Writing a Compare/Contrast Essay

Comparison is a means of showing similarities, while contrast reveals differences.

The process of comparing and contrasting is closely related to analysis as a writing method. In analysis the writer breaks down a process, object, or idea into its "base parts" in an effort to understand their relationship to the whole.

Establishing bases for comparison and contrast

The selection and number of bases depend on intention or concern. For example, if you were choosing between two courses for your class schedule, you might do so after comparing each class on particular bases including content, perceived difficulty, instructor's reputation, as well as the textbooks required. Others might make a comparison based on the amount of work assigned or the time the class is offered, if these represent what is considered important.

Defining the bases to compare and contrast

For the writer to establish the bases of comparison, the subjects being compared should be of the same broad classification and also be legitimately comparable. For example, one can more easily describe a Dachshund by comparing it with a Pekingese, than with an otter, a member of a much broader classification that includes dogs, the vertebrates. Even though the Dachshund and the Pekingese are in the same specific category (canines), this discussion still requires further comparison regarding size, color, and ease-in-training to show how one dog is different from the other.

For any comparison or contrast you must:

a) Select and limit the bases of comparison
b) Develop these bases carefully, with specific and relevant details.
Supporting the Bases

Once the bases of comparison selected and developed, the writer must provide support. This supporting evidence can take several forms:

- statistics
- verifiable facts
- quotations
- specific references
- figurative analogies. This last form attempts to compare similarities between subjects of entirely different characters or environments.

Choosing a method for a Comparison/Contrast Essay

Previously, you established a set of bases for comparison. Now, you must choose a specific method of comparison/contrast. This method and the bases from earlier, will enable you to develop a thesis statement to clearly show the aspects of the subject you are planning to compare.

The Whole-to-Whole Method of comparing and contrasting broad ideas is often used when the concepts themselves are easily understood or when the comparisons are general rather than specific.

a) When a complete presentation of an idea is important, this is the best kind of structure for the paper.

b) While this technique is easy for a writer to use, the result may be an oversimplification of the relationship between the two subjects.

Example:

A. The Whole-to-Whole Method

a) Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV)
   i) Engine Power
   ii) Fuel Consumption
   iii) Brakes
   iv) Cooling System

b) Truck
   i) Engine Power
   ii) Fuel Consumption
   iii) Brakes
   iv) Cooling System
The Part-to-Part Method of comparison emphasizes those details or segments which afford obvious bases of comparison; that is, comparing topics of equal size or importance.

a) This approach can be very convincing because the reader does not have to search for and possibly overlook important elements of comparison.

b) Because the writer has the responsibility of establishing bases of comparison in this approach, he must be careful that those he wishes to compare are truly comparable in size or importance.

Example:

B. The Part-to-Part Method

a) Engine Power
   i) SUV
   ii) Truck
b) Fuel Consumption
   i) SUV
   ii) Truck
c) Brakes
   i) SUV
   ii) Truck
d) Cooling System
   i) SUV
   ii) Truck
e) Resale Value
   i) SUV
   ii) Truck

The Likeness/Difference Method of comparison is important when the writer's main purpose is to highlight similarities and difference. It can, of course, be used in combination with the two methods already mentioned.

Example:

C. The Likeness-Difference Method

a) Similarities of the SUV and a truck
   i) Brakes
   ii) Ease of Steering
b) **Differences between the SUV and a truck**
   i) Engine Horsepower
   ii) Fuel Consumption
   iii) Cooling System
   iv) Body Style
   v) Resale Value

Once you have decided on a purpose and selected your method of comparison, write your introductory paragraph, presenting a thesis statement and the bases of comparison to be used. Organize the body of the essay using the method of comparison you have chosen to emphasize the similarities and differences between the subjects. Conclude, in a separate paragraph, by showing the significance of the comparisons.
Sample Paper A: Whole-to-Whole Method

**At Home or Away?**

Coming of age often brings about the urge to spread one’s wings, not only deciding to pursue a certain occupation, but also by deciding whether or not one will continue living with his parents, or will make the big step towards moving out on his own. Both choices offer rewarding alternatives.

Living at home may be the correct choice for one whose means are limited and whose social needs are compatible with that of his parents or guardians. In particular, if the young man is having difficulty securing employment, he may find it more economically feasible to live at home until he has put away enough money to manage on his own. Even though his new-found employment may turn out to be some distance from home, he will still be able to save money because of reduced costs at home. As well as the cost factor, this young man may want to continue living at home so that he may continue to enjoy the comforts he has become accustomed to. Perhaps his mother does his laundry and cooks his meals regularly, if even for a reduced fee. Also, he is free to use any facilities that he has heretofore been comfortable with, e.g. T.V. and the pool table. His social life may have to be altered somewhat because of shared family quarters, but after all the financial advantages are weighed, he may find the personal sacrifice worth it.

Eventually this same young man may desire more freedom, or he may wish to accept more responsibility. In that case, moving to his own apartment may be the next step in his maturation. Establishing his own place of residence will allow him to entertain a variety of guests, and to set his own hours. He will be allowed the freedom to establish his own household rules, and will be able to control his life according to his personal standards. Because of his new found responsibility, he will learn to budget his finances and in the long term, he may learn to save his money for future purchases. Living on his own may be more expensive than living at home, but this man may learn new personal and social skills that will benefit him in later life.

Either way, choosing between living at home or away is a decision that may take some time to make. Advantages and disadvantages must be weighed in order that one makes the wisest choice comparative to his preferred lifestyle. Perhaps the best decision is to try a little of both.

Sample Paper B: Part-to-Part Method

**Fix it Again, Tony; or Oh! What a Feeling!**

In all my years of driving automobiles I have never been more satisfied than I am now with my Toyota Celica. Its overall performance is a thousand times better than my previous vehicle, a Fiat Brava, that proved to be the bane of my existence.
From the outset, the Fiat Brava had performance problems. Invariably it would leave me stranded regardless of the weather or geographical conditions. On the other hand, the Toyota inspired me to take long trips just because I knew I wouldn't have any major breakdowns en route. Initially, the Fiat's ailments were difficult to diagnose as the problem could have originated from any moving part. However, as time went by, and parts were replaced, I knew that there were only a few parts left that could be the root of the problem. With the Toyota this was never the case. In the three years that I have owned it, I have only taken it into the garage for tune-ups. What a relief to know that when I paid the first bill it would only be a two-digit number. I bless the day the Fiat broke down for the last time at a red light in the left turning lane; that was the same day I began looking for a different car.

The Toyota salesman had me almost convinced that his cars were the best on the market. When he produced the Consumer Report for that year and showed me how highly rated the Toyota Celica was, I succumbed. At this point all I wanted was a car that could make it from A to B in one continuous motion and one that had heat. This particular desire stemmed from the fact that the Fiat never had a heater. Riding in it was similar to riding in an open sleigh with an afghan around your knees and the cold nipping at your nose. Oh, what a warm feeling it is to drive a Toyota!

Since the day I purchased my Toyota, I have been happy with it. I am not a successful used car buyer; I am also not mechanically inclined enough to fix a vehicle when it suddenly stops. Therefore, the last few years of virtually worry free driving have atoned for the years of mental anguish I suffered when the Fiat wouldn't start, or would suddenly stall at exactly the wrong moment. I can only hope my praise for such a worthy vehicle has not jinxed its performance. As far as the Fiat is concerned, it has since been relegated to the Happy Hunting Grounds for Miscreant Automobiles - a fitting reward for having caused so much pain.

**Sample Paper C: Likeness/Difference Method**

**Afternoon Delights**

If you are a connoisseur of ice cream delights, you will appreciate the finesse involved in the construction of a Banana Split and a Hot Fudge Brownie Delight. Both are made from similar ingredients, but "the Split" is a sprawling combination of mouth-watering ingredients while "The Delight" is a towering monument to earthly pleasures.

The most noticeable similarity in these two delicious desserts is, of course, the ice cream. Depending on the size of the dish, the amount used is up to the individual. The flavor, or flavors, used is also according to personal taste. For these two dairy treats, chocolate topping is necessary. In both cases chopped nuts and cherries are compulsory. Whereas the ingredients of the two ice cream delights are similar, the construction is quite different.
"The Split" begins with halving a whole banana and laying it in the bottom of an oval dish. "The Delight", however, begins straightaway with scoops of ice cream layered with chocolate topping served in a tall, fluted dish. In "the Split", the banana serves as the foundation for three scoops of ice cream, which are covered with three different toppings: chocolate, strawberry and pineapple. In contrast, "The Delight" is topped with iced brownies and more hot fudge sauce. Both of them are garnished with whipped cream, chopped nuts and cherries. Truly delectable.

Whether you are a chocolate fan and prefer the Hot Fudge Brownie Delight or you have a more varied palate and choose to mix three favorite flavors in a Banana Split, you will find these two desserts are an ice cream lover’s reward. While their construction may vary, the enjoyment in their destruction may tempt you to treat yourself to both.