



Comparison/Contrast Essays

Comparison papers ask you to compare two or more things, in order to get a better idea of each and also evaluate them to determine the relative success or merit of one or both. Comparison papers can compare two items, that is, show the similarities between the two. Sometimes you will be asked to contrast the two, that is, discuss differences.

You might, for instance, be asked to compare several different translations of a poem. In this case, you might answer the question: Which translation is the most successful, and why? Since there is rarely a right answer to a question like this, you must rely for your answer on your assessment of the different translations. You might consider such components as style, tone, vocabulary, and the level of literal translation achieved in each. The purpose of an assignment such as this is to evaluate the merits of each translation and to determine which, ultimately, is the most effective transformation of the original text. It is possible to conclude that one is definitely the superior one; however, you could also argue that in some aspects, Translation X is more effective, while in other aspects, Translation Y is superior. In either case, be sure to include enough evidence (usually references to or quotations from the text) to support your more general assessment.

You might also be asked to compare the way two writers present the same theme or scene. In this case, evaluation might not be the goal; rather, an understanding of the differences and similarities of the ideas/scenes will allow your reader to understand how the ideas are part of the larger context in each particular text. This type of assignment, like the previous one, relies in large part on your ability to read closely and analyze a text. If, for instance, the assignment is to compare two scenes, the points of comparison might include descriptions of action, characterization, or literary techniques that each scene incorporates.

Finally, you might be asked to discuss the way several critics evaluate a text. Here, the goal might or might not include evaluation. You could first discuss the different points of their evaluation, and then analyze their evidence to conclude which was the more effective reading of the text.

Introduction

Comparison papers have several components, including the introduction, body, and conclusion. Usually the introduction explains the point of comparison or contrast which will be the focus of your discussion throughout the paper; in other words, the introduction previews for the reader what your paper will be about. Begin the assignment by considering what will be gained by comparing the two things. The comparison should have some purpose: you might ask yourself what the reader will learn by seeing the two things juxtaposed.

Body

The body of the paper discusses your major ideas. As with essays and essay examinations, in the process of developing your ideas, be sure to include specific evidence to support your general assertions in your comparison. Since there are two (or more) items to compare, organizing your material can become more complex than, say, a stylistic analysis. There is not a right way to organize your paper; let your subject material and your purpose for comparison determine which method will be best for the paper. One page two are several possible organizing strategies.



You might want to emphasize the individual elements that are being compared; in this case, you probably want to organize your paper so that you discuss all of the issues surrounding the first scene/passage/argument, etc., before discussing the issues surrounding the second. A second way to organize your paper is to emphasize the comparable nature of the two plays, and so you can compare them issue by issue. Using this organizing scheme, you would discuss the various topics under the two authors' treatment of deception and then compare the two plays topic by topic, rather than author by author. A third way to organize your paper is to combine the above two types. The first part of the paper, for instance, might provide an extensive overview of each author's view of deception, and then you might compare their plays component by component for the second half of the paper.

Conclusion

The conclusion is often a place to summarize your larger argument, but it also provides an opportunity to do more. Naturally you do not want to raise an entirely disconnected idea, but you could expand on an idea that you raised earlier but did not elaborate on.

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