

Writing Tip Sheet: Writing a Comparison Essay

At its most basic, comparison means to describe the similarities and/or differences between two or more items. However, when you are asked to write a comparison essay, you need to do more than that. Some sort of claim must drive the comparison. You don't compare for the sake of comparing; you compare because you have a point you wish to make and comparison is the best means to make this point. Comparison works as a means, not an end.

Almost everyone can compare, but fewer people can write a truly effective comparison essay. If you keep in mind the following suggestions, you can include yourself in this more select group.

1) The objects you compare must be comparable.

Sometimes your instructor assigns you the items to be compared. However, a lot of the time you are given freedom to select your own objects of comparison. Here you need to exhibit care. You can't just pick two objects at random. While theoretically you can compare *any* two buildings in existence, how many of these comparisons would be relevant? A critical rationale is required and this rationale must be apparent in your essay. Your reader wants to know why you have decided to compare and contrast these objects.

Take a comparison between Frank Lloyd Wright's *La Miniatura* with Green & Green's *Gamble House*. You might have been drawn to these two houses because of your own aesthetic sensibility and/or personal history. But the critical rationale for picking these two houses would be their connections: to the Arts and Craft Movement, their location, and the fact that they are examples of renowned designers' art.

Or consider the student who intended to compare Boston's Tobin Bridge to the Nike store on Newbury Street. Perhaps there was a reason for this comparison, but it was not made clear. As a result, the comparison was almost nonsensical. (Fortunately, the student ended up comparing the Tobin to the Brooklyn Bridge.)

2) You need to have a thesis statement.

As mentioned above, some sort of claim must drive the comparison. Perhaps the biggest single problem with comparison essays is that many writers don't state a claim. They compare two items, and the comparison may even be relevant, but the comparison is the means *and* the end. There is no greater point.

So you need to have some sort of thesis statement. This is your statement of purpose for your paper. It tells the reader why you are making your comparison.

To check to see if your paper has a point, identify what you believe to be your thesis, and ask yourself – "So what?" If you can answer this question successfully, then you have a sufficient thesis. Consider the following two statements:

Weak: The Brooklyn and Tobin Bridges are both bridges that cross rivers. (*Does this really pass the “So what?” litmus test? You are just stating a fact! This is not a thesis.*)

Stronger: By examining the design of the Tobin and Brooklyn Bridges we can see where the Tobin’s builders went wrong and left us with a monstrosity crossing the Mystic River. (*Here there is a clear point.*)

Another thing to keep in mind with your thesis is not to just state your intentions, but to actually make a claim.

Weak: I will compare *La Miniatura* and the *Gamble House*. (*This just tells the reader what you want to do, not why you are doing it.*)

Stronger: Frank Lloyd Wright’s *La Miniatura* and Green and Green’s *Gamble House* emphasize the interaction of the family unit. (*Here a point is being made. The fact that you are making a comparison is implicit in this claim. Trust that your reader will understand that.*)

For more about this topic, please see the tip sheet “Thesis Statements.”

3) Make sure the body of the paper supports the thesis.

It can be relatively easy to come up with a claim to serve as your thesis. It can also be easy to come up with a series of comparison points. What is less easy, however, is making sure these comparison points *connect back* to your thesis.

For instance, consider the previous example about the Tobin Bridge vs. the Brooklyn Bridge. This student might discuss the types of bridges they are. He might say: “The Tobin Bride is a cantilevered truss while the Brooklyn Bridge is a classic suspension bridge.”

This is fine as a comparison point, but he can’t just stop there. He needs to connect the point back to his thesis (the Tobin is a “monstrosity”) and make these observations refer to his claim.

Don’t assume the reader will automatically understand the full import of your comparison points. You may state that two interiors use the same lighting, and you may provide a fair amount of detail to show the reader the two spaces. However, also make sure you explain the significance of the fact that they share this characteristic. Why is it important? Why does it matter? How does this information support your overall thesis? Just listing detail is not enough. You need to make sure the reader makes the connections.

4) Provide clear context for the reader.

This may seem self-evident but be sure to clearly introduce the items being compared before you begin comparing them. You would be surprised at how many people start throwing out comparison points without even making an announcement as simple as this. By the end of your introduction, your reader should know what is being compared

and why the comparison is being made (the latter being your thesis). If you do not provide this information, you are *not* being reader friendly. If your reader does not understand your essay, you have no one to blame but yourself.

5) Be consistent in how you structure your essay.

What you discuss for one item must be discussed for the other. This means that you are consistent in how you lay things out in the paper. Comparison essays by their very nature are “parallel.”

There are three primary structures you can adopt when comparing, and all three require consistency.

Grouping/Chunking

When employing this structure, you discuss each item separately in its entirety. You “chunk” the information together. However (as mentioned above), the sections should have a parallel structure. If, in your discussion of *La Miniatura*, you talk about ornamentation first and fireplaces last, then for the *Gamble House*, you should talk ornamentation first and fireplaces last.

In some ways, chunking is the easiest structure to employ—there is no need to juggle two items in one paragraph. For short essays it may be the structure of choice. However, chunking cannot sustain a long essay because if you go on for more than one or two pages, there is just too much information for the reader to keep in mind. Plus essays that use the chunking structure, unless you employ careful transitions, can feel like two separate papers.

Here is what this structure looks like in outline form:

- Introduction w/ thesis
- Body: Make comparison
 - Item A - Discuss Item A completely, no overlap with B (provide concrete examples)
 - Item B - Discuss Item B completely, no overlap with A (provide concrete examples)
- Conclusion

Point-by-Point

In this set up, you make a point first, then discuss BOTH objects being compared. For instance in the *La Miniatura/Gamble* comparison, your first comparison point might be about fireplaces. You might look at the height of the chimneys in both structures, then discuss both structures at the same time. You may discuss both in the same paragraph, or you may find it necessary to have separate paragraphs for each. (This depends on how much information you provide.)

When you have finished your first point, move on to your second, again discussing both items.

Parallel structure/consistency is again important here. If you discuss item A in your first point, don't suddenly reverse order and discuss item B first in your second point (unless you can give a good reason). Whether you realize it or not, the order you present

information gives cues to your readers. If item A came first before, they expect to see item A come first later. Changing without warning can confuse them. This is how this structure looks in outline form:

Introduction w/ thesis

Body: Comparison made

 Comparison Point #1

 Item A & B (provide concrete examples/evidence)

 Comparison Point #2

 Item A & B (provide concrete examples/evidence)

 Comparison Point #3

 Item A & B (provide concrete examples/evidence)

Conclusion

Similarities & Differences

In some ways this is a combination of the above two structures. You “chunk” similarities and differences, but list them point-by-point.

The outline looks as follows:

Introduction with thesis

Similarities

 Similarity #1

 Item A & B (provide concrete examples/evidence)

 Similarity #2

 Item A & B (provide concrete examples/evidence)

Differences

 Difference #1

 Item A & B (provide concrete examples/evidence)

 Difference #2

 Item A & B (provide concrete examples/evidence)

Again, consistency is something to keep in mind. If you start with a similarity, do not jump to a difference and then back to a similarity, unless you have a good reason (one that the reader can see).

Overall, this may be the most sophisticated of the three structures discussed here. But if you are consistent in your presentation, your essay should be clear.

6) Remain committed to your structure.

When you write a comparison, be aware of the structure you have selected. Don't begin by chunking and then, halfway through the paper, suddenly shift to a point-by-point essay. This will probably confuse your reader and may undercut your credibility.

For additional tips about how to write an essay, please see the tip sheets *Argument Structure*, *Thesis Statements*, and *Introductions and Conclusions*.