

COMPARISON/CONTRAST ESSAYS

As well as being one of the most common essay assignments, the comparison/contrast essay is also one of the most commonly misunderstood assignments. Your teachers want you to make connections between texts, ideas or subjects and by reflecting on the similarities and the differences, you should be able to get a deeper understanding of the items, how they are related to each other and what is the most important about them. However, many students simply give a description of the differences and similarities, rather than an analysis, and falling into this trap is why writing this type of essay can be difficult.

What does it mean to compare and contrast?

A comparison shows how two subjects are similar. A contrast shows how two subjects are different.

Sometimes it's easy to understand what your teacher wants you to do in your essay, like in these essay questions:

Compare and contrast William Blake's two poems, "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found."

Compare WWI to WWII, identifying similarities in the causes and outcomes of the two wars.

Contrast Shakespeare's and John Donne's sonnets; what are the major differences in their poetry?

Other times, the assignment will not be so specific, and comparing/contrasting will only be one aspect of the essay, leading you to develop your own argument.

Choose a theme (such as love, death or childhood) you feel is predominant in two modern poems and consider how the poems treat them.

How do the different authors we have studied define and describe racism?

How to find the similarities and differences

Who/What/When/Where/How

Begin by asking yourself these questions about the types of things you are about to compare.

Historical Periods/Events

When did they happen? What happened in each? What changed because of each? Who was involved? Why are these two events significant? What caused these events?

Ideas/Theories

What are they about? When did they each originate? Who created them? Who used them? Who uses them now? What does each one claim? Which is more believable to you? What kind of evidence do they use to prove they are right?

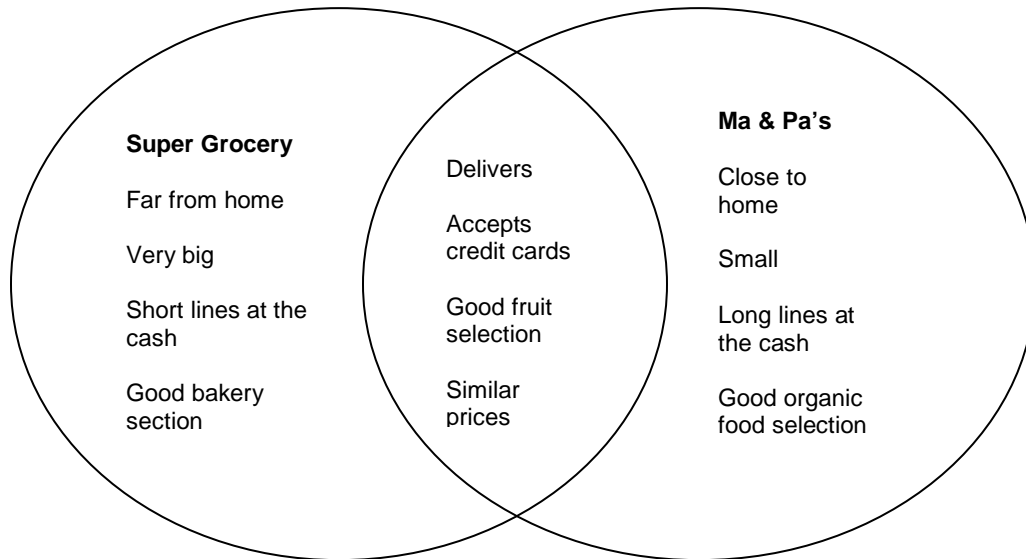
Literature

What are they titled? What do they describe or talk about? What is the tone? What is the form? Who wrote them? When were they written? What themes are in them?

Organization

There are a few ways you can organize your thoughts when first sitting down to write the comparison/contrast essay, such as the **Venn diagram**. This method can help you to quickly compare and contrast two things or ideas. Draw two circles, one for each item you are thinking about, and have them overlap one another.

Here's an example, using two grocery stores:



After you have finished brainstorming the differences and the similarities, you should work on developing your thesis statement.

The Thesis Statement

Avoid using vague or general claims on the topic. For example, "This paper will compare and contrast two grocery stores, Ma & Pa's and Super Grocery" or "Ma & Pa's and Super Grocery are similar and different at the same time" are weak thesis statements, and something more detailed should be included. A more appropriate thesis statement might be, "While the prices at both Super Grocery and Ma & Pa's are very similar, Ma & Pa's is still the smarter grocery store option, as it's closer to home, has a family-run atmosphere and offers a better selection of organic foods." Always make sure the thesis makes an argument, and doesn't just state the differences and similarities.

Transitional words/phrases are important in a comparison and contrast essay. They allow you to make your papers smoother and easier to read and help provide organization. Most importantly for the comparison and contrast essay, transitional words improve the connections that you are trying to make!

Also, although, again, at the same time, but, compared to, contrasted with, conversely, despite, even though, however, in contrast, in the same way, like, likewise, nevertheless, on the contrary, on the other hand, regardless, similar to, similarly, still, while

Format and Outline

Here is one of the most commonly used methods for organizing a comparison and contrast essay. In this one, you briefly discuss both texts and their connection to your topic, and then each paragraph that follows should address a point of difference or similarity, followed by the relationship of that point to each text. Make sure you include examples from the texts to prove your argument!

1. Introduction
 - a. Introduce the subject
 - b. Thesis statement
2. Brief explanation of 1st text/idea
3. Brief explanation of 2nd text/idea
4. First comparative point
 - a. Relationship of this point to the 1st text/idea
 - b. Relationship of this point to the 2nd text/idea
5. Second comparative point
 - a. Relationship of this point to the 1st text/idea
 - b. Relationship of this point to the 2nd text/idea
6. Third comparative point
 - a. Relationship of this point to the 1st text/idea
 - b. Relationship of this point to the 2nd text/idea
7. Conclusion

Here is a quick example of a comparison and contrast essay, using this method.

Compare and contrast the idea of utopia in Thomas More's novel Utopia and Aldous Huxley's novel A Brave New World.

1. Introduction
 - a. Brief discussion of the idea of utopia
 - b. Though both authors attempt to present a utopian society in their novels, each "utopia" is soon revealed to be a dystopia through the representation of religion, government and public opinion.
2. Thomas More's Utopia – how is it presented as a utopia?
3. Aldous Huxley's A Brave New World – how is it presented as a utopia?
4. Religion
 - a. Relationship of this point to Utopia
 - i. Discussion and examples from text
 - b. Relationship of this point to A Brave New World
 - i. Discussion and examples from text
5. Government
 - a. Relationship of this point to Utopia
 - i. Discussion and examples from text
 - b. Relationship of this point to A Brave New World
 - i. Discussion and examples from text
6. Public Population
 - a. Relationship of this point to Utopia
 - i. Discussion and examples from text
 - b. Relationship of this point to A Brave New World
 - i. Discussion and examples from text
7. Conclusion
 - a. Restate thesis
 - b. Brief summary on how you proved this