

The Comparison/Contrast Essay

“How is a subject like other things? How is it different from other things?”

Purpose of Comparison/Contrast Essay

“Do not just compare/contrast in a ‘vacuum.’”

The purpose of a comparison/contrast essay is 1) to assert the superiority of one subject over another and 2) to assist the reader in choosing between two alternatives.

More simply put, the comparison/contrast essay focuses on a *limited number* of similarities and differences within a subject area in order *to prove a point*. It requires a thesis statement that goes *beyond the obvious* stating that a subject is “similar and different.”

However, there are *three* essential “keys” to writing a successful academic comparison/contrast thesis statement are as follows:

- 1) The thesis statement *names* the subject to be compared and contrasted
- 2) The thesis statement establishes a *basis* for comparison and contrast
- 3) The thesis statement gives a *significant main assertion* about the subject to be compared and contrasted

In other words, it is not enough to tell the reader what she or he already knows. It *proves nothing* or does it give a significant main assertion or purpose to write: “Men are different than women.”

The thesis statement needs to establish the *basis* for comparison and contrast. For example, the thesis might focus on the basis of “communication.” In addition to giving the idea of communication, the thesis will give a significant main assertion about this basis of comparison. (e.g. “Because men’s communication styles focus more on factual details than women’s, men tend to be more easily understood.”)

The thesis sentence now has a basis of comparison and an assertion that compares men’s and women’s communication styles.

Next, you must determine specific points of comparison and contrast to develop this thesis.

I have chosen three points one might have used (world view, relationships, and problem solving) to be included in the thesis sentence.

Two Kinds of Comparison/Contrast Organizational Patterns

The thesis establishes the writer's plan for development. In terms of the comparison/contrast essay, the writer can choose how he or she wishes to show the similarities and differences. The two organizational patterns are:

- 1) Block
- 2) Point-by-Point

First, let's consider using a block pattern or structure. After the introductory paragraph, each block or groups of paragraphs within this essay will focus on communication styles and develop the block around the points of:

- a) world view
- b) relationships
- c) problem-solving

"Blocks" or paragraphs of the essay would first focus on the following: men's

- a) world view
- b) relationships
- c) problem-solving style

Then paragraphs or blocks would focus on women's

- a) world view
- b) relationships
- c) problem-solving styles

Block Pattern of Development

Introduction

- a) attention grabber
- b) context of the subject
- c) significance to the reader
- d) thesis

Block Paragraph #1

Focus the topic sentence on men's communication style

Develop the following three points with explanations, examples, and description.

- a) world view
- b) relationships
- c) problem-solving

Block Paragraph #2

Focus the topic sentence on women's communication style

Develop the following three points with explanations, examples, and description.

- a) world view
- b) relationships
- c) problem-solving

Conclusion

However, the writer may choose to organize this essay in a **Point-by-Point** organization style.

In this case, the writer would organize the essay around the three main points or characteristics: world view, relationships and problem-solving. The essay would use the characteristics as focus points within the essay. In the example used here, the essay would cover the first focus point, in this case, world view, to show the similarities and differences in men and women's communication styles. The second focus point, relationships would then show the similarities and differences in men and women's communication styles. The third focus point, problem-solving, would then be developed.

As with the block organizational style, the point-by-point method would have to address the purpose for examining communication styles. This method would address the same questions as the block method.

Point by Point Pattern of Development

Introduction

- a) attention grabber
- b) context of the subject
- c) significance to the reader
- d) thesis

Point #1 World View: different/similar

Men's communication styles are often rooted in reporting facts while women's communication styles are centered on establishing relationships. For example, a male might talk about how his reports are 21% behind schedule due to poor staffing and poor management policies.

On the other hand, a woman using a similar example might talk about the damage she sustained in her relationships to her staff when she discovered that her reports were reduced by 21%.

However, though both communication styles have the common desire to focus on communicating information to a listener, the male style centers on facts, the female style centers relationships.

Point #2 Relationships different/similar

Both men and women may want to communicate a story about a "bad day at the office." Men might begin by recounting the specific details of how the workplace culture is understaffed and underfunded—all of which contributes to "a bad day at the office." Women, on the other hand, might recount the specific details of a "bad day at the office" establishing "common point of

reference” regarding relationships and the workplace. Poor relationships may ultimately contribute to ineffective and unproductive work environment which result in “a bad day at the office.” Again, both are concerned about communicating the specifics of “a bad day at the office.” However, the focus shifts when the communication is be relayed by a male or female.

Point #3 Problem Solving different/similar

If reports do not meet organizational standards, a male might problem solve in his communication about his staff by suggesting they reduce the lunch hour by 15 minutes, thus freeing up more time for work and producing a better workday. Woman, in a similar situation, might problem solve the same situation requiring her staff to participate in an all-day retreat which, in turn, will lead to better relationships and “better days at the office.” In this situation, both men and women have a common goal of better office production, but the ways in which they go about communicating this goal will differ.

Conclusion

Comparison/Contrast Criteria Checklist

- 🍏 Compare and Contrast subjects in the same category (no “apples and oranges” unless the comparison/contrast is based on fruit with seeds)
- 🍏 Be sure your purpose is not classification (a large group) but comparison/contrast (individual items in the same category)
- 🍏 Make sure your Compare/Contrast purpose is ONE of the following:
 - ▶ Assists the reader in choosing between alternatives (argumentation)
 - ▶ Acquaints the reader with unfamiliar information (exposition)
- 🍏 The thesis sentence gives a *significant main assertion* about the topic. The Compare/Contrast mode is an excellent way to support a supposition.
- 🍏 Do have a purpose for comparing and contrasting. **Do not just compare/contrast in a “vacuum.”**
- 🍏 Develop a consistently organized Compare/Contrast pattern. Pick ONE of the following:
 - ▶ Block Pattern
 - ▶ Point-by-Point
- 🍏 Cover the same qualities (or distinguishing characteristics) for each subject or item
- 🍏 The topic sentence should give the reader a sense of which organizational pattern is being used—either block or point-by-point. The actual compare/contrast commentary should be given in the body of the paragraph.
- 🍏 Give each subject or distinguishing characteristic *equal* treatment—balance the support of each subject or characteristic
- 🍏 Use transitional expressions within the body paragraphs to indicate when a comparison or contrast is discussed. (for example: *in contrast to*; *on the other hand*; *similarly*)
- 🍏 Use specific examples and concrete details within the discussion of similarities and differences. (How was “X” different? The same? In what ways does “X” seem the same as “Y”? Different?)
- 🍏 The introduction should give an effective attention-catcher, a *context* for your subject; the significance/purpose of the subject; and the thesis
- 🍏 The conclusion should fully address its final thoughts on the significance of the Compare/Contrast and end the paper effectively