

How to Write a Compare/Contrast Paper

You've been asked to either "compare" or "compare and contrast" two or more things. What's the best way to go about this?

The purpose of a comparison paper is not merely to give a list of the similar and different facts about two things. You are expected to use these facts to make a point about the things being compared. To take an everyday example, suppose you are asked to compare two water bottles. Simply describing the colour, material, and shape of one water bottle and then the other does not constitute a comparison. You must determine the comparison's purpose (maybe it's to decide which water bottle is better for a hiking trip) and then discuss the two water bottles in relation to that purpose: for example, Water Bottle A is larger and is made of a lightweight material, whereas Water Bottle B is heavy and is made of breakable glass; therefore, Water Bottle A is more suited to use on a hiking trip. Having a clear purpose for comparison enables you to determine which details are relevant and which are not.

Two common ways of organizing the comparison essay are whole-to-whole or part-to-part.

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.

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 water bottle example above, you might discuss "weight of A and B," then "capacity of A and B," and finally "material 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.

Whichever method of organization you use, remember that the comparison essay as a whole should aim to present and develop a larger point about the two (or more) items being compared—not merely list features of the items. The reader wants to know your purpose for comparing. It is your task, as the writer, to specify that purpose and to fulfill it by presenting relevant details and showing how those details help support your essay's main point.

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