

Comparison and Contrast

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Comparison as a pattern of thought involves holding up two similar but not identical objects, situations, people, ideas, and so on, to determine in detail their likenesses and differences (a thorough comparison must always include contrast to be complete). We follow this pattern in selecting brand-name goods, indetermining contest winners, in choosing a candidate or a way of life—in any situation that involves weighing and judging.

In examinations and writing assignments of many kinds, you will often be asked to reach conclusions on a choice of objects, people, issues or theories by comparing them. Your purpose in writing an essay of comparison may be only to determine similarities and differences or it may be to convince your readers of the superiority of one of the things you are presenting. Whatever your subject and purpose, the general mental process will be the same.

In planning and composing your paper, follow these steps:

1. Choose two things as your subject. More than two may have been involved in your original view, but we usually eliminate choices by examining them two at a time so that reaching a decision is essentially a matter of alternatives. For example, in deciding which of several cameras to buy, you will probably narrow your choice by weighing and eliminating until you arrive at the two likeliest, which you will then compare to each other in every detail.
2. Choose two things alike but different. They must be alike enough to be genuinely comparable, different enough to make the comparison fruitful through contrast. Two cars of the same make, year, and model may have some differences, despite standardized production, but such variations are usually unimportant. On the other hand, although a school bus and a space shuttle are both vehicles, they are probably too dissimilar for a comparison of them to be worthwhile.
3. Organize your information on the two things in similar ways so that your readers will easily see the basis for the comparison. If you mention a certain type of detail about one, be sure to include it or to note the lack of it in your discussion of the other. For example, if leg room is important in your choice of a car, consider that feature in both cars you are comparing.

Two patterns are appropriate for organizing information in a comparison: the opposing pattern and the alternating pattern.

a. Opposing pattern. Suppose you decide to compare education as you experienced it in middle school with what you have found in high school. Your chief concern will probably be to paint a vivid picture of life in each area, and your paper will consist of two main divisions: education in middle school and education in high school. Where you place the parts will depend on which you wish to emphasize--the more important one should be last.

To compare the two thoroughly, you must examine essentially the same phases of experience in each. Your subpoints under each main division are therefore likely to be similar--for example, activities, teachers, classes. Determine the order of these subpoints logically and then maintain it under each heading. If you decide to emphasize your experience in high school, your skeleton ~~out~~ outline for the main body of your paper may look like this:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| I. Education in middle school | II. Education in high school |
| A. Teachers | A. Teachers |
| B. Classes | B. Classes |
| C. Activities | C. Activities |

As you write, you may merely paint two pictures, leaving your readers to draw their own conclusions; or, in your second picture, you may often point out comparisons and contrasts with the first; or you may write a conclusion tying them together and making clear your purpose in discussing them.

b. Alternating pattern. If, however, you wish to emphasize the details of the comparison instead of the larger differences, you will find an alternating arrangement more useful. In this, the levels of the points are the reverse of those used earlier, emphasizing the aspects of each way of life instead of the area. Your previous subpoints become main divisions; your main divisions, subpoints. Your skeleton outline for the main body of your paper will then look like this:

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|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| I. Teachers | II. Classes | III. Activities |
| A. Middle School | A. Middle School | A. Middle School |
| B. High School | B. High School | B. High School |

Which pattern you choose for a given paper will depend on your particular subject. For the topic of middle school versus high school, the first would probably be better since it emphasizes the contrast between the two pictures as a whole. But when you wish to emphasize the particular points of a comparison--one beach resort versus another, for instance, as to climate, hotels, and amusements--the second type of pattern would be better. If you completed the discussion of one resort before you started on another, the details of the first might have faded from your readers' minds before they were halfway through the second.

Notice how the patterns are used in the following examples. In the first, the opposing pattern emphasizes differences.

The beginner has some trouble in distinguishing the planets from the stars, but the following difference in appearance may help. The stars are so distant that they shine only as points of light even through the largest telescopes. In consequence, their light is unsteady because of disturbances in the Earth's atmosphere,

such as the rising of warm currents and falling of cold currents. Thus the stars twinkle. The planets, on the other hand, are very much nearer--so that with the exception of Pluto they show as discs in our large telescopes, and not as single points of light. Therefore their light is not so much affected by disturbances in our atmosphere. It is usually said that planets do not twinkle, but shine with a steady light. (Clyde Fisher, Exploring the Heavens.)

Introduction. Planets and stars

I. Stars

- A. Very distant
- B. Result-twinkling

II. Planets

- A. Less distant
- B. Result-steady light

The treatment of each part of the subject is so brief that there is no paragraph break before the second one appears in sentence 5, but "on the other hand" is a valuable transition between the two. Notice, too, the balance of "in consequence" (sentence 3) and "therefore" (sentence 6), transitions introducing in each part the comparable material on results.

The even briefer paragraph that follows is an equally clear example of the alternating pattern. Here, two people are compared, detail by detail.

Irene was, like Eve, a brilliant, courageous bearer of the great Curie name, yet in every other respect the two sisters were far apart. Where Eve was a Gaulist, Irene was pro-communist. Eve was chic and smart; Irene lived in a gray chemist's smock. Eve traveled the world and mingled with the mighty; Irene's world was the laboratory of the Curie Institute and she mingled with molecules and atoms, whose power was less visible if mightier. (David Schoenbrun, As France Goes.)

Introduction. Irene and Eve Curie

I. Politics

- A. Eve-Gaulist
- B. Irene-pro-communist

II. Dress

- A. Eve-fashionable
- B. Irene-workaday

III. Experience

- A. Eve-worldly
- B. Irene-focus on science