



TCS Writing Centre

Comparative Essays

People constantly compare things in their daily lives, making comparative essays a very important and useful academic exercise. (We should really refer to what are commonly called “comparison and contrast essays” as “comparative essays” because comparing things includes identifying similarities *and* differences, whereas contrasting things includes identifying just differences. It is this redundant (i.e., unnecessary) to say “compare and contrast”). Comparing takes you, the writer, a step beyond analyzing *one* thing and requires you to examine the similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses, or advantages and disadvantages of *two or more* things. The fact that comparison questions show up frequently on final exams (e.g., “Compare the teaching styles of Miss Brodie from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* with Hector from *The History Boys*”) suggests that comparing requires you to step back and take a broad view of the things being compared, looking at them in a larger context than simply the individual features of each thing being compared.

It is therefore important to remember that just listing facts or features of two things does not constitute a comparison. Comparing is a form of analysis, and a comparative essay requires you to not just list every possible detail about the items, but to select the most relevant ones and organize them **to develop a meaningful point (i.e., your thesis).**

Another trap writers may fall into is to assume that creatively discussing the parallels between two unlike things constitutes a comparison. It does not. For a successful comparison, you must compare things that fall into the same larger group: types of careers, for example, or different courses, or how a particular theme functions in multiple texts. Trying to force a link between two dissimilar things (“Rita’s work as a hairdresser is like Irwin’s work as a history teacher”) usually results in a pointless essay that serves no real purpose. The best way to avoid these pitfalls is to ensure that your comparison has a clear and legitimate purpose.

For example, one might compare Erasmus’s and Luther’s views of free will in order to show that their concepts of human goodness were fundamentally opposed. **Whatever your topic, having a clear purpose in mind is essential in helping you decide which points to include in your comparison and which to exclude.** This means that you need to start work on a comparative essay by brainstorming and determining what your context and purpose is in order to know which points of comparison are most relevant and what you want them to show. To return to the above example on Erasmus’s and Luther’s views of free will, you might choose not to discuss the two thinkers’ childhoods—unless, of course, that is relevant to your central point about their views of human goodness. In general, you should discuss those points which best help you fulfill the comparison’s overall purpose: in other words, those which best help you support your thesis.

In a comparative essay, your thesis will often express a preference for one option over the other, but not always. In any event, your thesis must make an arguable point. Avoid statements like “The choice is ultimately up to each individual person” or “It is impossible to compare two things that are so complex”; such statements are wishy-washy and lack assertiveness.

Tips on Organizing a Comparative Essay

Most comparison essays are organized in one of two ways: whole-to-whole or part-to-part. The whole-to-whole comparison means simply “All A, then all B.” In other words, first you discuss the characteristics of Subject A in relation to your thesis; then you discuss the characteristics of Subject B, as well as how they stack up against Subject A, in relation to your thesis.

The part-to-part comparison means “Point 1 in relation to A and B; Point 2 in relation to A and B,” and Point 3 in relation to A and B, etc.” In other words, you select several points of comparison (in the holiday example above, the three points of comparison are (1) the accessibility and interconnectedness of the trail networks, (2) the climate where the hiking will take place, and (3) the location of essentials like restaurants and accommodation in relation to established trail networks) and discuss them one by one, comparing Subjects A and B in relation to each point.

Which format you use depends on the length and complexity of your essay. The whole-to-whole approach can work well for essay questions on exams or fairly short essays with only one or two points of comparison. Using this format for a longer and more complex essay, however, may create the effect of two separate descriptive essays. Also, by the time readers get to the second half, they may have forgotten some of the details of the first half and may have to keep flipping back and forth. Ultimately, your task is to use the evidence you collect in order to support a thesis, so whatever format helps you do this best is the one you should use. In most cases, however, it makes more sense to use the part-to-part format, discussing both options together in relation to each point of comparison. For instance, for the Erasmus and Luther example mentioned above you might have one paragraph that compares the two men’s views of God, then one paragraph on their views of sin, and then one paragraph on their views of redemption—all for the purpose of supporting a thesis about their opposing concepts of human goodness.