

Making Comparisons

Apples to Oranges



One key to successful composition is the ability to make comparisons. Comparisons are an important part of any type of writing, and many composition classes go so far as to assign a comparison essay – an essay whose main focus *is* a comparison. Writing a comparison is any time two (or more) things are analyzed for similarities and differences. The term “compare and contrast” can actually be a little misleading, in fact, since contrasting two things is a *type* of comparison. Comparisons can be challenging; many people make the mistake of thinking that a comparison is just a description of two things. There’s a lot more to a comparison than simply an enhanced description.

Points of Comparison

Every comparison begins with points of commonality – not necessarily similarities, but traits that can be analyzed for both (or all) parts of the comparison. For instance, if you are making the classic comparison of apples to oranges, your points of comparison might be color, taste, and texture. Those are all points you can make about both apples and oranges. That’s one of the key things to remember when you’re comparing two things: anything you mention for one half of the comparison, you have to mention for the other. Otherwise, you’ve written a simple description instead of a comparison.

Transitions

Transition words and phrases are an important part of any composition, but comparisons are a place where they are of some of the highest importance. Transitions, in some ways, are what make a comparison obvious. They can be used to make similarities apparent (“*Just like apples*, oranges are a type of fruit.”), they can specify comparison points (“*In addition to being different colors*, apples and oranges can *also* taste different.”), and they can point out differences clearly (“*While apples can be tart or sweet*, oranges are usually tangy.”).

Sometimes transitions can clarify confusing points, or they can make relationships between two concepts more apparent. The important thing is that transitions are both what separate and what connect the ideas of your comparison, so you need to give your transition words and phrases special consideration in any comparison you write.

Block Format vs. Alternating Format

Most comparisons between two things can be organized along one of two vectors: object by object, or point by point. For essay purposes, the first (object by object) is usually called *block format*, while the second (point by point) is usually referred to as *alternating format*. These two formats simply refer to the order of comparison. It’s important to know the difference between the two since choosing between block and alternating format is one of the first steps to writing a successful comparison. In either case, you need to make sure you know your

points of comparison before you start, because without knowing those comparison points, your comparison will not be successful in either format.

Block Format

In block format, you make the comparison by object: describe all of the relevant traits of one object, then make all of the relevant comparisons to the other. For example:

Oranges and apples are very different in terms of color, taste, and texture. Oranges are almost always an orange color. They taste tangy, and they have a thick, bumpy skin. Apples, on the other hand, come in many different colors instead of just one. Unlike oranges, apples have a large variety of flavors ranging from tart to sweet. Apples also have a skin that is much smoother and thinner than that of an orange.

In the above example, all of the traits of the orange are listed first, followed by a description of how those same traits have different values for the apple. Note that there are still very clear points of comparison (color, taste, and texture), and that the description of the apple includes words that show the comparison ("Apples, *on the other hand, ...*").

Alternating Format

A second way to approach a comparison is to put the organizational emphasis on the points of comparison instead of the things being compared. In other words, organize the comparison trait by trait. For each trait, show the difference between the two objects, making sure to use comparative words and transitions. For instance:

Oranges and apples are very different in terms of color, taste, and texture. Oranges are usually orange and don't really come in other colors, but apples, on the other hand, can be many different colors. Oranges and apples also taste different; where the orange is tangy and acidic, the apple can be sweet or tart. The texture of these two fruits' skin is also different. Oranges have a thick and bumpy skin. Apples have a smooth skin that is much thinner than an orange's skin.

In the above comparison, instead of listing each object and all of its respective traits, the paragraph is organized trait by trait. It still includes a topic sentence that introduces all the points of comparison, and it still uses comparative words and transitions.

Comparative Essay

Sometimes you have to take the ideas and concepts of comparison and channel them into a fully developed essay. In sociology, for instance, you might have to write a paper that compares your generation to an earlier one. This is an example of a comparative essay. You should treat a comparative essay just like any other comparison, except on a larger scale.

Organization is the key to a successful comparative essay: your essay will almost certainly be unsuccessful if you don't spend some time planning your essay before you start writing it. As with any essay, it's very

important to plan, organize, and outline. To organize your comparative essay, you need to figure out three things:

1. What two things are being compared? (Your instructor may have specified this already.)
2. Are you going to use block format or alternating format? (Again, your instructor may have chosen for you.)
3. What traits are you going to compare?

Once you know the answers to those three questions, you can begin working on an outline. Treat it just like any other outline: come up with your main points (traits or things compared), organize them into paragraphs, and create a unified thesis statement. From there, it's just a case of fitting the information where it belongs in the comparison.

Additional Writing Center Resources

- The Writing Process

Further Reading

- *How to Write a Comparative Analysis* by Kerry Walk, Harvard University Writing Center. <https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-write-comparative-analysis>
- *The Comparative Essay* by Vikki Visvis and Jerry Plotnick, University of Toronto Writing Centre. <https://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/comparative-essay>
- *Comparing and Contrasting* by The Writing Center at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/comparing-and-contrasting>