

Compare and Contrast Essays

The “compare and contrast” question is common in essays and exams. Although the question may use only the word “compare,” the expectation is usually that you will examine both similarities and differences between two or more things. (For convenience, this resource uses the word “compare” to refer to the entire process of comparing and contrasting.)

The purpose of a comparison is not merely to give a list of the similar and different facts about two things. Rather, you must use these facts to make a point about the things being compared.

As an example, suppose you are asked to compare two characters in a play. Simply describing the appearance, personalities, and actions of one character and then the other does not constitute a comparison. You must determine the comparison’s purpose—in this example, let’s say it’s to argue which character is better suited to becoming a leader—and then discuss the two characters in relation to that purpose: for example, Character A understands the people they would lead, makes ethical decisions, and demonstrates wisdom, whereas Character B connects with only some of the people they would lead, and, while intelligent, makes self-serving decisions; therefore, Character A is more suited to be a leader. Having a clear purpose for comparison enables you to determine which details are relevant and which are not. The fact that Character A studied history at university, while Character B studied geography, may not need to be discussed (unless, of course, you can relate the characters’ academic disciplines to their suitability as a leader).

Two common ways of organizing the comparison essay are **whole-to-whole** or **part-to-part**.

Whole-to-whole format

With the whole-to-whole format, you discuss item A first, then discuss item B, relating it back to A. This format works best for short essays with few points of comparison. A longer paper using this approach tends to end up looking like two separate essays. With whole-to-whole, it can also be more difficult to keep the overall purpose of the comparison in mind. However, some instructors prefer this method because it keeps all the information about each item together.

Part-to-part format

With the part-to-part format, you choose several points of comparison and discuss items A and B together in relation to each point. Using the character example above, you might discuss “community experience of A and B,” then “wisdom of A and B,” and finally “morals of A and B.” This format works best for longer comparisons. It also makes it easier for you to determine which points serve your comparison’s purpose and which do not. Many instructors prefer this method, but others dislike its “back-and-forth” nature.