

## Chapter Four

# *Comparing and Contrasting*



“It is good to express a matter in two ways simultaneously so as to give it both a right foot and a left. Truth can stand on one leg, to be sure; but with two it can walk and get about.”

—Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

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## Comparison and Contrast



What makes one car better than another? There are a lot of choices out there. Of course, we typically find ourselves emotionally tied to our car decisions, but what if we were to find ourselves needing to make a more logical choice?

The 2011 Toyota Prius, for example, gets an industry leading fifty miles to the gallon and has a four-star safety rating in crash tests—not bad for a car that has a base model costing just a little over \$22,000 (Toyota Motor North America, 2011). Of course, for all that sensibility, you’ll likely have to sacrifice a lot in terms of the sheer joy of driving it. If you were to purchase such a vehicle, you will probably not turn many heads as you careen down the highway with your four cylinders humming an eco-friendly tune, but you will surely have the satisfaction that you’re doing your part to make the world a better place for your children.

By contrast, the 2011 Ford Mustang gets an incredible thirty miles to the gallon, has a five-star safety rating in crash tests, and the base model is approximately the same price as the Prius (Ford Motor Company, 2011). A Mustang, of course, is a guaranteed head turner, and with its V6 growling, the joy of driving is standard. Since both of these cars are comparable in initial cost, the purchase price isn’t really a factor in our decision. As far as ownership satisfaction, it depends on what you consider to be important: the environmental footprint you leave on this earth or the adrenalin you feel as you press the accelerator to the floor. If you were to get into an accident, the Mustang would hold up better, but then if you choose the Prius, chances are you’ll drive with the same sensibility that caused you to purchase the car in the first place thereby avoiding potential collisions.

Our comparison and contrast of these two vehicles, therefore, seems to rely on lifetime mileage ratings and the vehicle’s ability to raise one’s status in society. Of course, we could bring in factors such as resale value, lifetime maintenance costs, dealer service, and even socio-political factors like the push to buy American products or the need for America to wean itself from foreign oil. A good comparison and contrast essay begins with limitations; you’ll have to choose three or four points of comparison and contrast.



When we compare and contrast, we weigh the pros and cons of an idea, a product, a policy, a practice, etc. We try to find similarities between the things we are comparing (in the above scenario, two similarly priced vehicles) and we try to illuminate the contrast between the two things. In practice, these two methods are generally fused—there are, in most cases, no two subjects that are completely alike. Comparing and contrasting helps us to isolate and examine those differences. By defining and analyzing particular factors—factors that we believe to be important to us and/or our audience—we amass information that can aid us in making a decision, understanding a problem or situation, and eventually proposing a solution or course of action.

Anytime you find yourself comparing two or more subjects side by side or preferring one thing over another, you are comparing and contrasting. It is a natural process. When writing to compare and contrast, however, we need to make sure that our topics are not too distant. Of course, one probably could make a strong comparison between the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt and the mass production of Gummy Bears, but for now, keep it simple. Topics like comparing McDonalds to Burger King, Conservatives to Liberals, or Army basic training to Navy basic training would be good topics, though you may want to distill these down even more. To be clear, comparing subjects that are drastically different, like snowboarding to waterboarding, for example, may be incredibly interesting, but will likely take more time to adequately explore than a more simplified topic.

## Distilling the Process

Once you've found your topic, it's time to start defining what you'd like to compare about your subjects. If you were writing about the difference between getting an on-line or traditional degree, for instance, you might look at factors such as cost, convenience, degree of difficulty, likelihood of getting a job after graduation, and/or quality of the education you'll receive. If you were comparing and contrasting a book and the movie made from that book, you might want to look at the characters, the plotline, dramatic sequencing, quality of experience, and so on.



## Organizing the Comparison and Contrast Essay

You've got your subjects, you've defined the ways they compare and differ in a few, distinct ways. Now it's time to start putting your essay together. Even with the limitations we placed on our comparisons and contrasts, this essay can be difficult without a degree of planning. It is best to start with an outline—to put the information in some sort of order. There are two specific ways of going about this: chunking and sequencing.

### Chunking

Chunking is a method of placing information into groups. Let's go back to our car scenario: if you were to organize your essay according to a chunking model, the body of your essay would first contain information about the Toyota Prius, and then information about the Ford Mustang. Next, you would summarize the similarities and differences of the two vehicles. Your outline would look something like this:

1. Toyota Prius
  - a. Fifty miles to the gallon
  - b. Four-star crash test rating
  - c. \$22000 price tag
  - d. Joy of ownership from being eco-friendly
  
2. Ford Mustang
  - a. Thirty miles to the gallon
  - b. Five-star crash test rating
  - c. \$22000 price tag
  - d. Joy of ownership from driving experience

Note how each factor plays out the same way in each of these “chunks.”

## Sequencing

Another way of going about outlining our essay is sequencing. Sequencing involves separating out the comparison factors and applying them individually to the subject. Consider the following:

1. Miles per gallon
  - a. Prius: Fifty miles per gallon
  - b. Mustang: Thirty miles per gallon
2. Crash test rating
  - a. Prius: four star rating
  - b. Mustang: five star rating
3. Price
  - a. Prius: \$22000
  - b. Mustang: \$22000
4. Joy of Ownership
  - a. Joy from being eco-friendly
  - b. Joy from driving experience

Of course, each of these essays would have an introduction, a thesis/thesis statement, a summary of the comparison/contrast, and a conclusion that leads directly back to the introduction and thesis. Whichever way you choose to organize your essay, make sure your points balance. You can't really discuss the choice of color the Mustang comes in without explaining the color choices for the Prius, just as you can't discuss fears about the gas pedal sticking in the Prius without researching and explaining the potential problems one might have owning and driving a Mustang.

<b>Chunking</b>	<b>Sequencing</b>
Introduction	Introduction
First subject and points	First point
Second subject and points	Second point
Summary	Third point
Conclusion	Summary
	Conclusion



### **Words Commonly Used to Show Similarities and Differences**

The following is hardly an exhaustive list of the words we generally use in comparison and contrast, but they will get you started in the right direction:

<u>To Show Differences:</u>	<u>To Show Similarities:</u>
<b>on the other hand</b>	Similarly
<b>in contrast</b>	Likewise
<b>however</b>	Like
<b>but, yet</b>	And
<b>while</b>	much like
<b>although</b>	have in common
<b>even though</b>	And so on . . .

## Comparing and Contrasting Ideas

Throughout this chapter, we have talked about how to compare and contrast products, people, and so on. Comparing and contrasting also works when we look at ideas. Most argument claims fall into one of three categories: arguments of fact, arguments of values, or arguments of policy. Often, the same essay will include all three types of claims, but in order to determine the nature of the overall argument, we need to look to the thesis. Understanding what type of arguments you're examining can help you to determine how to counter them.



**An argument of fact** argues that something exists, has existed, or will exist. These arguments are generally supported by facts, statistics, examples, and by expert testimony. An example of a fact-based thesis would be:

*The African AIDS epidemic is a direct result of colonialist attitudes and cultural misunderstanding.*

**An argument of values** makes a judgment or expresses approval or disapproval of an action, a belief, or a condition. Value-based arguments work to determine the difference between right and wrong, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, and so on. Taking the same argument and making it an argument of values would result in a thesis like this:

*Because they fail to understand the various, often intertwined cultures affected by AIDS, relief organizations are doing a poor job of helping the African people.*

**An argument of policy** claims that certain conditions should or should not exist. Where arguments of fact and arguments of values are often designed to inspire the audience to take action, arguments of policy ask the audience to do something very particular. Consider this:

*Correcting the AIDS epidemic in Africa demands that relief organizations alter their practices to function within the cultural climate of the people they are serving rather than asking them to alter their way of life in order to get medical treatment.*

Hopefully as you read these examples, you found yourself agreeing or disagreeing with the statements. That's exactly what you should be doing. That's exactly what we will be doing for

the essays in the last half of the course. When we enter the research and argument portion of this course, we highly suggest you research using the EBSCOhost in Grantham's online library system. Find your topic, research both sides of the arguments, and establish your own position. You might be somewhere in the middle or even take a more extreme position than one or more of your articles. Wherever you end up standing, remember to treat both arguments fairly even if you strongly agree or disagree with one or both of them.

## So What?

Because one of the purposes in academic writing is to analyze similarities and differences, you may be tempted in your essays to formulate a thesis that says something like "X and Y have important similarities and differences," or "X is very similar to or different from Y."

For example: "The Republican and Democratic platforms for the 1960 American presidential election were very similar."

This kind of statement is not helpful, and is, quite frankly, boring. You need to ask yourself "So what?" or "Who cares?"

College level writing requires that you say something about what you have learned rather than simply regurgitating the information you encounter. Developing a good thesis for your essays might require you to ask the "So what?" question. What do you learn from having discovered similarities and differences? How does it affect your point of view?

The answer to this question can lead to a thesis statement like:

"A comparison of the Republican and Democratic platforms for the 1960 presidential race reveals so many similarities that one must wonder whether Americans actually have options when they go to the polls."

This is a thesis statement that a reader might find interesting. You can always revise or replace your thesis after your essay is underway.





## Some Final Words

Here are a few things to think about when working with comparison and contrast:

1. Know thy purpose – why are you writing (beyond the grade), will your readers see the purpose from the start of your essay?
2. Know thy subjects – are your subjects close enough to warrant a comparison and different enough for you to write an essay on them?
3. Know thy thesis – is your thesis defined enough to cover all of the relevant similarities and differences of your subjects?
4. Know thy organizing method – does the organization method (chunking or sequencing) do justice to your subjects and help your readers to understand the comparison?
5. Know thy balance – are your comparisons balanced? Have you covered the same features of both subjects?
6. Know thy audience – will your readers care? Are you providing a service to your readers, or just filling space on a page?



## References

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