarities or differences between them. A comparison explores similarities, and contrasting discusses differences. By analyzing common parts of different things, readers should get a deeper understanding of them.

Two Main Approaches

Although they have many different names, the two main approaches to a compare/contrast essay are *block style* and *point-by-point style*. The block approach explains aspects of one topic in a paragraph, then compares or contrasts the same kinds of things about another item in the next paragraph. For instance, you may describe Movie A's setting, dialogue, and music, then analyze Movie B's setting, dialogue, and music in relation to Movie A. In the point-by-point style, you write about one point or aspect of two or more items, identifying their differences and similarities in one or two paragraphs, before moving on to explore the next point of comparison. Block style organization is easier to follow for short essays, while the point-by-point approach is better suited to longer, more complex papers (Comprone 275; Fawcett 123-124). Regardless of essay style, the purpose of a compare/contrast essay is to carefully examine and evaluate the similarities and differences between two or more things.

Compare/Contrast Writing Process

With any comparison essay, brainstorming and prewriting are especially helpful to prevent shallow or circular writing. Make a list or diagram to find common parts to compare, then figure out how those common parts are similar and different, and what effects they have on you as an audience member or on the subjects themselves. In the prewriting stage, it may become clear that the topics of comparison are very similar, so focusing on their differences could be necessary to make your essay more meaningful. Likewise, if the topics seem completely unlike each other at first glance, discussing their hidden similarities may prove more interesting (Fawcett 284). Making these kinds of decisions before drafting can help keep your essay focused.

As the comparison progresses, a deeper impression of your subject matter should develop. Go beyond a mere listing of differences to explain, for example, why the characters see the world differently, or why one author's argument is more effective

than another. Use texts to support your analysis whenever possible. Conclude with a brief review of the subjects compared, reminding readers of the reasons the similarities and differences are important.

Some useful transition words and phrases:

Similarities: as, in addition, likewise, similarly, moreover, also, too, in a similar way/vein/fashion, both, neither, just as . . . so . . . , like, the same

Differences: although, whereas, conversely, in contrast, on (the) one hand . . . on the other hand, however, unlike, but, yet, instead, on the contrary

Works Cited

Comprone, Joseph J. Form and Substance: *The Modern Essay*. Dubuque: Brown, 1976. Print.

Fawcett, Susan and Alvin Sandberg, eds. *Evergreen with Readings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996. Print.

Block and Point-by-Point Comparison (In Block Format)

The compare and contrast essay is used to compare all sorts of things on any number of points. A common example is two items compared on three points, such as the movies *Star Wars* and *Avatar* compared on their visuals, stories, and soundtracks. People often wonder how to organize the comparison of their points. There are two typical formats: Block and Point-by-Point. Because of the ways Block and Point-by-Point differ in the format of their paragraphs, the organization of their comparisons, and how detailed they are, Block Format is good for creating shorter and less detailed essays, while Point-by-Point is better for writing more complex essays.

In the body of the essay (ignoring introduction and conclusion), Block **Format** presents its comparison and contrast in two or more paragraphs depending on how many items are being compared and contrasted to each other. In the example of any *two* movies being compared, no matter how many points of comparison there are between each movie, a Block Format essay would have *two* body paragraphs, one for each movie. Then Block Format **organizes** the information in an uneven way: in the *first* body paragraph, the first item is described on all three of the comparison points without actually comparing it to the second item. In the *second* body paragraph, Block Format describes the second item *only* by comparing it to the first. This can make Block Format essays less **detailed** because covering so many points in each paragraph can leave less room for well-developed analysis.

In comparison to Block Format, Point-by-Point **Format** requires more paragraphs. This format requires paragraphs based on the points of comparison instead of on the items being compared, so an essay with *three* points of comparison between two items will have *three* body paragraphs, not two. No matter how many items are being compared, the number of *paragraphs* will always be the number of *points*. In contrast, with Block Format, *two* items would mean *two* paragraphs, no matter how many comparison points were covered. Also, Point-by-Point Format **organizes** information in a more equal way than Block Format because it compares all items equally, one point at a time, repeating the process from paragraph to paragraph until all points have been fully

explored. This leads to Point-by-Point being naturally more **detailed** than Block because Point-by-Point gives each point its own paragraph, allowing more development of ideas for each point.

When it comes to the two types of essay format, Block tends to make essays shorter and Point-by-Point tends to make them longer. It is also often the case that Block makes essays less detailed, while Point-by-Point tends to make them more detailed, so Point-by-Point is the format generally preferred for college-level writing. In the end, the format a writer chooses for a comparative analysis depends on the best way to serve the purpose of the essay.

Block and Point-by-Point Comparison (In Point-by-Point Format)

The compare and contrast essay is used to compare all sorts of things on any number of points. A common example is two items compared on three points, such as the movies *Star Wars* and *Avatar* compared on an analysis of their visuals, stories, and soundtracks. People often wonder how to organize the comparison of their points. There are two typical formats: Block and Point-by-Point. Because of the ways Block and Point-by-Point differ in the format of their paragraphs, the organization of their comparisons, and how detailed they are, Block Format is good for creating shorter and less detailed essays, while Point-by-Point is better for writing more complex essays.

In the body, Block **Format** arranges the comparison of items into paragraphs depending on *how many items* are being compared and contrasted to each other. In the example of *two* movies being compared on three points of comparison, a Block Format essay would have *two* body paragraphs, one for each movie, and it would cover all three points of comparison twice, one for each paragraph. This means that, while Block would have as many paragraphs as items being compared, Point-by-Point would have as many paragraphs as there were *points to be made about the items*. So Point-by-Point will almost always have more paragraphs than Block format. This tends to make the Point-by-Point essay longer than the Block essay.

When it comes to the actual analysis, Block Format **organizes** the information in the first paragraph by describing one item on all points without mentioning the second item. Then in the next paragraph, Block Format *only* compares the second item to the first. The second item is never described without comparison to the first. Point-by-Point Format organizes information in a more equal way than Block Format because Point-by-Point analyzes both items on only one point at a time per paragraph, repeating the process from paragraph to paragraph until all points have been fully compared. Within any paragraph, the items are always seen together in comparison and contrast, never without each other.

Furthermore, Block Format essays often can be less **detailed** than Point-by-Point. In Block Format, looking at the first item with all points of comparison at once makes

readers more likely to think about it as a whole. As a result, the points could be compressed or oversimplified because they are not placed side by side with those of the other item. This is unlike in Point-by-Point, where **details** are more easily recognized by taking points one at a time. The step-by-step analysis of Point-by-Point offers writers more chances to look at items carefully and to develop their ideas about them.

When it comes to the two types of essay format, Block tends to make essays shorter and Point-by-Point tends to make them longer. It is also often the case that Block makes essays less detailed, while Point-by-Point tends to make them more detailed, so Point-by-Point is the format generally preferred for college-level writing. In the end, the format a writer chooses for a comparative analysis depends on the best way to serve the purpose of the essay.