

Comparison/ Contrast

In an essay that considers two subjects, commonly called a Comparison/Contrast essay, the writer focuses on the ways in which two subjects of the same class are similar to (this is the *comparison*) and/or different from (this is the *contrast*) one another. Most student essays will concentrate primarily on either similarities (producing a Comparison essay that may include elements of contrast) or differences (producing a Contrast essay that may include considerations of similarities).

In an effective Comparison/Contrast essay, the thesis offers more than a simple claim that the two subjects are alike or dissimilar by offering an arguable claim about the effects of the similarities and/or differences between two subjects.

Comparison/Contrast assignments challenge writers to make connections between two subjects, engage in critical thinking, and go beyond mere description or summary to generate interesting analysis. Reflecting on similarities and differences provides deeper understanding of the items being compared and contrasted, their relationship to each other, and what is most important about them.

TIPS:

Prewriting: Lists and charts can be very helpful prewriting steps for Comparison/Contrast essays.

Thesis: The thesis of your Comparison/Contrast essay is very important because it can reveal a focused essay and give the audience a road map to follow. As in any essay, you will want to replace vague previews of your general topic with a more detailed and specific claim. For example, if you were writing a Comparison/Contrast essay about restaurants, you would avoid theses like these:

“This essay will compare and contrast two pizza places.”

“Nick’s Pizza Palace and AJ’s Pizza Planet are similar in some ways and different in others.”

“Nick’s Pizza Palace and AJ’s Pizza Planet are similar in many ways, but they have one major difference.”

Instead, offer the thesis as a more specific claim:

“Nick’s Pizza Palace and AJ’s Pizza Planet offer similar prices and ingredients, but their atmospheres, locations, and customer service set them apart.”

N.B. This thesis offers elements of both comparison and contrast, but the essay will focus primarily on *contrasting* the two subjects.

Additional revision might produce an even more specific thesis:

“Nick’s Pizza Palace and AJ’s Pizza Planet both offer a greater variety of ingredients than other Portland pizza places, but the central location, friendly staff, and funky, lively atmosphere at Nick’s Pizza Palace make it a better choice for a great meal.”

N.B. This thesis offers elements of comparison and contrast, but the essay will focus primarily on *contrasting* the two subjects. More importantly, this thesis offers a specific arguable claim about the relationship between the two subjects: Nick’s Pizza Palace is better than AJ’s Pizza Planet.

Organization: The two most common strategies for organizing Comparison/Contrast essays are:

Block Method: the essay presents all of the analysis of one subject, then all of the analysis of the next subject. In our example, the first half of the essay would be about AJ’s Pizza Planet (ingredients, locations, staff, and atmosphere) and the second half would be dedicated to Nick’s Pizza Palace (ingredients, locations, staff, and atmosphere). Block method is suitable only for very short Comparison/Contrast writing, probably no more than a page in length.

Shuttle Method: the essay presents one point of comparison/contrast at a time, considering both subjects. In our example, the essay would consider ingredients at AJ’s Pizza Planet and Nick’s Pizza Palace, locations of AJ’s Pizza Planet and Nick’s Pizza Palace restaurants, staff at AJ’s Pizza Planet and Nick’s Pizza Palace, and atmosphere at AJ’s Pizza Planet and Nick’s Pizza Palace.

“Fair Play”: In a Comparison/Contrast essay organized according to either method, the principle of “fair play” requires the writer to dedicate roughly the same amount of text to each subject in order to eliminate concerns about bias.

Transitions: In a Comparison/Contrast essay, transitions are very important because they allow the audience to follow the essay from point to point *and* from subject to subject.