The Comparative Essay

A comparative essay is one which uses comparison and contrast to liken and contrast two things or ideas. Comparative essays help the reader to 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.

Introduction

1. In comparison and contrast writing, the items being compared and contrasted must share some common elements (e.g., both Hamlet and Oedipus exhibit characteristics of tragic heroes).

2. The individual points being compared within any comparative essay must be similar (e.g., both Hamlet and Oedipus have tragic flaws).

3. 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.

4. There are various means of structuring a comparative essay. The structure you choose depends to a great extent on the nature and complexity of the comparison as indicated in the thesis statement.

Comparative Essay Structure

As with any essay, the Comparative Essay’s Introduction and Conclusion should achieve the following:

Introduction

- Attract the reader’s attention.
- Provide background information about your topic.
- Introduce the two works, two authors, two characters, ideas, themes that will be discussed.
- State the purpose for making the comparison and/or contrast.
- State the thesis (specific instructions to follow).

Conclusion

- Paraphrase the thesis.
- Summarize the main similarities and differences.
- Paraphrase the importance of the topic.

You will then need to choose which essay structure you wish to use. For the Comparative Essay, the two most effective structures are the Block Method and the Alternating Method.
Option 1: BLOCK Method

The Block Method compares between each paragraph and follows the following format:

- Body Paragraph 1: discuss important and relevant characteristics of the first character. Three is generally considered to be the “magic” number, but is not always the case.

- Body Paragraph 2: show how the same characteristics of the first character are present in a second character.

- Body Paragraph 3: discuss all the differences between the two characters who are being compared. Draw most of your conclusions here. Depending on the length, this paragraph may fall into a fourth body paragraph.

Option 2: ALTERNATING Method

The Alternating Method compares within each paragraph and follows the following format:

- Body Paragraph 1: discuss the first similarity between the two characters. Go back and forth between the two characters, mentioning both of them at the same time.

- Body Paragraph 2: discuss the second similarity between the two characters. Go back and forth between the two characters, mentioning both of them at the same time.

- Body Paragraph 3: discuss the final similarity between the two characters. Go back and forth between the two characters, mentioning both of them at the same time.

- Depending on the length of the essay, you may have a fourth comparison which will follow the same format as the previous ones.

Formulating the Comparative Thesis Statement

A Comparative Essay must do more than simply present similarities and differences. It must draw a conclusion about which character or idea better or more exemplifies the traits that are being compared.

It is up to you to draw parallels and make connections between the two things being compared. Picture train tracks: the two run alongside one another, but 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. Is one character more compelling? One playwright more successful? One individual more responsible?

See some samples below (comparative words have been bolded):
Hamlet is more responsible for his tragic fate than Oedipus. Hamlet is able to control his destiny whereas Oedipus's life is fated from birth. Hamlet's ability to exercise his free will is what condemns him to a greater tragic fate.

Both plots end disastrously with the hero losing power, be it through death or exile. Oedipus however, experiences a more catastrophic ending than Hamlet.

Using Transitions

Since you will be moving back-and-forth between ideas, effective comparisons rely strongly on smooth transitions from one idea to the next. Transitional words and phrases help make a paper smoother and more coherent by showing the reader the connections between the ideas that are being presented.

Use words like these:

Also; although; as; as well; both; comparatively; contrasting; differ; even though; however; in contrast; instead; in the same manner; in the same way; like; likewise; most important; nevertheless; on the contrary; on the other hand; same; similarly; than; the same as; too; unless; unlike; whereas; while; and yet.

Achieving Balance

One of the most common faults of a poor Comparative Essay is that the comparison is not “balanced;” that is, the essay focuses predominantly on one of the two issues, and gives less importance to the other.

As you begin to organize your writing, it is important to make sure that you balance the information about the items that you’re comparing and contrasting. You need to be sure that you give them equal time in what you write.

Other Things to Remember:

• The key principle to remember in a comparative essay is that you must clarify precisely what you are comparing and keep that comparison alive throughout the essay.
• Make sure your topic sentences are argumentative and engaging
• Make sure not to repeat yourself
• Utilize formal voice
• Use present tense
• Avoid contractions

And, at all costs, avoid the conclusion that the two subjects are “similar, yet different.” This commonly found conclusion weakens any comparative essay.
Comparative Essay Checklist

Purpose and Supporting Details
- A central argument showing “more” or “less” or “greater” (etc) is present
- The paper compares and contrasts items clearly
- The paper points to specific examples to illustrate the comparison
- The paper includes only the information relevant to the comparison
- The analysis and proof offered is balanced

Organization and Structure
- The paper chooses the best organizational structure (Block or Alternating)
- The paper follows a consistent order when discussing the comparison
- The paper breaks the information into appropriate sections or paragraphs to the ideas

Transitions and Coherence
- The paper moves smoothly from one idea to the next
- The paper uses comparison and contrast transition words to show relationships between ideas
- The paper uses a variety of sentence structures and transition words