Scaffolding a Compare and Contrast Essay

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Compare and contrast writing should be a mainstay in our curricula. Research on compare and contrast strongly favors this instructional strategy. Of the nine instructional strategies discussed in *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001), identifying similarities and differences is the single most-effective instructional strategy (p. 7). But comparing and contrasting is a complex process. The series of steps below makes it easier for teachers and students by guiding them through a scaffolding process useful in any content area. Once learned, the steps can lead to an information-rich, multi-paragraph essay.

Prepare

- ✓ Identify two or more items to compare and contrast and insert them into the top row of the grid.
- ✓ Create the Critical Characteristics by having students individually brainstorm for characteristics, qualities, traits, and so forth of each item to be compared.
- ✓ In small groups, have students share their list of characteristics, with each group selecting the best 4–6 characteristics. Students should try to select characteristics that are mutually exclusive.
- ✓ Review suggested characteristics from each group, and have the class agree on 3–6 for the grid.
- ✓ Record the Critical Characteristics on the grid in the first column on the left.

Work Together

- ✓ Have students individually fill in the grid by using their background knowledge.
- ✓ In small groups, students share their individual grids and combine them to create one grid that represents what their group knows or understands.
- ✓ Using a whiteboard, SMART Board, or other display, combine the small group grids into a class compare and contrast grid.
- ✓ At this point, students who did not have information to contribute now have a fully developed grid to use.

Build a Paragraph

- ✓ Each student selects one characteristic and develops the information into a detail-rich paragraph. Make sure that every characteristic is selected and developed by at least a few students so you will have a paragraph for each characteristic.
- ✓ Three basic criteria for the paragraph should include:
  - Topic sentence that identifies the chosen characteristic
  - A specific number of details or facts about each of the items or topics being compared
  - A concluding sentence that sums up the similarities and differences

Pair Up and Peer Edit

- ✓ Students pair up with someone who selected a **different** characteristic and peer edit for the three criteria. This step exposes students to a wide range of characteristics. Or students pair up with someone who selected the **same** characteristic and peer edit for the three criteria to expose them to a deeper understanding of the chosen characteristic.
- ✓ Select the best paragraph written about each characteristic and arrange them into a multi-paragraph essay.

Write Introduction and Conclusion Paragraphs

- ✓ Depending on the time available, individual students or the class together could write an introduction, conclusion, or both.

When the process is complete, all students will have created a compare and contrast grid to organize information, written at least one body paragraph, and possibly an introduction or conclusion. By completing the grid, students have the opportunity to organize information. When they complete a paragraph based on one characteristic, they practice synthesizing ideas into a detail-rich paragraph. Following this procedure, students will eventually be able to write a multi-paragraph compare and contrast essay on their own.

Compare and Contrast Modes of Writing

Correct conventions are a common expectation in all modes, so they are not included in this analysis. Tests that require extended writing of multiple paragraphs assess conventions as: "Few errors, if any, are present in sentence formation, grammar ... ; errors present do not interfere with meaning."

Characteristic	**Narrative**	**Informative**	**Opinion or Argument**	**Similarities and Differences**
Introduction or First Paragraph	-Gets readers' attention -Introduces characters -Establishes setting (time and place)	-Clearly states topic -Establishes topic importance -Establishes reason for writing	-Argument: clearly states claim without "I" -Opinion: can have "I" -Argument: acknowledges counterclaim -Both: provide background information and/or topic's importance	-All have one paragraph but could have more, especially narrative (to establish setting and introduce characters) and argument (to provide background and establish importance of topic)
Body Paragraphs	-Introduce problem or conflict -Include multiple paragraphs -Use dialogue -Create new paragraph for each speaker -Use literary devices such as simile, metaphor	-Include multiple paragraphs -Include topic sentence in each paragraph -Include facts, details, and relevant information	-Include multiple paragraphs -Include topic sentence in each paragraph -Identify reasons, supported with details -Argument: cite evidence from sources	-All have multiple body paragraphs -All use paragraphs to help organize information -Narrative may have many short paragraphs if using dialogue
Conclusion	-Resolves conflict -Presents a moral or lesson learned -Can be varied lengths	-Restates important information -Is usually one paragraph -Might give tips and suggestions	-Restates claim, usually in different words -Is usually one paragraph -Ends with a call to action or challenge	-All use one paragraph, except narrative -All restate or summarize important points -Narrative presents moral or lesson learned
Word Choice: Diction	-Is appropriate to characters -May be informal or casual -Expresses emotion and feeling	-Uses formal style -Uses general academic and domain-specific vocabulary	-Uses formal style -Uses an objective tone in argument -Uses general academic and domain-specific vocabulary	-All modes except narrative require formal style and general academic vocabulary -Narrative may use informal style and casual dialogue

Moving from the Compare and Contrast Grid to a Multi-Paragraph Essay

Here is a six-paragraph essay based on the information in the attached Compare and Contrast Modes of Writing Grid. The essay has an introduction, one paragraph for each of the four characteristics listed in the left-hand column, and a conclusion. All the paragraphs below could be evaluated using the same rubric or FCAs.

Rubric or FCAs

Topic sentence identifies characteristic: ____ pts.
2-3 details for each mode: _____ pts.
TBD: _____ pts.

Before students begin to write a response to an assignment, they must know what mode of writing the response requires. Most assignments can be grouped into three modes: narrative, which requires a story about real or made-up events; informative, which requires accurate information about a topic; or opinion or argument. Opinion writing requires a clear position on a topic (agree or disagree, like or dislike, etc.), while argument writing requires a clear position that is supported with evidence from sources. This essay will compare and contrast these three modes of writing by focusing on the differences and similarities in the introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion, and word choice.

Introductions are designed to keep the reader reading. Look at any published work, and you will see the author trying to get and keep your attention. Narrative introductions may be the most engaging and varied of all. They can include dialogue, description, or action. Informative introductions quickly tell the reader the topic and why it is important, and they preview what will be explained. In opinion or argument writing, the topic, its significance, and the author's position are stated in a respectful way. With argument, one way to catch the reader's attention is to acknowledge the other side so that no matter what side the reader is on, there is something they can agree with.

In all modes of writing, the body paragraphs do the hard work of adding details and support. In narrative, body paragraphs can describe the setting, characters, and events, and move the plot along. Narrative paragraphs can be short, even be one line long, and include dialogue. Informative

body paragraphs are usually more traditional, with topic sentences and details, definitions, or facts. Argument body paragraphs are much like informative ones. They usually state a reason in the topic sentence and support the reason with details, facts, and quotes from credible sources. It would be very unusual to have a one-line body paragraph in an informative or argument piece of writing.

The conclusion or last part of the essay wraps up the paper and leaves the reader satisfied. In narration, it usually presents a resolution of the conflict or problem or suggests a lesson learned by the characters. It may cause the reader to have to stop and think. In a narrative, the conclusion can be stated as dialogue or feelings of a character or be an observation by the narrator. It could be a paragraph, multiple lines of dialogue, or just a few words. In informative writing, the conclusion is usually very clear and may sum up important points or give a tip. In opinion or argument, the conclusion provides one last chance to state the writer's position and suggests actions the reader may take. With informative, opinion, and argument essays, conclusions are usually one paragraph. In all modes of writing, the author should avoid simply restating what was already said.

Word choice, or diction, is important in all modes of writing. Narrative writing provides an opportunity to use a wide range of vocabulary, especially descriptive and sensory words describing the setting and characters. Common or street language can be used in dialogue if that is how a character in the narrative would speak. Informative and argument writing should use more formal or academic diction and include technical terms, particularly when they are defined or explained. Argument writing also requires an objective tone, that is, word choice that is respectful of all sides of an argument: less emotion and more facts. The wrong choice of words can make or break a piece of writing.

So how do we know if writing is effective? One way is to ask if it meets the intended purpose or goal. Good writing must have the required characteristics of whichever mode the assignment calls for. Therefore, it is key that writers know the distinguishing characteristics of each mode and be sure to include them in their writing.