



Learning Centre

COMPARISON & CONTRAST WRITING (extended)

Comparison and contrast focuses on the similarities and differences between two or more separate things. The purpose for using comparison and contrast in academic writing is to explain how these similarities and differences reveal something meaningful that is not apparent when either object stands alone. This writing should:

- introduce a fresh insight or new way of viewing something
- bring clarity to one subject by comparing it with another
- add commentary to an important concept or issue

In compare and contrast writing, at least two subjects or objects of interest are studied. The writer must be able to explain these two subjects separately and make meaningful connections between them at the same time. It is also important to include both similarity and difference in your analysis; the analysis is more useful and complete if similarity and difference are both discussed so that the significant similarity or significant difference takes on its full meaning.

Here are some examples of what could be compared:

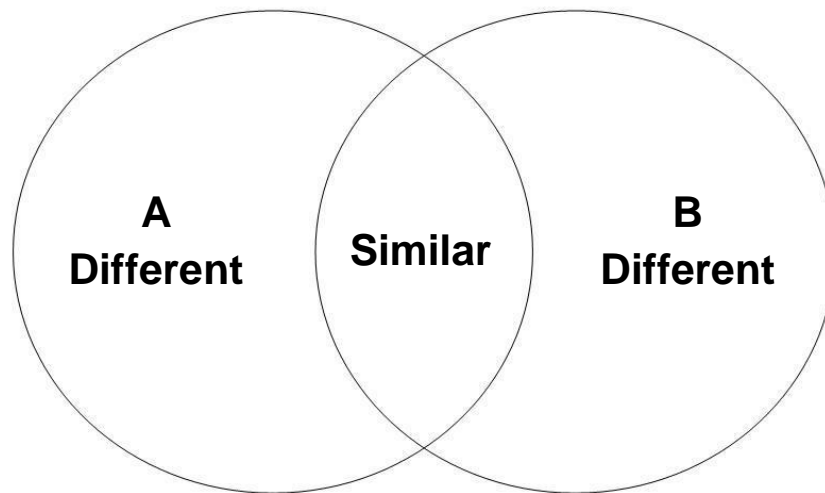
- two approaches or theories
- two films, novels, poems or other forms of art
- two characters
- two of your own experiences

This handout discusses basic formats for comparison and contrast writing. If you are not sure what format to use, ask your instructor what they expect. The following pages describe both how to discover significant points of comparison and how to organize the writing once you know the points you want to make. At the end, an example is provided from an essay by Richard, a Learning Centre tutor. However, you should note that Richard's essay provides only one example of how to apply compare/contrast writing principles. His entire essay is based on a compare/contrast structure, but it's also possible to use comparison and contrast in only one paragraph or as one section of a larger paper.

Discovering Similarities & Differences

Many strategies can be used to brainstorm ideas for compare/contrast writing. Some of these involve using diagrams and charts to help visualize and organize thoughts and ideas.

Venn Diagram



A Venn Diagram is helpful for *brainstorming* as many similarities and differences as possible. When analyzing the subjects or items, it's important to explore both the similarities and differences as completely as possible to fully understand what is most significant or meaningful about the two items in relation to each other. For example, even if your emphasis will be on differences, examining similarities provides the starting point for then showing the differences.

Idea Chart

Key Points	Taking the Bus to School	Driving to School
Cost	<i>Money Saver</i>	<i>Expensive</i>
Time	<i>Longer Travel Time</i>	<i>Shorter Travel Time</i>
Convenience	<i>Less Convenient</i>	<i>More Convenient</i>
Environment	<i>Better for Environment</i>	<i>More Pollution</i>

An Idea Chart is helpful for *organizing* and *listing* similarities and differences. Filling in the blanks is a great way to discover key points you will use to organize the paper.

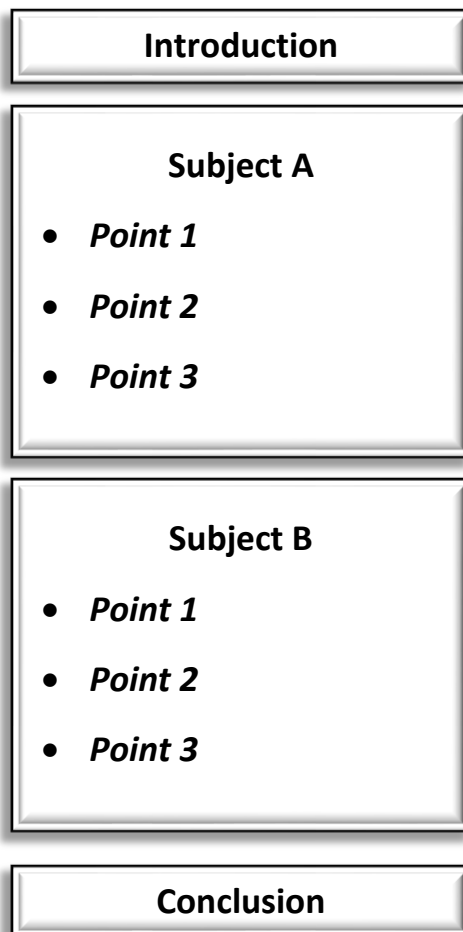
Structuring Compare/Contrast Writing

There are 2 basic structures for organizing compare and contrast writing:

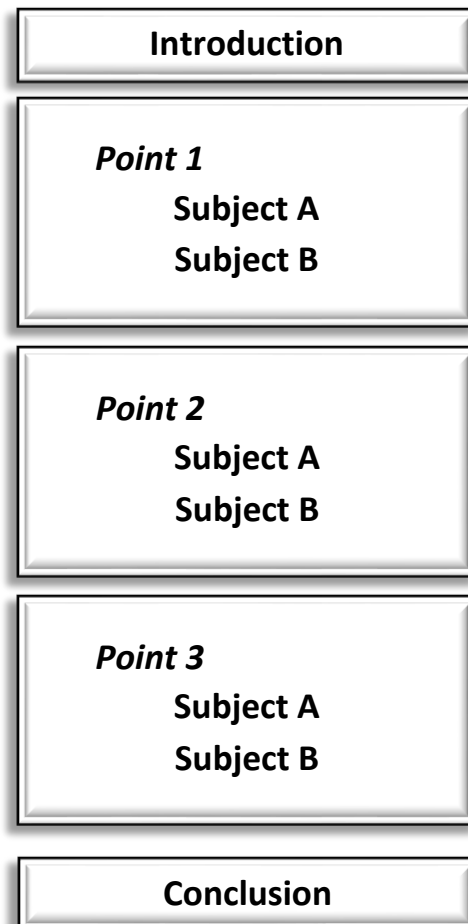
Subject-by-subject: One subject is fully discussed before the second. When using this structure, it's important to remember that comparisons must be made between each subject. Otherwise, the two paragraphs won't relate to one another. So, when discussing the second subject, remember to compare each point to the points of the first subject. See the essay near the end of this handout for an example.

Point-by-point: Both subjects are discussed with each point of comparison. This structure requires frequent transitions between each subject. Consequently, it's important to use clear transitions when writing with this structure. One paragraph could be used to compare both subjects. However, if there is a large amount of information, it's best to dedicate an individual paragraph for each subject's point.

Subject by Subject



Point by Point



Surface and Depth

When using comparison and contrast in academic writing, it's important to make an argument that contains critical analysis and not just a summary of how two things are similar or different. This can be understood by recognizing the difference between *surface ideas* and *depth*.

A surface idea is simply an observation of similarity or difference. For example, the statement “*Driving to school costs more than taking the bus to school*” is a surface idea. The statement tells us how there is a difference between driving and taking the bus, but it doesn't offer insight as to why this difference matters. In other words, it doesn't offer depth.



Think of the reader like this fisherman. He can see the surface of the water clearly with his own eyes, but he doesn't know what is under the water's surface. Similarly, readers won't know what is under the surface of your argument, unless you explain it to them.

The following example paragraph compares the costs of taking the bus to school and driving to school. Pay attention to how the paragraph compares each option and then suggests why it is significant to recognize the difference in cost. Also, notice the underlined cue words that alert the reader to the contrasting points.

Driving a vehicle to school is much more expensive than riding the bus, which makes public transit the economic option for students. The daily cost for fuel and parking is significantly greater than the daily cost of bus fare. On average, students pay between \$8.00 and \$13.00 each day for gas and parking. With fuel costs hovering around \$1.40 per liter and parking rates near \$1.25 per hour, it quickly becomes a large expense to drive to school. In contrast, the daily cost for bus fare is roughly between \$5.00 and \$9.00, and students can lessen this cost with a U-pass. Indeed, public transit is a much smaller expense than driving; the difference between these daily costs can add up to hundreds of dollars each year. Furthermore, driving to school is significantly more expensive when one considers the additional costs of owning a vehicle. Paying motor vehicle insurance can cost between \$140 and \$350 each month, and vehicle maintenance can be hundreds or thousands of dollars each year. These are major expenses, and so, for students who are occupied with their studies and have relatively low incomes, taking the bus to school is certainly more economic than driving a vehicle.

Transitions

Because comparison is all about making connections between two or more different objects, compare/contrast writing will frequently alternate between ideas. Cue words and transitional phrases are important to use when transitioning between objects and ideas. They help readers follow the discussion and keep track of how an argument progresses.

A transition can be a single word, a phrase, a sentence, or an entire paragraph, depending on the size of the comparison or contrast being made. Regardless of its size and place, a transition functions the same way. First, it reminds the reader of what has come before by directly summarizing or referring to the content of a preceding sentence, paragraph, or section. Then, it helps the reader anticipate or understand the following information that you plan to present.

Transitions within paragraphs:

Within a single paragraph (as in the example “bus versus car” paragraph above), single words and phrases help the reader follow the comparison or contrast. Below is a chart of these kinds of compare/contrast cue words.

Cue Words for Showing a Difference:

<u>Coordinators</u>	<u>Subordinators</u>	<u>Transitions</u>
but	while whereas though although	in contrast on the contrary on the other hand conversely however meanwhile otherwise

Examples:

Joe thinks 8:00 AM is an unreasonable time for class, but Mae thinks it's fine.

While some students hate lab assignments, Anita enjoys them.

Professor Witty's classes are interesting and challenging; in contrast, Professor Standoffish's classes are dull and boring.

Cue Words for Showing a Similarity

<u>Coordinators</u>	<u>Subordinators</u>	<u>Transitions</u>
and	just as as compared to	similarly likewise in the same way correspondingly at the same time

Examples:

Peter loves political science just as Rhonda loves English Literature.

Mae B. Knot has a great sense of humour; in the same way, her sister Dee Leerious loves a good joke.

Transitions between paragraphs:

A well-planned essay contains paragraphs that are arranged so that the content of one leads logically to the next, and compare/contrast essays especially need clear transitions between paragraphs to help the reader follow the relationship you are developing between the things being compared. By summarizing the previous paragraph and suggesting something of the content of the paragraph that follows, transitions help to clarify the relationship that exists between them. A transition between paragraphs can be a word or two (in contrast, likewise, similarly), a phrase, or a sentence. Transitions can be at the end of the first paragraph, at the beginning of the second paragraph, or in both places.

Transitions between sections:

It may be necessary to include transitional paragraphs that summarize the information just covered and emphasize how this information relates to the discussion in the following section. These transitions are particularly useful in lengthy pieces of writing that contain multiple sections.

A Sample Essay

Below is Richard's complete essay about two pieces of literature – a poem and a short story. Read the essay and identify the following parts:

1. The introduction
2. The body paragraphs
3. The conclusion
4. The thesis statement
6. The structure of the essay (subject-by-subject OR point-by-point)
7. The surface ideas used for comparison
8. The analysis of each surface idea
9. The transitions used in each body paragraph

Multiple Selves and Relationships

Erving Goffman's theory of dramaturgical analysis proposes that social interaction is a sort of play in which people engage in a number of roles, presenting themselves so they appear in the best possible light. In all social environments, people engage in role-playing and impression management. Thus, there is no single self, just the ensemble of roles one plays in various social contexts (Brym and Lie 81). Since people are constantly engaged in impression management, they produce certain guises that affect the structure of their social relationships. This managing of multiple roles has complex social implications that offers interesting subject matter in literary works about the human condition. For example, Francis Reginald Scott's poem, "The Canadian Authors Meet," describes an author who is frustrated with his peers for their self-concealment, and he believes their artistic progress has become stagnant as a consequence of their unwillingness to be true to one another. Another work that contains this theme is Madeleine Thien's short story, "Simple Recipes," which tells of a woman who struggles to accept the aspects of her father's character that he reveals during her family's integration into Canadian society. Taken together, these literary works demonstrate how the concealing or revealing of oneself can create stability or volatility in relationships, without suggesting how either method of interaction would generally be desirable.

In Scott's poem, the characters perform self-concealment within a public social group that maintains a hindered but stable relationship as a result. This meeting of Canadian authors is described as fairly large and impersonal due to the nature of the event and the interaction within it. The speaker observes these attributes in how "Miss Crochet ... sails / from group to chattering group" (Scott 3-5). Relationships that are formed in these social settings tend to be limited to

acquaintance because the space is more public than personal, and impression management becomes more pronounced as a result. This is apparent in the exaggerated politeness of the speaker's company as they greet strangers "with a cheer" (Scott 7) and measure one another for their "faith and philanthropics" (Scott 11). A stable social relationship seems to be created by the group as they engage in this role of a 'polite party guest.' However, the speaker expresses contempt in the disciplinary progress of the authors, calling them "virgins of sixty who still write of passion" (Scott 8). He skeptically describes his peers' behaviour as "selfsame welkin ringing" (Scott 20), indicating they are attempting to glorify self-image rather than share literature and develop as writers. The facade that the authors assert over themselves manages to maintain a positive social atmosphere, but it also hampers the members from progressing as artistic individuals.

Another form of self-concealment that the characters carry out in "The Canadian Authors Meet" is through cultural roles. The speaker makes many satirical observations that appear to suggest the authors are acting like British aristocrats. For example, he specifically indicates that group members are socializing "[b]eneath a portrait of the Prince of Wales" (Scott 2), which is a distinct icon of British pride. In addition, he mentions that the authors are praising one another for "[t]heir zeal for God and King" (Scott 12) – the two most significant figures in a traditional British monarchy. Among these illustrations, the speaker also mockingly proposes that the group might like to "[a]ppoint a poet Laureate this Fall" (Scott 15), an action only done by the British sovereign on special occasions, and "have another cup of tea" (Scott 16), which is a quintessential British stereotype. Clearly, his colleagues are concealing their Canadian identities by playing the role of a British aristocrat. The reward of this role-playing, the speaker jests, is to enjoy the sweet "feeling / [t]hat one is mixing with the *literati*" (Scott 14). Instead of exchanging critiques like professional writers, the group mingles as if they are an upper class social club, contributing to the Canadian authors' relational stability, but also perpetuating their creative languish. This poem demonstrates how extreme levels of self-concealment can provide strong security to social relations, but can also cause them to become monotonous and undesirable.

A very different relationship is illustrated in Thein's short story. In "Simple Recipes," the characters interact in a small social group and gain a better understanding of one another, but the revealing of true self causes instability in their family bonds. Unlike the setting within "The Canadian Authors Meet," the interaction within families is less guarded and results in the members knowing one another well. Case in point, the speaker initially describes her father as a "magician" or "man of tricks," indicating her lack of understanding of his 'mysterious' character, whereas later she explains that she has seen all sides of him, meaning that she has come to know him in more detail as a person (Thein 504). In contrast to the Canadian authors, these characters are able to become more than acquaintances. During the early stages of their relationship, the speaker states that she possesses an unconditional quality of love for her father (Thein 503). However, after the father enters a state of rage and cruelly punishes her brother, she struggles to accept his darker side and still love him (Thein 504). As a result of the father revealing negative aspects to his character, their relationship becomes volatile. The intimate interaction within this

family allows for deeper understandings between its members, but their emotional ties are much less stable than those of the group in Scott's poem.

Similar to the characters in "The Canadian Authors Meet," the family members in Thein's story act out cultural roles that influence the exposure of their personalities and affect the stability of their relationship. For example, the speaker's brother takes the role of a Canadian adolescent and detaches himself so far from his family's culture that he forgets his native language and avoids being home during the day (Thein 498). It is not entirely clear if he is revealing who he is as a Canadian citizen or if he is concealing his cultural background in order to fit into Canadian society. However, it is clear that the cultural role he has chosen has led him to not cooperate with the family and even show complete disrespect for his father's ethnicity by calling him a "chink" (Thein 501). Preceding this incident, it seems as though the father has remained patient with the brother's deviant behaviour for quite some time, which is indicated by the brother's degree of unruliness when he arrives for dinner (Thein 499-501). This suggests that the father may have been attempting to perform the role of a Canadian parent by offering leniency to his 'Canadian' son. But after the confrontation, the father engages the role of a traditional Malaysian parent, inflicting a harsh physical punishment on the brother with a bamboo pole. The father's attempt to assume a foreign role, like the authors in Scott's poem, is in itself a concealment of his true self, and by abandoning that cultural role, he is forced to reveal suppressed parts of his personality. Consequently, this story shows how people come to truly know one another through the revealing of character, but also that there are relational stresses involved that may be undesirable.

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological method of study that focuses on face-to-face communication and attempts to recognize the meaning that people create and attach to their social circumstances (Brym and Lie 15). A reading of these literary works from this perspective provides a rough framework of how different modes of interaction affect people's relationships. To hide the persona behind a social barrier can provide stability to social ties due to the masking of true emotions, but this permanence comes at the cost of relational development due to the lack of truly meaningful interaction. Conversely, to expose the persona can cause volatility in social relations, but this evocative interaction allows for advances in relational development. This represents how relationships constitute perpetual negotiations between the risks and rewards of presenting or distancing oneself.

Works Cited

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- Brown, Russell and Donna Bennett, eds. *Canadian Short Stories*. Toronto: Pearson, 2005. Print.
- Brym, Robert and John Lie, ed. *SOC+*. Toronto: Nelson Education Ltd, 2012. Print.