



Learning Centre

## COMPARISON & CONTRAST WRITING (brief)\*

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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
- show how one subject is better than the other

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

The following pages explain how to do the following:

1. discover useful similarities and differences as you plan the writing
2. structure comparison/contrast writing once you have collected the ideas to write about.

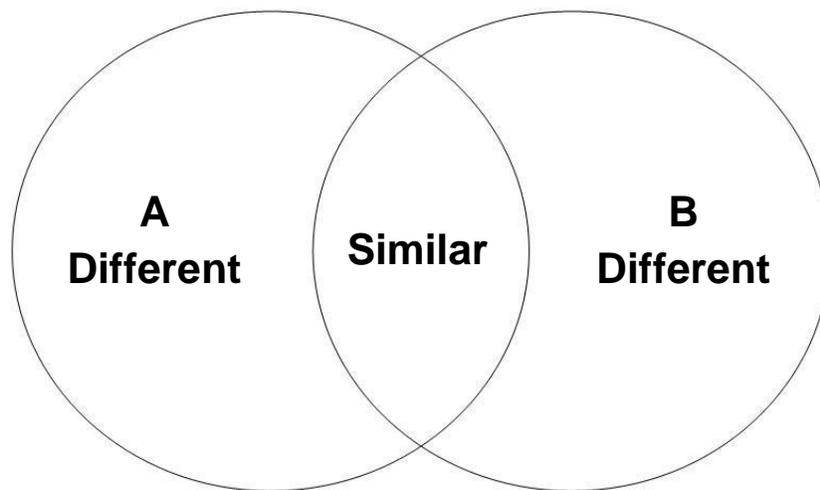
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\* A longer version of this handout, with more examples and explanations, is also available.

## Discovering Similarities & Differences

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

### Venn Diagram



A Venn Diagram helps you brainstorm as many similarities and differences as possible. Make sure you explore both similarities and differences to get the full picture of what you could write about.

### 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 the key points you will use to organize the paper.

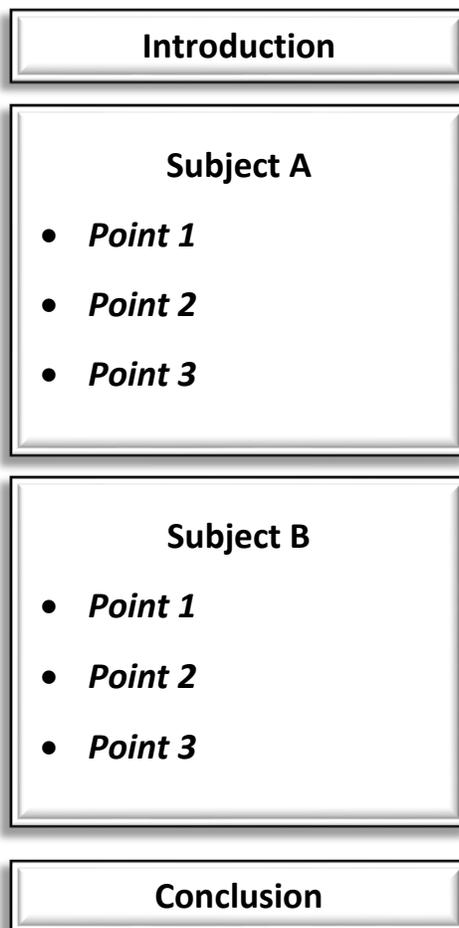
## Structuring Compare/Contrast Writing

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

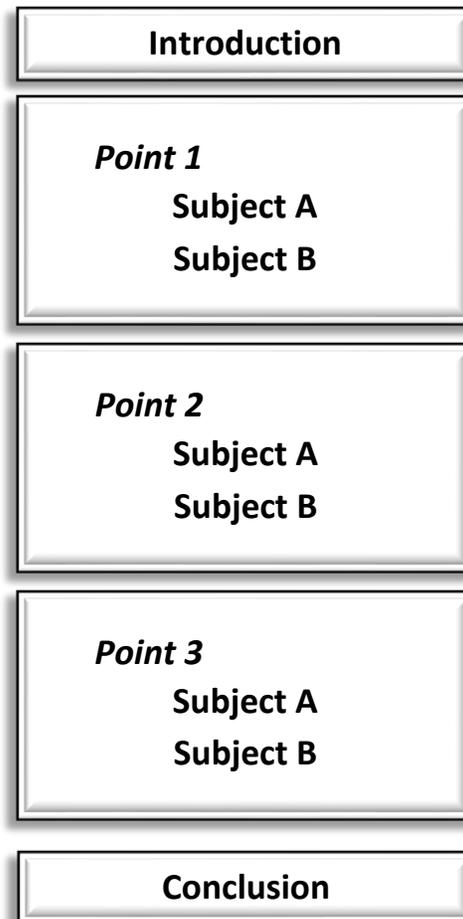
**Subject-by-subject**: One subject is fully discussed before the second. When using this structure, it's important to remember that comparisons must be made between each subject. Otherwise, the two paragraphs won't relate to one another. So, when discussing the second subject, remember to compare each 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 writing compare and contrast essays, 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, to say that it *costs more to drive to school than it costs to take the bus to school* is a surface idea. The idea 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, a comparison essay 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 the argument progresses.

### When 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:

- *He thinks 8:00 AM is an unreasonable time for class, but she thinks it's fine.*
- *While most 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.*

### When Showing a Similarity

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

#### 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.*