

1.18 Comparing and contrasting

Comparing (finding similarities) and contrasting (finding differences) is a process of analysis which helps you to understand things in greater depth.

Often, the purpose of comparison is to show that things which are considered different are in fact similar; likewise, contrasting can show that things which are considered the same are in fact different. It can also be a first stage in evaluation; by comparing specific aspects of A and B, it is possible to decide which is more useful or valuable.

Note that the term *comparison* is sometimes used in the sense of comparing **and** contrasting.

Structure of a comparison/contrast piece of writing

There are two basic structures that can be used. Imagine you are writing an essay entitled:

Compare and contrast the Higher Education systems in the UK and Japan.

The first alternative would be, after your introduction, to write the first section just on the UK, point by point. This would then be followed by a section just on Japan, mirroring the points made about the UK. Your conclusion would then draw the points together. This structure is perhaps more suitable for a short essay, as in a longer piece of writing the reader may forget what you have said about the first subject.

The second alternative is to approach the comparison aspect by aspect. On balance, this is usually the preferable method. For this essay, you would therefore plan which aspects you want to concentrate on (for example, funding, assessment, entry procedures etc) and write a section on each, comparing the two subjects (here, the UK and Japan) within each section. Your essay plan may therefore look something like this:

Introduction

Aspect 1 : UK	Japan
Aspect 2 : UK	Japan
Aspect 3 : UK	Japan
Aspect 4 : UK	Japan

Conclusion

Whichever approach you adopt, you must:

Be clear about the *purpose* of your comparison. For example, are you trying to *persuade* or *explain*?

Establish the basis upon which the two subjects are to be compared/contrasted.

Language of comparison and contrast

Look at the following examples of the type of language which you may find in this type of writing - (check the [Manchester Phrasebank](#) for more examples).

Introductory Sentences: Differences

X is different from Y in a number of respects.

There are a number of important differences between X and Y.

X differs from Y in a number of important ways.

Smith (2013) found *distinct differences between X and Y.*

Women and men *differ* not only in physical attributes but also in the way in which they...

Introductory Sentences: Similarities

The mode of processing used by the right brain *is similar to that* used by the left brain.

The mode of processing used by the right brain *is comparable in complexity* to that used by the left brain.

The effects of nitrous dioxide on human health *are similar to* those of ground level ozone.

Both X and Y generally take place in a "safe environment".

There are a number of similarities between X and Y.

Numerous studies *have compared* the brain cells in man and animals and found that the cells are *essentially identical*.

Comparison within one sentence

In contrast to oral communities, it is very difficult to get away from calendar time in literate societies.

Oral societies tend to be very much anchored in the present, *whereas* literate societies have a very definite awareness of the past.

Women's brains process language simultaneously in the two sides of the brain, *while* men tend to process it in the left side only.

Comparison within one sentence (comparative forms)

Women are *faster / slower* than men at certain precision manual tasks, such as placing pegs in holes on a board.

Women tend to perform *better / worse* than men on tests of perceptual speed.

Further, men are *more / less accurate* in tests of target-directed motor skills.

The corpus callosum, a part of the brain connecting the two hemispheres, may be *more / less extensive* in women.

Women are *more / less likely* than men to suffer aphasia when the front part of the brain is damaged.

Adolescents are *less likely* to be put to sleep by alcohol than adults.

Women tend to have *greater / less* verbal fluency than men. Men learned the route in fewer trials and made fewer errors than did women.

Comparison across two sentences

It is very difficult to get away from calendar time in literate societies. *By contrast / in contrast*, many people in oral communities have little idea of the calendar year of their birth.

Tests show that women generally can recall lists of words or paragraphs of text better than men. *On the other hand*, men usually perform better on tests that require the ability to mentally rotate an image in order to solve a problem.

Young children learning their first language need simplified, comprehensible input. *Similarly*, low level adult L2 learners need graded input supplied in most cases by a teacher.

Speech functions are less likely to be affected in women because the critical area is less often affected. *A similar pattern emerges* in studies of the control of hand movements.

When comparing and contrasting, you should always try to be as precise as possible. *x is bigger than y* doesn't really tell you very much: you need to make your terms of comparison clear, and then state exactly how much *x* is bigger than *y*. So similarly, stating that *There are 20% more students in Higher Education in the UK than in Japan* only makes complete sense when we know the exact number of students.

Note these phrases (Swales & Feak, 1994):

Almost exactly twice as many boys... A marginally smaller percentage of girls... Slightly over twice as many boys... Close to three times as many boys ... Boys exceeded girls ... by a ratio of 2.5 to 1.

And note the following words and phrases that can be used to make a comparison more precise (Jordan, 1999) :

X is	considerably / a great deal (very) /much / rather /somewhat / a little / slightly	smaller / bigger / cheaper etc.	than...
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X is	exactly / precisely / just / virtually / practically / more or less / almost / nearly / approximately / about	the same as ...
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X is not	exactly / entirely / quite	the same as ...
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X is	totally / completely / entirely / quite	different from Y.	X is not quite so/as	big / expensive etc.	as...
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X and Y are	different / dissimilar	in every way/respect.
	totally / completely / entirely / quite	different.