

# How to Approach a Compare/Contrast Essay

We make comparisons every day; a Facebook status that discusses why a movie is worse than the book or a text to a friend comparing two different sets of weekend plans are both examples of everyday communication where you *compare* or *contrast* two things. However, creating planned comparisons in the form of an essay can be a challenge for a lot of people. Let's break this common essay topic down so that you can ace that next assignment.

## Choosing a Topic and Pre-Writing

Prompts for compare/contrast essays will ask you to focus on the *similarities* and *differences* of two things. Most often, these prompts will have the words "compare," "contrast," "similarities," or "differences," which makes them easy to identify. Often, the prompt will give you some guidance on your topics. For instance, you might be asked to compare and contrast two career options, purchases, favorite books/movies, or something similar.

- It helps to choose two items that are already inherently similar. You probably could write an essay comparing the planet Mars with a car, but it would be a lot easier to compare two cars or two planets. These inherent similarities are often called the **basis of comparison**.
- At the same time, you want to make sure that you have enough differences to be able to write an essay on the topic. As you're brainstorming topics, try to think of 3-4 ways that the two items are different from each other. For instance, if you were comparing two cars, you might look at differences in the engine, interior, or extra features.
- **Venn Diagrams** are a really good pre-writing tool. Draw two circles that overlap in the center. Write the name of each of the items at the top of each circle, and then put the similarities in the space where the two circles overlap and the differences in the parts of the circle that are separate.

## Breaking It into Parts

Most of the time, compare/contrast essays are written using the **five-paragraph essay** model. This is the most commonly taught essay form, and it includes: an **introduction** that introduces the topic, **three body paragraphs** that explain the main points, and a **conclusion** that summarizes what was said and why it was important. When you're planning your compare/contrast essay, it helps to break your topic into two-three parts so that they'll easily fit into those body paragraphs. There are two common ways to structure this kind of essay:

- **The block method** generally has two body paragraphs and focuses on *the two things being compared*. You'll list all the similarities and differences of one item in one paragraph and then list all the similarities and differences of the other item in another paragraph. For instance, if you were comparing a book and a movie, one paragraph would talk about the book and the next would talk about the movie.
- **The point-by-point method** is more precise because the organization is based on the *points of comparison*. For instance, if you were comparing two cars, you might have one paragraph that describes the engines of the two cars, then another paragraph describing the interior, and a third paragraph talking about the available extra features.

## 5 Steps for Writing a Compare/Contrast Essay

As with any other type of essay writing, an organized approach will help you write this kind of essay more easily and quickly.

1. Start by selecting a topic with a solid **basis of comparison** and doing some quick pre-writing with a list or Venn Diagram. Once you have an idea of the similarities and differences you'd like to discuss, choose between the **block** method and the **point-by-point** method.
2. Draft a **thesis statement** to outline the argument you're going to make. Your thesis statement will tell the reader what you're talking about, why it's important, and the main parts you mentioned above. A good formula looks like this: "Although [item A] and [item B] are [similarity], they are different in terms of [A], [B,] and [C]." For instance, you might say something like, "Although both the Honda Accord and the Honda Civic are made by the same manufacturer, they have several crucial differences in terms of engine power, interior comfort, and additional features."
3. Create an **outline** with your thesis statement and the basic information for each of the body paragraphs, including the type of structure that you're using. Then write down as many examples as you can think of for each paragraph.
4. Once you have the outline written, you're ready to write the body of the paper. It's helpful to start with a **topic sentence** that outlines what the paragraph will be about. Then, describe the topic using the examples in your outline. Remember to explain the similarities and differences to your reader so that your thought process will be clear.
5. Then, you'll write the introduction and conclusion. For the introduction, start with an interesting hook, then provide the reader with some background information on what you're writing about. You'll end the introduction with the thesis statement you created in step two. For the conclusion, you'll start by rephrasing your thesis statement, then summarize the main points you made in the body, and end by explaining why all of this matters – in other words, why should someone read your paper?

Once you've finished these steps, you should have a rough of your essay completed. You'll find that if you use the pre-writing steps and organizational approaches above, writing a compare/contrast essay doesn't have to be hard or time-consuming. After all, it's something you already do every day!