

Mastering the Essay

Lesson 4 – The Compare & Contrast Essay

READINGS

- “Le Morte d'Arthur: The Death of Arthur” (Thomas Malory)
- “Idylls of the King: The Death of Arthur” (Alfred, Lord Tennyson)
- “Comparing and Contrasting” (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Centre) <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/comparing-and-contrasting/>
- **MLA style (Purdue OWL)** Please look over the "in text citation" section and the "bibliography" section before class.
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_formatting_and_style_guide.html

Socratic Discussion Please consider these questions as you read the excerpts

- Is this a tragedy, or a hopeful tale? Is it different in Malory than in Tennyson?
- What are the most important differences between the two works? Why do you think the authors chose to handle these elements differently?
- Are there any unexpected similarities?
- How do the authors' choices change our attitudes towards this story?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

- What is the difference between comparison and contrast? Comparison examines the similarities between two different things, ideas, situations, people, etc., while contrast focuses on the differences between them.
- Sometimes, however, people use “compare” to mean both “compare and contrast,” so if you receive an assignment that asks you to compare, it is a good idea to check with the instructor about whether you are also expected to contrast.
- This next section is adapted from Queen’s University’s Writing Centre’s Compare/Contrast Handout:¹
- **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. In other words, you are still trying to make an argument, support your thesis, and persuade the reader. You are just using comparison and contrast as your main method of making your argument. Never forget, even more important than compare and contrast is *the point* of the essay. As always, you want to define clearly for yourself your audience and your purpose.**
- **Why is audience and purpose important? To take an everyday example, suppose you are asked to compare two shirts. Simply describing the colour, fabric, and construction of one shirt and then the other does not constitute a comparison.**

¹<http://sass.queensu.ca/writingcentre/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2013/06/Compare-Contrast-Essays.pdf>

You must determine the audience and purpose (maybe your audience is people who love to camp, and your purpose is to try to help them find the best shirt for a long backpacking trip) and then discuss the two shirts in relation to that purpose: for example, Shirt A has long sleeves and is made of cotton, whereas Shirt B is sleeveless and is made of polyester; therefore Shirt A is more suited to use in the woods. Having a clear purpose for comparison enables you to determine which details are relevant and which are not. The fact that Shirt A comes in blue and yellow, while Shirt B comes only in red, may not need to be discussed (unless, of course, you can relate the shirt's colour to its suitability for camping).

- In other words, you must use critical thinking to pick out which details are relevant to the thesis, just as you would pick out arguments or research depending on whether they related directly to the thesis.
- Two common ways of organizing the comparison essay are whole-to-whole or part-to-part, discussed below.

BRAINSTORMING TACTICS

- **Venn diagram:** The following is adapted from UNC's handout, <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/comparing-and-contrasting/>: making a Venn diagram or a chart can help you quickly and efficiently compare and contrast two or more things or ideas. To make a Venn diagram, simply draw some overlapping circles, one circle for each item you're considering. In the central area where they overlap, list the traits the two items have in common. Assign each one of the areas that doesn't overlap; in those areas, you can list the traits that make the things different.
- **Columns:** Draw three columns on a piece of paper. At the top, define your audience and your purpose. Label the columns as "similarities," "differences," and "interesting." The "interesting" column is for ideas that are relevant to your purpose but may not be either a "similarity" or a "difference." Come up with as many ideas in each category as you can and then go back and underline or highlight the ones that seem most relevant to your purpose.

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.
- Bullet Point outline example:
 - Intro: Thesis: The McKinley camping shirt is superior to the Bob's Best outdoor extraordinary shirt.
 - BP1: The McKinley shirt is a fantastic, inexpensive, durable camping shirt.
 - BP2: The Bob's Best shirt, however, is more expensive, has fewer features, and is not very durable.
 - Conclusion: Buy McKinley's!

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 shirt example above, you might discuss “colour of A and B,” then “fabric of A and B,” and finally “cost of A and B.” This format works best for longer comparisons. It also makes it easier for you to determine which points help serve your comparison’s purpose and to omit those which do not. Many instructors prefer this method, but others dislike its “back-and-forth” nature. You will want to be very careful to use **transition sentences and even brief transition paragraphs** to show how one idea relates to the next.
- Do not just dump your conclusions about the comparisons and/or contrasts in at the end—develop them as the essay goes along, within the body paragraphs.
- Bullet Point outline example
 - Intro: Thesis: The McKinley camping shirt is superior to the Bob's Best outdoor extraordinary shirt.
 - BP1: durability - The McKinley shirt is vastly superior in its durability because the Bob's Best shirt did not even last through an afternoon family picnic without a hole.
 - BP2: materials - The McKinley shirt is made of spider silk, the strongest fabric in existence, whereas the Bob's Best shirt is made from cotton candy.
 - BP3: features – The McKinley shirt has a built-in flint and tinder, bottle opener, life vest, and parachute, whereas the Bob's Best shirt has a pocket for one pen.
 - BP4: availability – The McKinley shirt is available at any corner bodega whereas the Bob's Best shirt has to be special ordered by camel.
 - Conclusion: Obviously, McKinley's is vastly superior.

RECOGNIZING COMPARE/CONTRAST ASSIGNMENTS

- Some assignments use words—like compare, contrast, similarities, and differences—that make it easy for you to see that they are asking you to compare and/or contrast. Here are a few hypothetical examples:
 - Compare and contrast Clent and Mye’s accounts of oppression.
 - Compare WWI to WWII, identifying similarities in the causes, development, and outcomes of the wars.
 - Contrast Wordsworth and Coleridge: what are the major differences in their poetry?
- Notice that some topics ask only for comparison, others only for contrast, and others for both. But it’s not always so easy to tell whether an assignment is asking you to include comparison/contrast. And in some cases, comparison/contrast is only part of the essay—you begin by comparing and/or contrasting two or more things and then use what you’ve learned to construct an argument or evaluation. Consider these examples, noticing the language that is used to ask for the comparison/contrast and whether the comparison/contrast is only one part of a larger assignment:
 - Choose a particular idea or theme, such as romantic love, death, or nature, and consider how it is treated in two Romantic poems.

- How do the different authors we have studied so far define and describe oppression?
- Compare Clent's and Mye's accounts of oppression. What does each imply about the people's collusion in their own oppression? Which is more accurate?
- In the texts we've studied, soldiers who served in different wars offer differing accounts of their experiences and feelings both during and after the fighting. What commonalities are there in these accounts? What factors do you think are responsible for their differences?
- Make sure your thesis both indicates your point and that this is going to be a compare/contrast essay.

MLA STYLE

- There are several different "citation styles." In this class, you will learn MLA ("Modern Language Association") which is most commonly used in literature and arts classes. The purpose of a citation style is to tell your audience, in a standardized way, where you found your research. It may seem tedious, but it is a way to "love your neighbor as yourself." How so? If you follow a familiar pattern for citing your research, your audience will be able to pay attention to your paper without being distracted by figuring out where and how you researched your ideas.
- There are other citation styles for different subject matters (for example, Chicago Style and APA). All citation styles, however, are very similar to one another and differences are often matters of commas versus periods or parentheses versus footnotes. If you master one style, it will be very easy for you in different classes to learn others.

Assignment

Write a compare and contrast essay. You may choose from one of two options:

1. Compare and contrast Tennyson's version of Arthur's death with Malory's, with an eye to which one is more effective in getting the reader to grieve for Arthur.
2. Choose two similar but significantly different things to compare and contrast with an eye to making a point about one of them. You could pick two versions of the same story, two songs about a similar subject, two pastimes, two historical figures, and so on. They should have enough in common to make it worthwhile to compare them, but have some significant differences as well. Students should clear the topic with the instructor in class or via email (by the next day). Some topic ideas:

- Compare a book versus its movie adaption. Which is better and why?
- Compare the ideal of heroism in two books or movies. Which is superior?
- Contrast the decision to stay close to home after high school against the decision to move far away (to college, work, etc.). How might the decision change your life? Is one better?
- Compare or contrast two similar songs (or covers of the same song). Which one is more effective?
- Compare/contrast a core religious doctrine of two different religions or

denominations. How does the difference matter?

- Compare two versions of a fairy tale. Why do the differences matter?

Whichever you choose, make sure that your comparison and contrast leads to a point (confirming the thesis). Do a little background research, but don't let it become the main focus of the writing process. For example, writing about the death of Arthur, you might find it helpful to learn a little about Tennyson or Malory, depending on the focus of your essay, or about something mentioned in the pieces with which you are not familiar.

You must **cite at least two sources** (Malory & Tennyson, in the case of the Arthur assignment), but **no more than four**. Use MLA style throughout, and make sure to include a page numbering, citations, and bibliography in that style. (Look up MLA style in your assortment of readings you read this week.) Your essay should be **at least five paragraphs long**. Develop each paragraph properly. Remember what you have learned about introductions, body paragraphs, conclusions, transitions, and topic sentences. **Use at least one quotation** in your essay—make sure to introduce it and connect it to your work.