

The Comparative Essay



To compare means “to examine two or more things in order to discover their likeness or differences.” (Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language)

A comparative essay is one which uses comparison and contrast to liken and contrast two things or ideas. Comparative essays help the reader understand more about both items or issues by showing them in relation to one another, and by discussing the significance of their similarities and differences.

Basis for Comparison



- Sometimes the focus of comparison is provided in the topic; at other times, you may have to develop a basis for comparison i.e. a theme, concern or device common to both works from which you can draw similarities and differences.
- E.g. Evaluate the degree to which Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet* and Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth* are responsible for the tragic outcomes of the plays.
- The question may simply ask that you compare two texts or two characters. If this is the case, it is up to you to develop a basis for comparison.

Process: Brainstorm!



Juliet	Lady Macbeth
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Young/innocent (14 yrs old)- Of marriageable age- Appears obedient- Outspoken- Bold (proposes marriage to Romeo)- Close relationship with Nurse and Friar- Influenced greatly by many outside pressures (i.e. social, personal relationships)- Practical- Makes hasty decisions- Idealistic about love	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Mature, married woman- Worldly- Cruel- Ruthless- Outspoken- Ambitious- Cunning- Manipulative- Intelligent- Headstrong- Not easily influenced by others- Guilty conscience- Makes hasty decisions

Process: Do the Research!



Develop a list of **similarities** & **differences** between the items

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Outspoken - Makes hasty decisions - Bold/Confident - Methodical (originate plans) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young/innocent vs. Mature/worldly - Appears obedient vs. Headstrong - Influenced greatly by many outside vs. not easily influenced by others

Juliet	Lady Macbeth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young/innocent (14) - Of marriageable age - Appears obedient - Outspoken - Bold (proposes marriage to Romeo) - Close relationship with Nurse and Friar - Influenced greatly by many outside pressures (i.e. social, personal relationships) - Practical - Makes hasty decisions - Idealistic about love 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mature, married woman - Worldly - Headstrong - Cruel - Ruthless - Outspoken - Ambitious - Cunning - Manipulative - Intelligent - Not easily influenced by others - Guilty conscience - Makes hasty decisions

Process continued



- Brainstorming and creating a list of similarities and differences will help you to come up with topics for comparing and contrasting.
- For example, according to our process, Juliet and Lady Macbeth's words, actions and influences can be compared and contrasted.

Developing a Working Thesis



- A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process.
- Formulating a thesis is not necessarily the first thing you should do after reading an essay assignment. As seen in the process, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships.
- Once you follow this process, you will probably have a “working thesis,” which is a basic argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.
- A comparative essay must do more than simply present similarities and differences. It must draw a conclusion about which character or idea *better* exemplifies the traits that are being compared.

Sample Introduction



Any Student

Student 1

Ms. Teacher

ENG 3U1

23 November 2012

Female Protagonists in Shakespeare's Tragedies

Shakespeare's plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* present typical tragedies of the Elizabethan era.

Despite the restrictive roles of females during the time period, Juliet and Lady Macbeth demonstrate characteristics that set them apart from the traditional model. Both characters contribute to the tragic outcomes of the plays. Their words, actions and outside influences determine the degree to which they cause the ultimate catastrophe. While their words and actions share some similarities, it is in their outside influences that they differ significantly. While Juliet's words and actions contribute to the tragedy to a certain degree, it is Lady Macbeth's lack of outside influence and, ultimately, her strength of character, that make her more personally responsible for the tragedy.

Consider the following when preparing to write a comparative essay



- In comparison and contrast writing, the items being compared and contrasted must share some common element (i.e. Juliet and Lady Macbeth as female protagonists who are responsible for the tragedies that occur in either play)
- The individual points being compared within any comparative essay must be similar (i.e. Juliet and Lady Macbeth's actions, words and influences)
- The nature of your subject will determine whether it is more appropriate to emphasize likenesses or differences. For instance, the differences between the two items may be of particular importance and, therefore, this is what you would emphasize. (i.e. Juliet and Lady Macbeth's actions and deeds may have more similarities, but their influences may be more different.)
- There are various means of structuring a comparative essay, such as the Alternating Method or the Block Method. This means that the essay structure you choose depends, to a great extent, on the nature and complexity of the comparison as indicated in the thesis statement.

One more thing may help...



- Remember that a good comparative essay doesn't simply analyse the two texts side by side. It is up to you to draw parallels and make connections between the two. Picture train tracks – the two texts are tracks running alongside one another. Your task is to engineer a number of intersections between them.
- Good analysis in a comparative essay makes some kind of judgement between the two texts. Is one character more compelling, one playwright more successful, one theme more universal in its treatment?

Comparative Essay Formats



- In deciding which format to use, one must pay careful attention to the thesis statement and what it demands.
- In the **Block Method**, the writer discusses one unit of comparison in its entirety before going on to the other unit in a separate paragraph.
- The **Alternating Method** can be thought of as a seesaw that swings back and forth between its two subjects within the same paragraph.

Block Method



This method should be utilised when the thesis statement requires that two subjects or topics be explored in great detail. In this case, all the details of one side of the comparison are presented first, followed by all the details about the second side.

Block Method cont'd



The following is a sample outline using the Block Method for an essay addressing the degree to which each character (Juliet and Lady Macbeth) is responsible for the tragic outcome of the play.

Introduction: Introduce text(s), topic, arguments and thesis

Body Paragraph 1: Juliet's words

Body Paragraph 2: Lady Macbeth's words (vs. Juliet's)

Body Paragraph 3: Juliet's actions

Body Paragraph 4: Lady Macbeth's actions (vs. Juliet's)

Conclusion

Alternating Method



The Alternating Method may be more appropriate when writing a longer complex paper with many subtopics. In this method of developing a comparative essay, it is necessary to establish a number of specific points that you wish to discuss in relation to your topics.

Alternating Method cont'd



The following is a sample outline using the Alternating Method for an essay addressing the degree to which each character (Juliet and Lady Macbeth) is responsible for the tragic outcome of the play.

- Introduction:** Introduce text(s), topic, arguments and thesis
- Body Paragraph 1:** Feature A: Words
Text 1 – *R & J* (Juliet)
Text 2 – *Macbeth* (Lady Macbeth)
Compare and Contrast
- Body Paragraph 2:** Feature B: Actions
Text 1 – *R & J*
Text 2 – *Macbeth*
Compare and Contrast
- Body Paragraph 3:** Feature C: Influences
Text 1 – *R & J*
Text 2 – *Macbeth*
Compare and Contrast
- Conclusion**

Some Final Pointers



- The comparative essay must commit itself firmly to the persuasive principle. Without a clear thesis argument that articulates a judgement, comparison and contrast writing is a pointless game of compiling lists of similarities and differences.
- Avoid vague, what-else-is-new theses like “There are many similarities between Juliet and Lady Macbeth.” The same statement could be made of any two characters and it therefore worthless.
- Don’t feel that you need to pay equal attention to comparisons and contrasts. In practice, most papers give much greater weight to similarities (comparisons) OR to differences (contrasts). Some papers may deal entirely with one or the other; their whole point may be that two seemingly similar items are, in fact, very different, or that two seemingly different items are very similar.

A Brief Comparative Essay



William
Shakespeare



William
Stillspere