

How Do I Write a Comparison/Contrast Essay?

Comparison = Similarity

Contrast = Difference

Comparisons are discussions in which a student finds similarities between two or more ideas or things; contrasts, ON THE OTHER HAND (a popular but overused transition between concepts) are discussions in which a student indicates differences between two or more ideas or things. As you might sense from the previous sentence, comparison/contrast essays can be very dull without the use of some imagination, particularly in the use of transitions.

There are several ways of writing a comparison/contrast essay, all of which depend on the choices of topic and the direction of the thesis:

Mainly contrasting?

For example, if you want to talk about why dogs and cats are different, comparison probably shouldn't be a major component of the paper; while comparisons ought to be acknowledged in a contrast-heavy paper, they needn't be developed beyond a paragraph or two, and probably toward the beginning of the paper, before the "meat" of the thesis.

Mainly comparing?

A paper centered largely on similarities would, of course, take a different approach. Say the topic is dogs and cats, but the thesis attempts to discuss why dogs and cats are similar (because of their status as the most popular domestic animals, perhaps, or because of the comfort both can afford to human beings). In a paper emphasizing comparison, acknowledge the contrasts, then spend the majority of the time discussing the similarities.

Different Ways to Organize Ideas in a Comparison/Contrast Essay

Beyond determining that an essay's emphasis is similarity or difference, you also need to decide how you will present these similarities and/or differences. Is it better to explore one side completely, then the other (Block-by-Block method), or is it better to investigate the two items to be compared or contrasted by sub-categorizing to specific

items (Point-by-Point)? Take a closer look at the advantages (and potential traps) of each method:

Point-by-Point: (aka, Topic-by-Topic)

There are several ways to organize within the comparisons and contrasts. Let's say the topic is PC and Mac personal computer systems, and the thesis is that the discriminating consumer should buy a Mac. You may choose to discuss the comparisons and contrasts of each main idea point by point, paragraph by paragraph: maybe software, ease of use, and cost. In doing so, create a mini-essay in each paragraph:

- ✓ Each paragraph should have a topic sentence that indicates the main ideas of the paragraph
 - For instance, "Mac software is more creative and has more applications."
- ✓ Each paragraph should contain some cursory comparisons
- ✓ Each paragraph should then have the contrasts that prove the point of your topic sentence (and, as a result, your thesis).

Sample Point-by-Point Outline:

Introduction: PC vs. Mac

Body:

PC: Software
Mac: Software

Transition (note: see ARC handout on "Transitions")

PC: Ease of Use
Mac: Ease of Use

Transition

PC: Cost
Mac Cost

Mac's preferability to PC

Conclusion: (note: see ARC handout on "Conclusion")

Summary, Thesis Restatement
Significance of your discussion

Block-by-Block: (aka, Subject-by-Subject)

ON THE OTHER HAND, you may feel that one system so outperforms the other in every category that these nitty-gritty comparisons and contrasts rob from the eventual conclusion. In this case, you can opt to discuss the two block by block:

- ✓ PC software, ease of use, and cost (discussed first, since it is not the beneficiary of your contrast discussion).
- ✓ Then Mac software, ease of use, and cost
- ✓ Followed by an integrative paragraph or two to acknowledge the surface comparisons and root contrasts with the same eventual conclusion: that the Mac route is the better one to take

Sample Block-by-Block Outline:

Introduction: PC vs. Mac

Body:

PC:	Software
	Ease of use
	Cost

Transition

Mac:	Software
	Ease of use
	Cost

Mac's preferability to PC (this/these paragraph(s) will be crucial in clarifying your comparisons and/or contrasts)

Conclusion:

Summary, Thesis Restatement
Significance of your discussion

Regarding Block-by-Block Structure:

In the above example, the Mac paragraph(s) in the body would probably need to refer to the information you've already related in the PC paragraph(s). Be forewarned that you run two risks by using the block-by-block outline form:

- ✓ You may assume that you've made the comparisons and contrasts clear, but they may be clear only to you, not in the paper and thus not to your reader
- ✓ In making sure that you clarify the comparisons and contrast so they are clear for your reader, you may have to cover lots of ground you've already covered, resulting in massive repetition. If you fear you're repeating yourself too much, revert to the more integrated format of point by point.
- ✓ None of this is to say that you should avoid block-by-block form; weigh the risks and what your thesis is trying to accomplish. Block-by-block can perform a rhetorical "slam-dunk" if appropriately presented.

Things to Watch for:

- ✓ You ought to be able at least to acknowledge a comparison (or contrast, as the case may be) before moving into the contrast (comparison) that dominates the paper.
- ✓ Work on transitions, so that they aren't either missing, weak, or repetitive. (See the sections on "Transitions" in the ARC handout on "Paragraphs").
- ✓ The bottom line is that you want to choose the outline that best (and most logically) serves the purpose of your paper. Discuss the other side first, in other words, and then hammer that other side with the information that serves to "prove" your thesis.