

Chapter 10: The Comparison Essay



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Why Write a Comparison Essay?

Comparison/contrast is important because it is a useful tool for critical decision-making. Whether you are buying a new car or choosing a university, it is important to master the art of this critical writing and thinking skill. In writing the comparison/contrast essay, students often engage with the rhetorical strategy because it is an easy genre for them to develop topics and ideas. Since we compare and/or contrast things all of the time, students spend less time struggling to find a topic and more time working on the necessary skills to conquer this kind of paper. In addition, in writing the comparison/contrast, students learn to differentiate between two or more objects seeing how they are similar or how they are different.

Here are a couple of examples. If a photographer wants a new camera, that person may contrast Canon and Nikon. Or if someone wants a new cell phone, that shopper may contrast Samsung and Apple. In these two examples, the writers would develop criteria for contrasting the two companies and their products, and then based upon their criteria, they would identify which item they would purchase. These are two of the basic examples of how we use compare and contrast every day.

Another way we use comparison and contrast is through juxtaposition. Juxtaposition places two items close together to create a specific effect, or so readers or viewers can draw conclusions by comparing their similarities or contrasting their differences.

Understanding the Basics of Comparison

First, what is the difference between comparing two items and contrasting two items? If we want to examine the similarities between two items, we compare them. If we want to look at their differences, then we contrast them. Often comparison/contrast explores both similarities and differences. For the purposes of this essay strategy, the term “comparison” will mean looking at both similarities and differences.

In choosing topics, writers must select item that have a **basis of comparison** (something that they both share in common) before they can see the similarities and differences between them. For example, one would not compare an apple with a flight attendant. One would not contrast a dog and a peanut. There must be some basis for comparing the two items. One could compare apples and oranges because they are both fruit, or one could contrast Dell computers with Apples because they both are brands of computers. “Fruit” or “computer” would be the basis in comparison for each of these topics.

To further develop the comparison, consider the following example: The photographer who is contrasting Nikon and Canon is contrasting cameras. But, even that is vague. Writers would want to make sure that they contrasting the same type of camera: two DSLRs with **similar qualities**: cost, number of pixels, lenses, other miscellaneous items that may be included with the purchase. If contrasting a regular Nikon 35mm film camera with a Canon Rebel DSLR, one would not be able to draw clear conclusions. They are completely different kinds of cameras.

Prewriting Strategy

The first stage of the writing process is always topic generating and freewriting. Use the topic generating and freewriting techniques described in Chapter 1. After completing these steps, let’s say you determine you want to compare two DSLR cameras, the Nikon and Canon. Generate as many points of comparison you can think of and place them in a map or grid like the one below. Then fill in as many details as possible. This will give you content for your essay and a way to organize them.

	Nikon D7000	Canon 60D
Price	\$685, extra cost for specific lenses, tripod is separate cost	\$999, specific lenses included, tripod is separate cost
Image quality	16.2 megapixels	18 megapixels
Shutter speed	6 frames per second, 100 shots, good for still objects, portraits	5.3 frames per second, good for continuous shooting, great for action sports like car racing or basketball
Auto-focus system	Dynamic ISO range 100-6400	Dynamic ISO range 100-6400, expands to 12800

The Thesis Statement

For many students, the thesis statement can be the hardest and most important sentence in a paper. It identifies the topic and purpose of the paper. Students will need to develop clear and concise thesis statements that identify the point and purpose of the essay while breaking the subjects down into logically developed paragraphs. Thesis statements should always be written in third person. There are two kinds of thesis statements: a basic thesis statement and a listing or mapping thesis statement.

Basic Thesis Statement

Despite a slightly higher price, the Nikon D7000 is a better value than the Canon 60D.

The basic thesis statement identifies the topic and makes an assertion about the topic, stating the position of the writer.

Listing or Mapping Thesis Statement

By contrasting price, image quality, shutter speed and the auto-focus system, it is clear that the Nikon D7000 provides more camera for a slightly higher price than the Canon 60D.

The listing or mapping thesis statement acts like a checklist. In this case, often the writer is not making a judgment; the topic is an explanation rather than an evaluation. The information should be covered in the order listed in the thesis statement. Thus, in a comparison/contrast essay on cameras, the first body paragraph would be on price, the second body paragraph on image quality, the third on shutter speed, and the fourth on the auto-focus system. Writers should have at least three criterion to use to compare or contrast.

Basic Structure

There are two basic formats for the compare/contrast essay: block or point-by-point. Block divides the essay in half with the first set of paragraphs covering one item, the other set of paragraphs covering the other item. So, if the writer is contrasting a Nikon DSLR with a similar priced Canon DSLR, the first set of paragraphs would cover Nikon and the next set would cover Canon. In point-by-point, the writer would cover the two items alternating in each point of comparison (see examples in outlines below).

Block Method

- I. Introduction
- II. Nikon D7000
 - A. Price
 - B. Image Quality
 - C. Shutter Speed
 - D. The Auto-focus System
- III. Canon 60D
 - A. Price
 - B. Image Quality
 - C. Shutter Speed
 - D. The Auto-focus System
- IV. Conclusion

Point-by-Point Method

- I. Introduction
- II. Price
 - A. Nikon D7000
 - B. Canon 60D
- III. Image Quality
 - A. Nikon D7000
 - B. Canon 60D
- IV. Shutter Speed
 - A. Nikon D7000
 - B. Canon 60D
- V. The Auto-focus System
 - A. Nikon D7000
 - B. Canon 60D
- VI. Conclusion

Introduction

The introduction is the hook. It is said that first impressions are the most important. This is especially true for essays. Writers only have one opportunity to hook their readers and get them involved, so they need to look at imaginative ways to begin their essays. Some ways to introduce the topic and get the reader involved include telling a story that is related to the topic, ask a question and the thesis answers it, ask a rhetorical question that has no answer but introduces the reader to the subject matter. Usually, the final sentence of the introduction is the thesis statement.

Begin with Narrative (tell a short story)

Topic: Contrasting bike frames and componentry.

Let's say I used to race both mountain and road bikes. If I was writing a contrast essay describing the differences between mountain and road bikes, I could describe what it is like to race down a hill doing 50 mph.

Begin with a question

Topic: Choosing the best smartphone.

Which is better, the Galaxy S5 or the iPhone 5s?

Begin with a rhetorical question

Topic: Contrasting two Las Vegas resorts

Does what happens in Vegas really stay in Vegas?

Conclusion

Conclusions address key points in the essay. Tie the introduction to the conclusion: if you used a quote, refer to that quote again and draw more conclusions from the information; if you began with the story, go back to the story to draw final conclusions from it; if you began with a question that can be answered, then return to that question and answer it. Your conclusion should not just restate the thesis; it should comment on the significance of the thesis. What does your reader know now after reading your essay that wasn't known before?

For more explanation regarding introductions, body paragraphs, conclusions and thesis statements, refer to Chapter 6.



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Questions for Discussion and Analysis

Answer the following questions regarding the essay. Be complete in your explanations, and cite examples or quotes in support of your answer. Use complete sentences with proper grammar, spelling and punctuation.

1. What are the qualities of neat people? Of sloppy people? List them.
2. What is the intent of the essay beyond comparing the two categories? What might the author be trying to justify?
3. Find three examples of humor in the essay. Provide the quotation of each example and explain why you find each funny.

Additional professional readings are available at the PVCC English Division website/PVCC English Resources: <https://pvccenglish.wordpress.com/>

Sample Student Essay

Student Name

Professor Polliard

English 101

20 July 2009

How Did These Jeans Shrink?

1 Like a slap across the cheek, the arrival of extra weight squeezing its way into a favorite pair of jeans appears as a shock for some people. Thinking the washing machine has shrunk the jeans, another pair is recruited. The same thing happens, the zipper won't budge and the seams are barely hanging together across the derriere. How did this happen so suddenly? Let's examine the situation, maybe the fifth slice of pizza every Friday night for the last year has something to do with the attitude problem of these pesky jeans. Perhaps the extra handfuls of mixed nuts or afternoon stacks of Oreos have finally found a home. Starting to see the clear picture the revelation occurs, the revelation to change and to lose weight. For many people, keeping fit and lean is a daily battle. Genetics, lifestyles, busy schedules and family obligations all contribute to reasons why many throw up the white flag and surrender, feeling they have no choice but to be overweight. However, there are two popular and successful weight loss programs available to help us fight and ultimately win that battle: Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers. While both programs offer tips and tools for losing weight and living a healthy, active lifestyle, each program has vastly different methods, including cost and support factors.

2 Between the two programs, Jenny Craig is the more expensive option. First, there is the one-time membership fee which varies anywhere from \$59.00 to \$200.00. After the initial one-time fee is established, the fundamental method of their weight loss program is buying their meals, Jenny Cuisine. The average cost is around \$150.00 per week for Jenny Cuisine and Jenny Vitamins. In addition to the cost of the Jenny Craig food, there is also the cost of buying extra foods needed each week from the market, like fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and low-calorie beverages. The upside of the program is that there is no cooking involved and everything is proportioned correctly and nutritionally balanced. There is virtually no thinking involved and no decisions to be made. A detailed menu spelling out what to eat and when is given to every Jenny Craig client. Being on the Jenny Craig program is as simple as opening a box and flipping on the microwave for three minutes. Voila! Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks for each day of the week are handled. As the client achieves success with Jenny Craig, he or she will then have the option of making meals on his or her own for part of the week, which is a weaning technique used to boost the confidence of the client to eat smaller portions and healthier foods from his or her own kitchen. Therefore, the cost for Jenny Craig

initially is quite steep, especially when considering it is for only one member of the household, the costs do eventually come down based on success in losing weight.

The Weight Watchers approach is quite different. There are no required foods or vitamins to purchase, only meeting fees are required. The cost to attend meetings is \$12.00 per week. If a person has achieved his or her weight loss goals in the past with Weight Watchers and he or she has reached a Lifetime status, the cost for attending the meetings is free. Weight Watchers is essentially about calorie counting, which they refer to as Points. Based on a person's age, sex, weight, height, and activity level a certain number of Points are suggested to consume each day. Every member is encouraged to choose healthy foods to spend his or her Points on to ensure a balanced diet. Guidelines for what to eat and portion sizes are discussed frequently which help each member in his or her daily choices. Ultimately, the decision of what to eat is left to the client. A client can choose to cook all or some of their meals at home from scratch, eat frozen meals or even dine out; the program is all about choice and accountability to one's self. As a result, there is no set food cost involved in the Weight Watchers program. Consider the cost of a normal grocery bill when comparing Jenny Craig to Weight Watchers programs. Chances are the amount of money spent on groceries will remain the same if Weight Watchers is chosen. The Grand Canyon-like cost comparison is clear; being on the Weight Watchers program is cheaper.

Although both Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers are hugely successful weight loss programs throughout the world, each approaches the task of transforming their client's attitudes and bodies with different tools of support and guidance. At Jenny Craig, a client makes an appointment to meet with a weight loss representative for a fifteen minute weekly meeting to track weight, measure inches, discuss any food obstacles, and finally to purchase the upcoming week's food. Although the representative is not a clinical nutrition counselor, the atmosphere is similar to a doctor/patient setting. Jenny Craig's one on one approach may make many feel comfortable to face their weight issues head on, with the private support of their personal Jenny Craig representative.

Weight Watchers, meanwhile, views support in an entirely opposite way. As a member, a Weight Watchers client is invited to the weight loss center any time during the week to attend a group meeting and to have his or her weight privately logged. Free weight loss guides and Points tracking journals are given out for the upcoming week and the atmosphere is party-like. The thirty minute meetings offer discussions on a variety of topics to promote success, make better food choices, become more active, and deal with obstacles that might stand in the way. The camaraderie among members is what keeps members coming back. Members are encouraged to speak up and ask questions, applaud other members' success, or offer suggestions to other members. The Weight Watchers approach is not a do it alone program. Their motto is, "If you don't need the meeting, the

meeting needs you.” Meaning, if you are successfully losing weight or maintaining a healthy weight, your insight might help someone at the meeting, so come!

6 With centers and meeting facilities all over the world, both Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers have proven to be healthy and successful programs for people wanting to lose weight and change their lifestyles permanently. The variation in each program’s approach appeals to many different types of personalities. Jenny Craig offers a private hand-holding type support which also requires a bigger investment. Weight Watchers offers a discounted group therapy approach that encourages individual responsibility and success. Depending on needs and budget, either program is certain to help almost anyone on his or her journey to not only get healthy and lean but feel great from the inside out.

Grader’s comments

- Apostrophe use and comma use rules are not applied consistently.
- Sentence variety is good, but be aware of comma splices.
- Some repetitive wordiness
- Well-organized and well-developed details to support the thesis.

Questions for Discussion and Analysis

Answer the following questions regarding the essay. Be complete in your explanations, and cite examples or quotes in support of your answer. Use complete sentences with proper grammar, spelling and punctuation.

1. Which organizational pattern was used to develop this essay?
2. What were the organizing content traits or “major comparison points” for this essay?
3. What writing strategies were used to enhance the writer’s voice?

Tips for Writing the Comparison

One common mistake students make in writing the comparison is not providing **analysis**. Students present the similarities and differences but forget to explain, analyze, and signify the points presented.

Another common mistake is omitting qualifying transitions, especially when using the block format method. Specific to comparison are the following:

- **Similarities:** *similarly, similar to, like, in addition, also, likewise, at the same time, moreover*
- **Differences:** *different, opposite of, unlike, however, on the contrary, nevertheless, but, yet*

Finally, students often try to compare items that are really too large to have unique characteristics. For example, you can’t compare two countries, but you can compare two countries’ healthcare systems.

Topic Ideas

- Consumer products
- Restaurants
- Sports icons
- Musicians or bands

- Cars or vehicles
- Candidates for government office
- Colleges or universities
- Careers
- Types of drivers
- Parenting styles
- Characters in movies or books
- Theme parks

Chapter Questions for Comprehension

Answer the following regarding the comparison essay referring to the previous information presented here. Be sure to use complete sentences.

1. Briefly describe the two types of organization that may be used in a comparison essay.
2. What one new strategy or insight did you gain by reading the overview?
3. How might you use comparison in your daily life, either personally or professionally? Provide an example.