

How to Write a Comparison/Contrast Essay

Comparison/Contrast essays can be one of the most interesting types of essays to write, but often they are very frustrating for many people to do. Perhaps this is because we spend most of our waking hours drawing comparisons between things, people and ideas, that it is hard to narrow a subject down enough to write a clear paper. Often, we compare things without distinctly knowing why we are doing so other than having a vague sense of wanting to understand those things better. If we don't have a distinct idea of why we are comparing or contrasting two things, then we will definitely have trouble remaining focused enough to write a clear paper.

Many students get confused because they believe that a comparison/contrast paper must contain paragraphs that are 50% comparison and 50% contrast, or that the paper must be 100% comparison or 100% contrast. These assumptions are not true. A comparison/contrast essay can be a comparison essay, a contrast essay, or any mix of the two. You can have a 20/80 blend, 60/40 blend or even a 90/10 blend of comparing and contrasting. In other words, it is important to remember that these kinds of essays can be dominated by either method.

Another common problem that students have is that the idea of having a thesis gets lost in the process of drawing connections between the things that are being compared or contrasted. A comparison/contrast essay, just like any other type of essay, must have a thesis. You must have a purpose for your comparison -- why are you writing this essay? What is your point?

There are two general reasons to write a comparison/contrast essay.

1. To lay two things side by side and show connections between them or a lack thereof.

Examples:

- a) The current drive to outlaw information about homosexuality in schools and government bears a strong resemblance to the Nazi's campaign against Jews (comparison)
- b) Though many people believe Pagans and Satanists are one and the same, the two religions are quite different in theology and practice.

2. To evaluate or judge between two things:

Examples:

- a) Taking a shower is better than taking a bath.
- b) Having an open mind is better than following a belief system blindly. (Often, if you are writing for this reason, your essay will be dominated more by contrast than comparison, unless you are trying to prove that, even though one thing is believed to be better than another, they are actually have the same value.)
- c) Though many people believe owning a dog or a cat is better than owning a fish, this idea is not really true.

The examples above are good examples of acceptable ideas for comparison. In these examples, the writer tells the reader what things he or she will be comparing and gives the reader the general reason for comparison (either to show connections or evaluate between the two).

However, not all of the above statements are thesis, because they don't tell the reader the purpose for comparison.

The thesis statement of a comparison/contrast essay tells the reader what the writer's point is. The thesis tells why this comparison is being made. For example:

a) Grounds of comparison: The current campaign to outlaw information about homosexuality in schools and government bears a strong resemblance to the Nazi's campaign against Jews.

Purpose (Thesis): This campaign against homosexuality is a form of brainwashing.

b) Grounds of comparison: Having an open mind is better than following a belief system blindly.

Purpose (Thesis): One should always try to maintain an open mind.

Can you see the difference? In the introduction to this kind of essay it is important to put both kinds of statements. The first statement of each pair tells the reader what kind of comparison is happening (showing connections or evaluating) and what things are being compared. The thesis statement tells the reader what the writer is trying to show by making this comparison.

Getting Started:

Often the best place to start when you are preparing to write a comparison/contrast essay is to write down the general ideas or things you want to compare and/or contrast. Next, figure out why you want to compare these things and write that reason down. Then, write down what details and specifics concerning those two ideas or things relate to why you are making this comparison. Finally analyze, analyze, analyze! Draw as many connections as you can.

From this, you should be able to identify specific areas of relation or opposition between the two things you are comparing. These specific areas will be your main points. Remember keep the ideas specific enough so that you can write clearly and intelligently about your subject.

What's Your Plan?

In a comparison/contrast essay-- there are two main plans that you can use to structure your paper clearly.

The first is a subject by subject plan. This plan is ideal for a short paper. The outline for this form goes as follows:

- I. Satanists
 - A. Beliefs
 - B. Actions
 - C. Results
- II. Pagans
 - A. Beliefs
 - B. Actions
 - C. Results
- III. Satanists compared to Pagans
 - A. Similarities/differences in Beliefs

- B. Similarities/differences in Actions
- C. Similarities/differences in Results.

In this format, you lay out all of your facts for your reader first. Show what is involved in the first idea in your first paragraph and the second idea in the second paragraph. The third paragraph is a little like a summary where you expand upon and emphasize any connections or drastic differences between the ideas mentioned in the first two paragraphs.

The second plan is a point by point plan. This plan is a good plan for longer papers. In this plan, the main idea is to compare or contrast within each paragraph. Remember that each main paragraph is set up to support one and only one main point. You must have a topic sentence in each paragraph also. Your reader needs to be aware of what you are trying to achieve in each paragraph's comparison or contrast.

Topic: Many people believe Satanists and Pagans are similar, but they are different.

Thesis: Pagans are not "evil" like Satanists. (i.e. Pagans don't murder people)

- I. Beliefs
 - A. Satanism is Christianity based
 - B. Paganism is nature based
- II. Actions
 - A. Satanists: Self gratification/material gain
 - B. Paganism: Gain of all comes before self gain
- III. Deities
 - A. Satanists: Satan
 - B. Pagans: God and Goddess.
- IV. Results
 - A. Satanists: Hell
 - B. Pagans: Reincarnation or summerland

As you can see, this format works well for longer, more detailed papers.

Where Do I Go From Here?

Once you have set up your outline and have got a plan of action, the important thing to do is to jump in and get your feet wet. You have already completed the hardest part of comparison/contrast essay.

There are some important things to remember about each section of this kind of essay though:

The Introduction:

In the introduction of a comparison/contrast essay, you must set up the basis of comparison for your essay. Make sure the purpose of comparison is clear. Explain or define the two things or

ideas you are comparing for the reader if necessary. Show the reader the basic connection between the two ideas.

The Main Body:

Make sure that your plan is clear and easy to follow. Always make sure that any connections you may have assumed in your mind are on paper. You may have to spell them out for your reader. Watch out for generalizations or blanket statements.

People who write comparison/contrast essays quite frequently leave out a lot of transitions. Make sure you have them there.

Watch for clarity.

The Conclusion:

Restate your reasons for comparison or contrast. Emphasize any major ties between the two things or basic conclusions you may have covered in your paper. Also, tell the reader what you learned by doing this. Share any discoveries you might have made.

The best thing you can do is just start writing once you have a basic idea of what you want to do. Be sure to keep your mind open during the writing process, you'd be surprised at what you might find or see in making your comparison. Proofread and revise as much as you can.

Some Tips:

Don't write a cats vs. dogs or an oranges vs. apples paper. These topics are obvious topic and have been written about thousands of times. Try to be original.

Don't get hung up on the framework of this kind of essay. A comparison/contrast essay that flows well is much more pleasant to read than one that trudges mechanically onward.

Don't stretch your subjects so far that the connections are weak.

Relax! It's not as hard as you think!